

A BEAR PLAYING AN INSTRUMENT MATCH HOLDER

By Neil Shapiro

Recently, I acquired an iron match holder in the shape of a bear playing a musical instrument. At first glance the instrument looks like a cello, but the bear is playing it with its paws not with a bow. An internet search provides some similar looking instruments but none that are really identical.



Calls to professional musicians provide no definitive answers and the only reasonable conclusion is that the modeler used artistic license to create an instrument that looked real but was easier to forge when casting the holder.

But why create a match holder of an animal playing an instrument at all? In reality animals can't play musical instruments, well, monkeys can be trained to turn a crank for an organ grinder, but that hardly counts as playing an instrument. And yet, throughout history there are many representations of animals playing musical instruments. Maybe the most well-known of these figurines is the "Monkey Band" or "ape orchestra." They are a group of monkey musicians, in fancy period costumes first made by Meissen, circa 1750s.



The term *singerie* is the name given to this type of representation. It depicts monkeys imitating human behavior, often fashionably attired. The term is derived from the French word for "Monkey Trick," although now it is used in a broader context to include all animals imitating humans.

The story goes that August the Strong, Elector of Saxony, commissioned the monkey orchestra after being told that a real orchestra of humans looked like performing monkeys during a performance.



Christophe Huet (1700-1759), (monkeys with sheet music, playing instruments and drinking wine). Page from *Singeries*, c.1750

But I suspect that the Meissen factory made the monkey orchestra after seeing the success of an early series of humorous French drawings depicting monkeys imitating upper class human activity.



But whatever the origin of the monkey orchestra the use of animals playing instruments goes much further back than the 1750s. There is a carving of animals playing instruments in the Canterbury Cathedral that dates from 1070.

Experts think that examples of animals playing instruments go even further back, think of early fables and folk tales. It helps to remember that during the Middle Ages and before most people were illiterate so seeing representational images allowed them to visualize images that accompanied sermons, myths, and folk tales. All of these contained some sort of guidance, either religious or regulatory, for the general population.

Somehow, the depictions of animals playing instruments told a story to their Middle Age viewers. Whether the instruments represented the “voice” of the animal, or the shape of the instrument represented the sexuality of the animal is uncertain. For example, cats are examples of laziness and the cat playing a fiddle may have suggested a meowing sound, a sound that a cat makes.

The popularity of animals engaging in human activities in eighteenth-century France has roots in Dutch and Flemish painting from a hundred years earlier. The Dutch treated this genre of art as a means to ridicule human vanity, sensual excesses, and foolishness. The eighteenth century French were, however, much lighter and more playful than their Dutch antecedents. Indeed, in one of their dictionaries they define this genre as “pleasant and laughable gestures in the manner of monkeys.”

In addition to monkeys this type of art featured a wide collection of animals, singing and playing musical instruments. Some examples from a small sample; singing sheep, monkeys playing oboes, a rabbit playing a recorder, a monkey (wearing a clerical collar) singing from a piece of sheet music, a monkey playing the harpsichord, a singing cat, a fox singing and holding a large music manuscript, a monkey in theatrical costume conducting the group with a piece of rolled-up sheet music (the method of the day; batons weren't used for conducting until the 19th century), a monkey sitting on the podium and singing, a cat playing the violin, a monkey playing the flute, another cat playing the lute, and a fox playing the viol, a bear playing the bassoon, a goat and a donkey singing.

All this brings us to my bear playing a cello-like instrument. It was probably made 1860 – 1890, in Europe, probably in Russia, maybe Germany, or Austria. It is iron and 3” tall with a cross-hatched striker on the bottom. The head is hinged and the body cavity is hollow to hold the matches. What could it symbolize, and why would it appeal to someone to purchase it?

To speculate: bears are symbolic of nations, particularly Russia. In 19th century political cartoons the Russians are often depicted by bears much as the British are shown as lions. The Russian bear has been a personification for Russia since the 16th century.



One instrument closely associated with Russia is the balalaika, another is a more obscure instrument called a bandura (see image on left), more Ukrainian than Russian, but remember that Russian controlled Ukraine during the period this match holder was made. Both are stringed instruments that do not faithfully look like the instrument in

the match holder but are at least reminiscent of a stringed instrument that is strummed and plucked rather than bowed.

Whether the amplitude range of these instruments can be associated with Russia I do not know, but maybe the forge that made this match holder saw some natural connections between the bear, the instrument and the Russians.

One last things to consider: Charles Darwin published *ON THE ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES* in 1859 which gave a major role to natural selection and evolution as a unifying theory for the diversity of life.

The book created international interest and controversy, both within the religious and lay communities. With a history of art comingling animal and human foibles and activities it is not difficult to imagine commercial artists creating a match holder in the shape of a bear playing a cello-like instrument to derive benefits from the issues of the day.