

Spanish and Japanese Damascene Match Safes

By Neil Shapiro

Damascene, as a metal working technique, refers to inlays of thin gold and/or silver wires into an iron or steel base. It is a metal working technique that has been used in many countries but is usually associated with Spain. Generally, when people use the word damascene they are using it with reference to swords or a type of steel. But damascened objects are often ornamental and both Spain and Japan made match safes using this technique.

This this essay will focus on the match safes from these countries.

Spanish Damascene

The history of Spanish damascene match safes begins with the reinvigoration of the damascene technique by the Zuloaga workshops in Eibar, Spain, in the 1860s. Plácido Zuloaga is the name usually associated with the finest work produced by these workshops and the elevation of Spanish damascene to previous high levels that had fallen in prior years.

The technique used by the Zuloaga workshops to produce damascened objects began with the iron surface of the object being cross-hatched with fine lines made with a chisel and a hammer. These striated, fine lines, covered the surface of the piece and the gold and silver wire was attached by manually pressing or lightly tapping with a hammer, the wires into these lines to create the desired figures.

The most difficult part of the damascening process was achieving a shaded area in the design. If the artisan incised the gold or silver lines to create shaded areas the base metal would show through so the artisan used various punches and pointed tools on the incised lines to create the shaded effects.

Like many workshops there was a division of labor, that is, some workers did the cross hatching, some did the inlay work, and others did the design work. Probably the most important worker in the shop was the person who produced the object to be damascened. In Spanish this worker was called the *plantillero*. It was the *plantillero* who created the blanks that the damascener would fill in with gold and silver wires.

Many of the motifs used to decorate and ornament 19th century Spanish damascene match safes were influenced by Islamic Iberia. They included thick arabesques, incised rondels, the Nasrid (the last Muslim dynasty in Spain) motto, *La Ghaliba Illa Allah* ("There is no victor except God), and intertwined vines and leaves.

Spanish damascene material

On true Spanish damascene work the gold is 24 carat and the silver is pure. During Zuloaga's time, both the gold and silver wire, were produced in a separate facility and purchased as needed by the artisans and the iron surface was darkened, or blued, to create a contrast to the gold and silver wire. Finally, the finished object was coated with a lightly applied oil and rubbed smooth.

Examples of Spanish damascened match safes/vestas

Below are two images of a famous match safe/vesta, circa 1870, made for Alfred Morrison (1821-97), an Englishman, who commissioned several works from the Zuloaga workshops. It was made by Plácido Zuloaga. The match safe/vesta is currently owned by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

It is of rectangular shape with beveled corners and the hinge at the back of the case. A deep arabesque border surrounds another lineal frame enclosing a central cartouche amidst a field of incised vines and leaves. The blackened iron base is allowed to show through the gold decoration in both the border and the cartouche. One side has a rampant wyvern astride vines and tendrils. Each corner holds a vase with flowers. On the lid at each corner is a scallop shell which is usually a symbolic reference to the correct direction along the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James), pointing pilgrims towards Santiago de Compostela (the shrine of St. James, the Greater), in Galicia, Spain.





Below are images of a match safe/vesta that is signed by Plácido Zuloaga. His initials are seen in the last image in this set.



Toledo match safes/vestas

Eibar in the Northeastern Basque area of Spain was where the rebirth of damascene in Spain began, but the tradition was quickly rediscovered in Toledo, as well. In 1761, the *Fábrica Real de las Espadas* (Royal Sword Manufactory) was established and in 1783 its name was changed to *Fábrica de Artillería* (Artillery Factory of Toledo). For much of its early existence the Factory produced weapons that were used for the military and later on for ceremonial purposes. Later on the Factory began making damascened card cases, caskets, cigarette cases, and match safes, etc., for personal use and for sale as souvenirs. Commonly, much Spanish damascene work from Eibar used designs of Moorish or Arabic flavor as in the examples above. But damascene made in Toledo also used many of the same designs since a number of Eibar damascene artisans moved to Toledo to work. A match safe made by the Factory is shown below.



Below are images of the front, back and side of Arabic-themed match safe, with Arabic script on its edge, and a match safe with *cabeza de moro* (Moor's head)



An example of a 1940-50s match safe/vesta:



Above is a mid- 20th century Spanish match safe from Toledo, with a damascened lid and the rest of the case made of brass. Instead of true gold wire work around the border the lid has a series of punched dimples to simulate the wire work. The central element is an exaggerated wyvern surrounded by flowers.

Unmarked Spanish damascene match safes



Three unsigned Spanish damascene match safes, the center safe opens at both ends

Japanese damascene

In 1855, in Japan, the Komai family devise a form of damascene (*zogan*) used to ornament armaments, particularly swords. In 1876 the Meiji government banned the wearing of swords and the Komai family, as well as other artisans who ornamented swords, began to use their skills to fashion other objects in damascene in both Western styles and well as traditional Japanese forms. Many of these objects were exhibited and exported to the West via international exhibitions.

The techniques used by the Komai workshops were similar to the Spanish techniques used by the Zuloagas. In that both workshops etched the design with a sharp tool on the surface of the iron and laid the gold wire into the lines making certain that the bottoms of the incised lines were wider than the top so the inlaid metal would not become loose from the contrasting background. The Japanese sealed their work with lacquer which the Spanish artisans did not use for their damascene.

Other, more obvious differences are easily seen in the choice of design and decoration of the match safes. The Japanese initially used designs that were native to their culture but as more and more of their work was sold in the West the Japanese artisans sometimes used Western motifs while continuing to work in their traditional damascene manufacturing style.

Below is an example of a damascened match safe made from two parts of a Japanese sword's hilt. Next to that image is a contemporary advertisement from a Japanese maker, O. Komai, of damascened objects, including match safes.



Japanese damascened match safes with an Egyptian motif:



The interest in Egyptian motifs blossomed in West in the late 1700s, after Napoleon's military campaign in Northern Africa and the Battle of the Nile in 1798. Of course, this did not influence match safe design since match safes did not appear until after 1827. But the archaeological discoveries of ancient Egyptian artifacts in the mid-1850s and the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 along with important Egyptian tomb excavations and the popularity of the opera *Aida*, in 1871, influenced the design of many decorative objects, including match safes.

There is documentary evidence from the sales brochures of Kawano & Co., a Japanese company with shops in Yokohama, that made and sold "Egyptian Damascene," which they stated were "... old copies of old Egyptian sacred patterns." The shop was located on Honcho Street in Yokohama, an area that was off limits, at this time, to most Japanese and catered to foreigners.

A damascene match safe with an Egyptian motif is shown above on the left. Another Japanese match safe with an Egyptian motif is shown on the right but the metal working technique on this match safe is enamel cloisonné not damascene. Below are four images of Japanese damascene match safes with Egyptian motifs.



Finally, it is necessary to try to clear up some confusing vocabulary about damascene work.

Inlay, is a general term for creating an image by setting some, usually contrasting, materials, into a ground.

Niello, is a specific method of ornamentation where an alloy of various sulfides is fused with the metal in previously incised channels to create contrasting dark ornament to the ground.

True damascene, as used in the creation of Japanese and Spanish match safes/vestas is only created by the methods described above and true damascene match safes do not appear to have been made in other countries despite other countries making other types of damascened objects.

Why this is true is not known. Especially since other countries using damascene ornamentation on firearms and other objects could have made damascened match safes but to date collectors across the world have not found any examples.

Even more interesting to this writer is why artisans in countries that made match safes and had other inlaying techniques of ornamentation, e.g., guilloche, champlevé, etc., and were in contact with cultures that practiced damascening never tried to ornament their match safes with this technique. This is especially true either in cultures that had an indigenous smoking tradition or were making products for the West from circa 1840-1910, the years when match safes were most common.

