

The Greatest French Engraver Made a Match Safe

By Neil Shapiro

There are match safes made by famous companies, for example, Fabergè, Tiffany, Gorham, Cartier, etc. There are even match safes made by noted individual artists, namely, G.A. Scheidt of Austria, G.Klinger of Russia, S. Mordan of England, etc. But to my knowledge there is only one match safe made by perhaps the foremost French engraver in history. (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2008)

Louis Oscar Roty, a French engraver of medals, was born in 1846 and died in 1911. Within his life he is credited with reviving the Renaissance craft of rectangular medal plaques as art rather than tribute.

By 1880, Roty, influenced by the Art Nouveau movement, abandoned the rim on medals and created graceful symbolic and allegorical images that recalled the traditions of the Renaissance medals. His mastery of the art of medal engraving influenced many artists and eventually led to his becoming President of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in 1897. He won a number of important awards, including the Grand Prix de Rome in 1875 and the Grand Prix at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris.

Besides a huge number of medals and plaques, Roty is well known as the designer of the “Semeuse” image –the woman sowing seeds - who used to appear on most on French silver coins and stamps. His medallic art can be found in nearly all European and American museums. A large number of his medals and plaques can be viewed in the Kunsthalle Hamburg and the Musée Oscar Roty in Jargeau, France.

Roty also made the medal for the 1900 Paris Exposition and was exhibited in Samuel Bing’s pavilion (Bing was the owner of the Parisian gallery, L’Art Nouveau, and the man often credited with promulgating the Art Nouveau movement in the West), along with other leading French designers, Guimard, Gallé, and Majorelle.

Roty also made at least one match safe. It is made of at least 18k gold and has an image of Vesta, the goddess of the Hearth, on the front and a graceful cascading floral design on the back of the case. It is of at least 18k gold as evidenced by the eagle’s head mark on the side of the case. The match safe is also signed by Roty on the image of Vesta.



The engraved image of Vesta is on a 2 ¼” x 1 ½” x 7/8” gold case. The border of the lid is an intricate, twisted jack-in-the-pulpit floral design. The border holds the engraved Roty plaque which depicts the Vesta goddess, chaste in a draped gown with a plant leaf

fan in one downward stretched arm and the other arm modestly shielding her breast. Vesta is tending the sacred fire which is burning on a three legged stand and has flames and smoke rising from the fire. Below the stand are the same flowers, roses, which are engraved on the back of the case. The engraving captures the essence of the Vesta goddess; a deity of grace, chastity, and warmth, - a guardian of the home, in fact, according to the Romans, the center of household life.

The gold purity mark is an eagle head with a double line around it. It is near the striker and very small. This mark indicates that it was assayed in Paris and has a minimum purity of 750 grains of gold out of 1,000, or is at least 18k out of 24k. It weighs 72.3 grams or 2.55 ounces or 46.5 pennyweights.



Note: French assay mark on left above striker



Paris minimum fineness 750 mark

Roty's engraving for plaques and medals, after 1880, is remarkably constant in style, tone, and line. For example, his medal for the 1900 Paris Exposition



Roty's 1900 Paris Exposition plaque

shares the same gracefulness of figure and the delicacy of floral depiction. Note the women's clothing in both images:



Front view of Roty's gold match safe

and the floral treatment on the back side of the match safe and the Paris Exposition plaque:



Back view of Roty's gold match safe

There are a number of traditional images of Vesta, the goddess and it is easy to see where Roty took some of his artistic inspiration. Below is an image of Vesta from a 1909 encyclopedia. (B.P.Holst, *The Teachers' and Pupils' Cyclopaedia*. Kansas City: Bufton Book Co., 1909)



A rendering of Vesta

There are few match safes of 18k gold or finer and even fewer designed by notable engravers. With this safe Roty gracefully captured the essence of Vesta, the goddess and embellished a beautiful match safe.

Some of Roty's best medals and plaques are:

Medal for the International Electrical Exhibition held at Paris in 1881.

Medal commemorative of the death of Gambetta, 1882.

Medal for the one hundredth birthday of E. Chevreul, the celebrated chemist, 1886. .

Medal commemorating the erection of the Statue of Liberty in New York City, 1886. On the reverse is a portrait of Bartholdi.

Plaque of Louis Pasteur the physician and chemist, 1892. Issued on Pasteur's seventieth birthday.

Plaque for the Chicago Exposition, 1893.

Plaque issued on the funeral of President Carnot, 1894.

Plaque for the Paris Exposition, 1900. The reverse represents views of the Grand and Petit Palais in Paris.

Besides these medals Roty designed some coins for Chile, some Haitian coins, and the 100 franc gold piece of Albert I, of Monaco.