

Tips for the collector of Japanese Match Safes

By Neil Shapiro

Check the match safe for careless workmanship as any absence of minutiae that Japanese craftsmen are known for, e.g., is the safe finished on all surfaces, is the material consistent with materials used in similar pieces, is the signature (if there is one) engraved rather than stamped, is the workmanship finely executed or is it slipshod, if any or all of the above are incorrect it reduces the value of the match safe.

What about wear on the match safe? Most safes were made as utilitarian objects and hence, have handling wear. Very few match safes were kept in a drawer and not used for a 100 years. There should be wear on the hinges, spring, area where the lid is lifted and in other areas where the hands touched the body of the safe or where there was friction from material. It is possible to find match safes in pristine condition due to fastidious care over the years but in general, wear from usage should not be considered a reason to devalue a safe.

Japanese match safes are noted for their applied patina. But there is also the patina that is formed from years of oxidation and handling. In some cases years of handling removes some of the artist's applied patination, but in this writer's opinion this adds to the beauty of the match safe and does not decrease the value of the safe. Naturally, any over - eager polishing that has destroyed the original patination has ruined the artist's original conception and lowered the value as well.

Almost all match safes are commercial products, i.e., they were meant to be sold and in all likelihood meant to be produced in some quantity. For collectors of Japanese objects, commercial products are usually deemed to be inferior products compared to objects that were made by artists in limited quantities in an original manner. But it is worthwhile to note that almost all artisan products were also meant to be sold either in a retail setting or to fulfill patronage commitments.

When examining a match safe for engraving, stamping or incising of an animal look for perfectly delineated whiskers fur or hide with incised lines, animal paws looking soft and nails or claws hard. Check that the feet and hands have individualized fingers and toes.

Ivory match safes should have a fine texture and luster, almost moist, not dull or dry looking.

A word about signatures on Japanese safes:

Most safes have no signatures. This is because many safes were made for export and the craftsman was in the employ of a business and did not sign his name to the items he fashioned. In a sense, this follows the old pattern of craftsmen who were employed by daimyos and shoguns and they dare not sign their work as their employers were responsible for all of their worldly needs and utterly ruled their lives. It would have been disrespectful for the maker to sign his name to a commissioned piece.

Some safes are signed and this is accounted for in several ways:

1. Small items were given as gifts by lesser nobility to higher nobility and the name of a famous craftsman added to the luster of the gift
2. By the time safes were in use there was a merchant class who sold products to wealthy Japanese people and the name of a noted craftsman added to the salability of an item
3. By order of the Meiji Emperor Japanese crafts were sent to world expositions, adding the name of a famous craftsman might increase Japanese prestige throughout the world
4. Some of the signatures were added to safes by soldering a small plaque on the safe, this may have fallen off in the last 100 years.

If a safe is not signed this in no way diminishes the value of the safe if it is a truly fine piece. A superior safe is a superior safe; quality and value are not linked to a signature.

To summarize thus far, there are six (6) different generic styles of decoration:

1. The body of a safe is modeled in the form of another subject.
2. Undecorated – only the material used is important.
3. Safes where the decoration is not on the two main surfaces but on the ends or bottoms.
4. Safes where there are two distinct designs, one on each side.
5. Safes with a design of a repetitive nature, diaper pattern, birds, insects, etc.
6. Safes with designs that try to unify the whole piece – draw you eye around the safe.

Finally, a match safe must have certain qualities to be considered a great safe: design, craftsmanship, balance, harmony, a sense of balance in the hand.

It may be an interesting exercise to compare the form of a match safe to a haiku –
Can some safe makers have taken inspiration from haiku poets? Haiku has a rigid poetic form, an awareness of the environment, a sublime subtlety of the verse, and a sensibility to nature. Qualities the best match safes share with the haiku.

Some thoughts about souvenir safes:

In Japan school children are often taken on trips around their country and there is a tradition of returning with a small present (*omiyage*) for friends and relatives; hence, there are many souvenir shops – could match safes have been made as souvenirs for the

Japanese? If not, could some souvenir makers have made safes for export? In some cases the older souvenirs were well made.