



“A Rare Safety Match Holder Or Vesta Case The Front Is Beautifully Commemorating A Battle Scene The Backside Is Decorated With The Divine Lord Vishnu Riding His Vahana (The Flying Garuda), Probably Bangkok, Thailand, Circa Late 19th. Century.” (As quoted from website)

Link: <https://www.aljantiques.com/inventory/country-of-origin/thailand/thai-silver-black-nielloware-a-rare-safety-match-holder-or-vesta-case-the-front-is-beautifully-commemorating-a-battle-scene-the-backside-is-decorated-with-the-divine-lord-vishnu-riding-his-vahana-the-fly.html>

Thai Match Safe

By Neil Shapiro

In my quest to find match safes made in countries that have a smoking tradition but a small, or non-existent output of match safes, I found a Thai match safe on a website that sells Thai antiques. When I made inquiries about purchasing the safe I was told it was already sold. Subsequent inquiries to the owner of the site did not reveal any more information about the item. So I decided to follow up on the annotation provided by the website. It read, " For similar black nielloed Safety Match Holder Or Vesta Case, please see, *Silverware in Thailand*, by Naengoni Punjabhan, ISBN 974-88695-6-3, Please see lot catalogued on page 157."

The cited book was expensive so I requested a copy from Inter-Library Loan (ILL). Page 157 in *Silverware in Thailand*, does not have an image of a match safe nor does it have any images that resemble the nielloed scenes on the pictured match safe. It does picture a cigarette box, three cigarette cases, and buckles, shirt pins, and a neck-tie pin.

I realized, again, since this has happened before, that websites often mislead, misattribute, or fabricate to sell their items. But in an unanticipated bit of good fortune I learned something about the long tradition of nielloed silver work in Thailand and since it appears that there is at least one extant Thai match safe there probably were others made using their unique techniques.

Briefly, Thai niello work, follows this pattern.

The niello worker makes niello by creating an amalgam of silver, copper and lead. The amalgam must contain no less than 8% of the total weight. The individual amounts of copper and lead vary by the maker.

The amalgam is melted, sulfur is added until the amalgam is free of bubbles and scum.

The amalgam is allowed to dry in a disc shape. After that is it stored either in slabs or broken up to be used when needed.

Then the silver worker shapes the object being made. Design patterns are drawn directly on the silver object and chiseled into concavities. The niello is mixed with soldering flux and fitted into the cavities. Traditionally, blowpipes were used to heat and smooth out the niello.

Finally, the surface is filed and smoothed and any damage done during the ornamental process repaired.

One unique Thai niello process is called "thom ta thong." The Thai silversmith encrusts the surface of the object with pure gold and quicksilver.



Thom ta thong bowl

Thai silversmiths also used enamel to enhance their wares. Since King Rama I liked the color royal blue many enameled objects have that color.



Thai royal blue enamel bowl

Another technique, borrowed from the Arabic traditions, is the inlaying of gold and silver patterns into an iron base. This technique, used by many cultures around the world is called Krum by the Thais.



Krum, Thai silver inlay work

I have shown examples of these techniques with objects other than match safes because I could not find any safes illustrating these techniques. But it stands to reason that if the Thai silversmiths made objects using these techniques they probably made at least some

match safes in the same manner, especially since the upper Thai social classes, as well as the common folk, were tobacco users.

References:

Silverware in Thailand

Author: Naengnoi Punjabhan

Publisher: Rerngrom Publishing Co., Ltd. Bangkok 1991

Distributor: D. K. Today Co., Ltd., Bangkok Hardcover: 202 pages, color illustrations.

Language: English.

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