

An Assyrian Revival Match Safe

By Neil Shapiro



This 18k gold match safe inset with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds was written about in a book I wrote in 2008. The maker was and is unidentified although the retailer, Theodore B. Starr, is identified on the bezel.

In my book I noted the Egyptian motifs and credited the design to the interest in the Egyptian revival either from the 1800s excavations or the 1920s discovery of King Tut's tomb by Howard Carter. Those earlier discoveries as well as Carter's encouraged jeweler's interest in creating Egyptian style jewelry. But I could not name the maker of this remarkable safe and I continued to research the literature until I came across Gustav Manz.

Gustav Manz was the subject of a master's thesis by Courtney Bowers who unearthed information about this manufacturing craftsman who provided items for Tiffany, Gorham, Shreve, Crump and Low, Marcus and Co., Theodore B. Starr, and many other notable manufacturers and retailers. In a collection of work journals housed in the Winterthur Museum, Bowers found descriptions and drawings of over two thousand pieces of jewelry made by Manz, most unmarked with his name, and made for a notable list of clients and businesses.

In this trove were hundreds of examples of Manz's Egyptian-themed jewelry many pieces of which were sold by Tiffany and Co. The designs included, "... inventive pastiches of sphinxes, eyes of Horus, hieroglyphics, pyramids, winged scarabs, pharaohs, ankhs, asps, and lotuses." ("The life and jewelry of Gustav Manz," by Courtney Bowers, p.3). After reading about Manz I thought he might be the maker of the gold safe so I contacted someone (not Ms Bowers) who maintained a Manz website and sent her images of the gold safe and asked whether Manz might have made the match safe.

Her reply indicated that she thought Manz may have made the match safe since it shared stylistic similarities with other Manz pieces and Manz often used 18k gold, favored the restrained use of gems and preferred cabochon and small mine cut

diamonds - all characteristics of the gold match safe. All of the above, plus she added, he was generally more faithful to historical sources than other artists-jewelers of that period.

She also suggested I contact two other researchers who were knowledgeable about Manz and the jewelry made between 1880-1925. I thought I was onto a major discovery.

I did contact one of the researchers and her reply taught me about assuming expertise on another's part. She pointed out the figures on the gold match safe were NOT Egyptian but Assyrian gods. The figure on the right is a depiction of Nisroch, the Assyrian god of agriculture. Egyptian deities Anubis and Toth (named as the figures on the gold match safe by the first correspondent, the person who maintains the Manz website) never had wings and wings are typically an Assyrian feature. The letters are cuneiform, not hieroglyphics, the border is a typical guilloche pattern, not as the first correspondent said an "eye of Horus motif."

The Assyrian Revival period began with archeologists investigating the ruins of Ninevah in the 1840's. Artifacts found showed Assyrian motifs of lions, winged bulls, and turbaned men with curled beards. The "Great Exhibition" of London, held in 1851, showcased new jewelry incorporating these designs which viewers found fascinating and exotic.

Of all the nineteenth century revivals, Assyrian, Etruscan, and Egyptian, Assyrian revival is perhaps the least well-known and objects in the style are quite rare, especially those made in the United States. Assyrian Revival jewelry, pre-1900, appears to have been made and sold by only Tiffany and Co. (Personal correspondence with a jewelry historian).

Whether Manz made the gold match safe cannot be determined without actually checking the work books and journals in the Winterthur Museum to see if such a sketch or description with direct attribution to Theodore B. Starr is in the records.

Timeline for Archeological discoveries that influenced the jewelry revivals:

1827—Unearthing of tombs in Italy begins the Etruscan Revival.

1845-47—excavations of Nimrud and Nineveh begin the Assyrian Revival.

1859-69—Suez Canal and discovery of Queen Ah-Hotep's jewels (1859) are impetus for Egyptian Revival.

1850's—John Ruskin's writings and lectures and the writings and actions of William Morris (who helped establish a communal artistic group) fostered interest in all of the 'decorative' arts and began the Arts and Crafts movement.

1922—Howard Carter, a famous archeologist, discovered the tomb of King Tutankhamen and sparks an Egyptian design period.

Note: The labels designate styles and periods. Many styles over-lap during periods of time and nothing precisely begins and ends as we might wish in our attempt to classify antique jewelry.

Nisroch

