

A Clue to the Maker or Origin of the Friar/Monk Match Holder

By Neil Shapiro

It was the summer of 1994 and Denis Alsford used an image of a monk figural match holder on the cover of his book, *Match Holders*. Denis guessed, based upon his research and experience that the holder was of European origin and made of cast brass. Starting with Denis' surmises I tried to find more about the match holder. I wondered who the maker, was where did the maker work, and was cast brass the only material used to make this piece?

Question #1. Is the match holder a monk or a friar?

The main difference between the two is that a monk remains within his community while the friar has a public ministry. Generally speaking, once a monk enters the cloistered life, he does not leave. Friars are often given assignments in the world although they usually have a communal life.

Alsford called the holder a monk, I like to think he is a friar since he does not "live" a cloistered life. But correspondence with an actual monk is leading me to think of this holder as a monk. Please see below.

I contacted John Petrikovic, OFM Cap. [a Capuchin monk] head of the St. Ambrose Friary and asked him to help me identify the holder's habit.

John Petrikovic wrote to me via email that:

I think the monk is a Capuchin monk of the Franciscan Order. They wore hoods and beards. The communities were to be small, eight being fixed as the normal number and twelve as the limit. In furniture and clothing extreme simplicity was enjoined and the friars were discalced, required to go barefooted—without even sandals. Like the Observants, the Capuchins wore a brown habit. Their form, however, was to be of the most simple form, i.e. only of a tunic, with the distinctive large, pointed hood reaching to the waist attached to it, girdled by the traditional woolen cord with three knots.

If you search for images of the Capuchins you will see many that look like the holder (as well as lots of pictures of monkeys). None of the other religious orders look quite the same as the Capuchins.

I followed up John Petrikovic's email with another email asking more questions and below are his answers to me (my questions are in red):

I am attaching images of the back, and a close-up of the front, of the bronze figure. Please tell me if this is the caprone ["caperone," an extra little cape (or large bib of sorts) that distinguishes him as a novice] that Capuchins might wear, or would never have worn, in the 1860-80 period.

I've never see a Capuchin with a caperone (except for novices, but even then, it doesn't go over the shoulders and this friar/monk seems a lot older than a novice . . .

The Capuchins, as I understand it, wear a pointed hood. This figure has a pointed hood that hangs down in back. Does the Capuchin hood have to point upwards, it does not in the Caravaggio painting? Also, if the caperone is a small cape or a sort of a bib, then my figure seems to be wearing one. So that would mean that the figure could not be a Capuchin?

It depends on the province whether or not the hood points upward in the back. It generally lies flat, but I know that ours (from the Bavarian tradition) stands up.

My figure also has buttons on what appears to be the caperone, does that also exclude the figure from being a Capuchin?

That's the part that confuses me - is it a style of a coat or cape? I am not an expert on French style habits, but I've never seen that button down cape anywhere.

Finally, you said that the cord is troubling - is that because the cord does not have 3 knots? Sorry for the confusion. The cord is troubling because it indicates that the man is a Franciscan of SOME variety. And from its "austere" look, I too would guess a capuchin, especially since that pointed hood in the back is pretty long which is a dead giveaway for a capuchin - - - but what IS that caperone doing there

As the reader can see trying to determine the anything conclusive from the habit of the monk is unlikely.

Question #2. Is the match holder of European origin?

I thought about countries that made figural match holders during the period from 1855-1880 and whether they would be likely to make a figure of a monk/friar if they were not a predominately Catholic. After all, these holders were meant to be commercially sold and the users would put them in places where they would be continually seen and used. Germany, Austria, and France made many of these types of holders and France and Austria are predominately Catholic countries while Germany is mostly Protestant. I assume that a predominately Protestant country would not want to use a Catholic figure on a daily basis. The only other country that made match holders of this type was Russia and it would be unlikely for a Russian (most Russians are Orthodox Christian, not Catholic) business to find this product commercially viable. Of course, the manufacturer of this holder probably exported his products around the world so it is possible that the manufacturer was located in a Catholic country and simply made the holder as a business venture.

Therefore any conclusion as to the origin of this match holder is a problem.

Question #3. Was this holder only made in cast brass?

As for the material composition of the holder there are some complications to consider, viz., Alsford's example may have been cast brass, while my own example is patinated bronze¹ and I also have an example in sterling silver. It appears that this holder was made in several different materials.

Again, no help in determining the origin of this holder.

Question #4. Are there any signed examples of this holder?

Recently a monk/friar holder appeared on French eBay and this holder has a name etched into the base, A. Giroux.

A bit of research reveals that A. Giroux is the name of a well-regarded French firm. The firm was established by Alphonse Giroux (1775/76–1848)—a *tabletier*, or dealer in luxury goods and was known for its high-quality objects such as glove boxes, caskets for weddings and baptisms, gifts for the New Year, and small pieces of furniture in a variety of styles. In the tradition of eighteenth-century *marchands merciers* (a type of entrepreneur working outside the guild system of craftsmen), Giroux and his sons

¹ It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between brass and bronze but here is a short look at some of the differences.

Brass is the term used for alloys of copper and zinc. Typically it is more than 50% copper and from 5 to 20% zinc, in comparison to bronze which is principally an alloy of copper and tin. Bronze is richer, more golden in color than brass which is usually a yellow color

probably did not, at the start of their business, make any of the offered wares themselves but commissioned them from a variety of artists.

But by the middle of the 19th century the firm is no longer content with selling items made by others and begins to create their own products.

The Giroux firm participates at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1867, where it received a silver medal and the 1873 Vienna Exposition where it was awarded two medals of merit.

Given the above brief history of the Giroux firm can I conclude that A, Giroux made the monk? No, I cannot. But I can surmise that Giroux either retailed the holder or made the holder for sale. Can I state that the holder was made in France, no I cannot. But the likelihood that the match holder was made in France is high as Giroux made and sold many articles to French royalty and as a French company selling to French royalty Giroux probably promoted French-made objects.

Question #5. Can we learn anything from other holders about the monk match holder?

As most in match holder community know a "companion" piece to the monk is the nun match holder. The nun holder is by a yet unknown maker from an unknown country, mostly seen in patinated bronze.

Looking at her habit we can easily see she has a distinctive headdress. It is called a wimple, generically, and specifically, a cornette. A cornette is a piece of female headwear that was especially popular with European lay women in the 15th to 17th centuries. It consists of a large starched piece of white cloth that is folded upwards in such a way as to create the resemblance of horns on the wearer's head.

The cornette, out of public fashion by the end of the 17th century, was worn by the Daughters of Charity, a Roman Catholic group of non-cloistered women that tended to the sick and poor, until 1964.

If we accept the idea that the friar/monk and the nun are companion pieces, made by the same company, in the same country, and in many of the same metals I think we can only objectively conclude that we know only that one bronze friar/monk was made or retailed by A. Giroux.

In conclusion, we have a clue to the history of the monk match holder and with a bit of luck we will eventually solve the mystery.



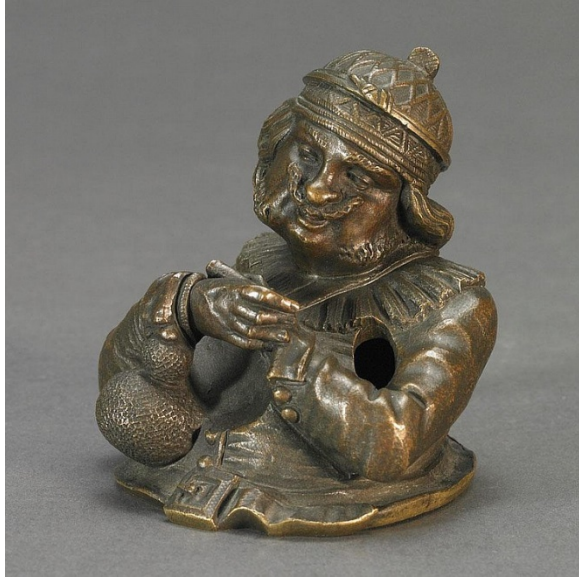
Caravaggio's image of St. Francis in meditation. St Francis was a friar of the Dominican order.



A. Giroux name on the friar/monk match holder



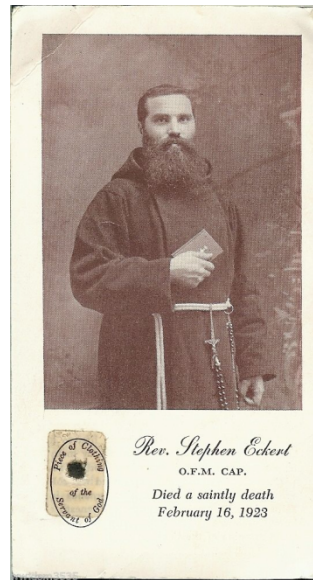
Monk_Giroux



An example of an A. Giroux product that has some similarities to the friar/monk match holder:
French Patinated Bronze Figural Inkwell by Alphonse Giroux, Modeled as a Smiling Boyar with Bag of Coins, mid-19th century. The cap is hinged as a lid.



Patinated monk & nun



Capuchin monk