

GORHAM'S SIGNED MATCH SAFES AND ANTOINE HELLER

By Neil Shapiro

F. Antoine Heller was the Gorham Manufacturing Company's chief designer from 1881 until 1904. His work is generally thought to reflect the Beaux Arts style - a very rich, lavish and heavily ornamented classical style of carefully thought out schemes, motifs, and designs that drew from the French and Italian Renaissance, and Neoclassical periods. But it appears that Mr. Heller had a subtle and saucy sense of humor as well as a deep background in art history.

In a match safe that he designed, production #1235, there is a raised image of a young woman dressed in the height of 1896 fashion, smoking a cigarette, holding a wine glass while standing next to a table where a wine and seltzer bottle rest. Immediately to her left is a chair that holds a man's top hat and scarf. In the elaborate border that surrounds the upper portion of the image is an interwoven banner that has these words – When I was in Paris. In the lid is a stamped design of grapes with two bottles of wine protruding from the grape cluster.



Full frontal image of safe



"When I was in Paris" banner

Clearly, Mr. Heller was having fun. He either recalled his growing up in France and his subsequent education at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts or he was poking fun at American strait-laced morality with regard to women.

A woman smoking in public, for example, was not allowed in the United States from 1880 to 1908 as it might undermine their morality. There were a number of anti-smoking campaigns in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which condemned women smokers as debasers of the family ethos. The exhortations usually sounded like this: smoking (and drinking) destroys morality, virtue and beauty. If you engage in smoking (or drinking) you will weep, and weeping is women's lot in life. Drinking alcohol was especially deemed a social ill by man during the Progressive Era, 1890 -1920, and women, by and large, did not drink in public as drink was a cause of personal sin. Clearly, woman could and did smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol in Paris and Heller wanted to make that clear to anyone who purchased this match safe.

To emphasize this French viewpoint look at Alphonse Mucha's poster of 1896, for JOB

cigarettes. Closely examine the luxurious Art Nouveau hair of the beautiful woman whose lips are parted and appears to be the epitome of sensuality. For the French, smoking was sensual, done in public, and something to be enjoyed.



Alphonse Mucha poster

Antoine Heller created many famous flatware and hollowware patterns. Almost all of them reflect his Beaux Arts training as they interpret mythology, historical architecture or other academic subjects. In the later portion of his career at Gorham, Heller's designs have a sense of Art Nouveau curves and swirls and stand in strong contrast to his other work, but they do not show a sense of humor, and match safe #1235 seems to stand alone as Monsieur Heller's one roguish public design. As if to put a point on this design being his, Heller had his name stamped in tiny letters near the bottom of the safe.



Heller name, lower left close-up