

THE CASE OF THE CURIOUS GORHAM MARKS

By Neil Shapiro

On October 25, 1898, the Gorham Manufacturing Company made what appears to be a mixed metal, match safe, production number 1179. It has the production number 1179 stamped in an elongated oval on the bezel of the safe. This indicates that Gorham made this match safe as a sample to either show to a potential customer or for salesmen to carry around to various retail outlets for possible sales.

Gorham's production numbers correlate to the Gorham work records in the John Hay Library at Brown University. By referencing the production number with the cost record it is possible to find out how the Gorham manufactory made the match safe, when it was made and how much Gorham paid for the materials and the labor.

Match safe #1179 is a relatively rare safe. It measures 2 1/4" x 1 1/2" x 3/8" and is made of sterling silver. It has a round cut Mozambique garnet stone set in the center of the case with a smaller garnet set in the lid for use as a thumb push to open the lid. The striker, on the bottom of the safe, is inset and ridged. The hinge pin is totally integrated within the body of the case to make a smooth surface. The interior retains most of its original gold wash. The overall shape tapers so that the sides of the case are narrower than the center of the case. It took a workman six hours to set the stones. Gorham paid \$0.95 for the silver, \$0.75 for the garnets, and \$2.10 for the labor to set the stones. The safe weighed 1 oz. 7 pennyweights. when new. Just looking at the match safe its material seems to be part copper and gold as well as silver. But the work record clearly specifies that the entire safe is made of silver. The only clue from the work record that might clarify this anomaly is the phrase "wallpaper amalgam" which appears on this work record and no other match safe record in the Gorham Archives.

An amalgam is any kind of an alloy that combines mercury with another metal or metals. Today most people know amalgam from a visit to the dentist when they need a filling for a cavity in their tooth. Currently, many dental amalgams are composed of 43% to 54% mercury; the remaining powder is made up of mainly silver, some tin, copper and zinc. The amalgam is pushed into the cavity and the dentist, using special tools smooths it and contours it to fit in the tooth. If the dentist were to simply allow the dental amalgam harden upon a table top, straight from the extrusion machine, the surface would be pitted, not smooth. (Personal experiment at my friend's dental office.) This is the same type of surface on Gorham's #1179 match safe.

Somehow, Gorham's silversmiths managed to make the silver amalgam produce an irregular pattern of copper, gold and silver colors on the exterior surface of the match safe. The pattern does not go all the through the metal as the inside of the case is uniformly silver where the gold wash is worn away. The work records do not indicate how this was achieved. In a personal email from a silver expert he thinks the technique was achieved by electroplating the gold and silver on top of the surface. He further speculates that the surface was acid etched prior to the electroplating.

Beside the production number on the bezel there are two other marks, a rampant lion and four

scratched marks, two upside down "V"s, and two "I"s. These scratched marks are secret Gorham price symbols. They stand for a price of \$51.15. In Larry Pisto's book, *Martelé Gorham's Art Nouveau Silver*, (p.160), he explains these marks. Generally, these price symbols are related to the net price of the piece at the factory, but in this case there is some confusion as the work record shows the net price as \$6.00.

The other mark, a rampant lion is part of Gorham's usual trade mark of a lion, anchor, G-mark, but nowhere else has this author found only the lion used as a Gorham mark.

There are three known examples of this type of "wallpaper amalgam" match safe. There may be more as Gorham rarely made one-of-a-kind match safes and certainly if these types of safes were made as samples for the Gorham salesmen, of whom there were many, you can be certain that more of these safes were made to show to clients.



From a private collection of an IMSA member



Carefully look at the left side of this image and see the scratch marks.