

JAPANESE TRADE POLICY AND HOW IT EFFECTED THE MANUFACTURE OF MATCH SAFES

By Neil Shapiro

If you like Japanese safes and collect them the history of how the Japanese thought of match safes and other items of trade with the West, from 1876 until 1900, may be important in the development of your collection.

Japan was only opened to large scale trade with the West in 1853 when Commodore Perry and his fleet entered Japanese waters and signed a trade treaty. After that treaty the Meiji government decided that the best way to initiate trade with the West was through international expositions. Couple these facts with the knowledge that 1876-1900 period was the heyday of match safe production and you have a definitive time period to study how Japan thought of the marketing and manufacturing of safes.

Although Japan tentatively opened its trade borders to the USA and the other Western countries, by making brief showings at two prior European expositions but it wasn't until 1873 with the restoration of the Meiji Emperor, that a full-fledged philosophy for trade with the West was developed and implemented. This commercial program was first implemented at the 1876 USA centennial exposition in Philadelphia.

In this time period it was the Japanese government's decision to carefully select what was chosen to exhibit at the 1876 Philadelphia World's Fair and the 1883 Chicago Colombia Exposition and evaluate the commercial viability of those objects for sale to Western consumers.

Japan wanted to promote items that could be easily mass produced and sold to the general public, but at the same time they needed to include enough items of a high level of artistic quality in order to maintain their reputation among the educated reviewers and wealthy connoisseurs. To achieve that end, Japan created new items that were directly inspired by older ones.

This allowed Japan to cater to Western demand for its products without losing its sense of traditional Japanese aesthetics. The distinction was made between mass produced items for the lower end of the export trade and finely made objects for the international connoisseurs' market.

This distinction was called the "Meiji parallel" and would play a defining role in American perceptions and consumption of Japanese art at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

The Japanese wanted to use their traditional art and crafts to promote their craftsmen's extremely high technical skills rather than machine-produced products. These craft items were not positioned as "works of art" but rather as precision "handcrafted products." The government hoped that this would invite more investment in manufacturing while restricting the outflow of historically important pre-Meiji objects –

Western demand for these older objects was strong – and also to help maintain their traditional arts and crafts culture.

For the match safe collector being aware of these governmental goals leads to a shift in our understanding of match safe production, since it implies that the vast majority of safes were contemporary items developed by the Japanese government for trade with Westerners.

Essentially, the Japanese government used the World Fairs in Philadelphia and Chicago as marketing research to see which of the displayed items produced Western demand.

Match safes were one item that fit the criteria of the government goals and also seem to sell well to Western businesses, so we have a relatively large number of Japanese safes available for collectors; both those made for mass consumption and those made for connoisseurs.

Below are examples (left to right) of a mid-level safe, a mass produced safe, and an artist-created match safe:



Silver, applied silver monkeys



Brass with stamped motif



Attributed to Kodenji Hayashi (Japanese, Nagoya 1831–1915), *NAGOYA HAYASHI SAKU*: Kodenji was partially responsible for developing overseas markets for cloisonné. Aware that copper, the base metal of his objects at that time, was restricted by law from export, he disguised himself as a silk merchant and hid his cloisonné wares in cocoon baskets. Carrying these baskets suspended from the ends of poles, he walked five hundred miles from his workshop to the port of Yokohama. There, he not only sold his wares to foreigners but also learned of their tastes.

Or another possible attribution: Cloisonné match safe attributed to Seizaburō Gotō, (active ca. 1860–1910) rectangular with black ground; dragon decoration and geometric border to lid. Additional decoration to underside. Japanese, Meiji period, late 19th century. Seizaburō Gotō was the best known maker of Yokohama cloisonné enamel. Both enamellists have work in the V&A and the Met.