

Match Safes around the World

By Neil Shapiro

In 1900 there were about 50-60 sovereign nations (the definition and number of sovereign countries is a contentious issue among historians) and of those nations only a few seem to have made match safes.

China, Japan, France, UK, Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, Austria, Turkey, Spain, Netherlands, USA, Norway, Mexico, Brazil, Belgium, Italy, Hungary, Canada, Germany, Russia, all have made match safes and we have extant examples today.

Other countries, Romania, Uruguay, Argentina, Luxembourg, Thailand, Switzerland, Korea, Bulgaria, Greece, Morocco, Persia*, may have made match safes but we have no evidence that they did and to date, no one has any examples of safes made in those countries.

Still other countries, e.g., Andorra, Monaco, San Marino, Kuwait, Bhutan, Haiti, etc., appear to have never made match safes. But we can't be certain about this as no one appears to have found any match safes from these countries, but that does not mean they were not made there.

Why match safes were made in some countries and not others is difficult to determine. Almost all the sovereign countries in 1900 had a population that used tobacco. In order to smoke users needed to ignite the tobacco. The easiest way to do this in 1900 was by friction match and the friction match was known in most of the world by 1900. So why weren't these matches kept in a secure container so they would not accidentally ignite when they were needed for smoking?

Also, in most of the countries that did not make match safes, they did use silver and other materials for small boxes, jewelry, and other utilitarian objects. So they had a craft tradition, if not a commercial industry, for holding small objects.

Examine one country, Korea: In 1876, Korea signed a peace treaty with Japan and in 1882, a treaty with the United States and was opened commercially and otherwise to the West. For many years Korea had (and still has) a history of heavy tobacco use. Yet, despite its proximity to Japan and China, and its diplomatic acknowledgement of the United States, all of whom made match safes, no known match safe from Korea has been known of or found despite the opening of this isolationist country to the West in the most productive years of match safes manufacture.

The art of metal crafting has a long history in Korea. Since the production of the 'Korean style slender dagger' in the 10th century BCE, Koreans have demonstrated an aptitude for sophisticated and exquisite metalworking techniques. As Buddhism spread (Three Kingdom period and Goryeo dynasty, 67BCE-1392CE) and Confucianism took hold (Joseon dynasty, 1392-1910), metalcraft flourished, resulting in the production of highly ritual objects and many beautiful and practical items for daily life.

In contrast to other parts of Asia, Korean artists have tended to favor metal over other materials. Concerning 'table culture', for example, the Chinese have traditionally used white porcelain spoons and the Japanese, lacquered wooden chopsticks while the Koreans have long preferred thin metal chopsticks. This well illustrates the ways metal was valued at even the most basic levels of everyday life and consequently, why Koreans have excelled in its production. (See: <https://garlandmag.com/article/joungmee-dos-spirit-of-jang-in/> by Min-Jung Kim)

To explain why Korea did not produce any match safes some Korean scholars have argued that Korea is a Confucian country and trade is frowned upon in Confucian theology. How then to explain China and Japan, both having large Confucian populations, and both engaged in international trade. Other Korean scholars have postulated that the Korean Kingdom preferred to remain isolated and the engagement with the United States was a forced trade treaty that Koreans tried to evade in as many ways as they could and so they did not participate in international trade fairs and expositions. Obviously, all this changed for Korea after 1945 when Japan was ousted as the colonial power in Korea and in a few years Korea was engaging in international trade. Was the disengagement from Japanese colonialism the reason for the international trading? Or were there other factors?

Despite Korea's long tradition of metal working and as noted before, smoking, we have never found any container for matches that would facilitate smoking despite the skills of the Korean society's crafts people.

Does this mean that Koreans never used match safes made in other countries? Could all the match safes made in Korea, if Korea did make match safes, get melted down or destroyed over the years? We simply do not know.

But a larger question for match safe collectors is not why safes were not made in some countries but how to identify those safes that still exist and have no easily identifiable characteristics.

How can match safe collectors distinguish among safes made from different countries? Some countries mark their products and that makes it easy to tell where a safe has been made, other countries have fairly distinctive cultural motifs and designs, so that helps identify the safe's origin. But there are thousands of match safes where it is not easy to locate their origins so what can the collector do to aid in identifying the place of a match safe's manufacture?

Some suggestions:

Material(s) – some countries used unique alloys, e.g., Japan

Decorative techniques – unique enameling colors, e.g., Russia

Sizes – some countries generally made larger sized match safes than others, e.g., USA

Patinas – unique to some countries, e.g., Japan

Inscriptions – an alphabet, a name, a place, a championship, a battle, etc.

Patents, registered designs – sometimes a number, or date, e.g., USA, UK

Old trade periodicals, catalogs, advertisements

I am sure there are other ways to identify match safes and maybe IMSA members can write to Andy Denes and he can collect all the suggestions and IMSA can compile them in an illustrated pamphlet for its membership.

Identification of the match safe, in hand, other than personal appeal, is usually the most important characteristic for the collector of match safes. Yes, rarity, value, sentimentality, are some of the other reasons collectors collect, but the I think the desire to know more about their pieces is a fundamental objective for most collectors. Let IMSA help them by compiling a pamphlet and making it available to our membership.

- There are match safes with Arabic writing on them but whether they were made in Persia is uncertain.