

Pan Slavic Russian Match Safes

By Neil Shapiro

From the mid-19th century until the beginning of the 20th century there were two great Russian centers of silverwork, St. Petersburg and Moscow, that made most of the Russian pocket match safes that we collect.

In St. Petersburg the metal artisans were influenced by European designs and the large number of European silversmiths working there as they applied Russian skill sets to produce the safes. In Moscow the silversmiths reached back into Russian and Slavic history to find ideas and ornamentation for their work trying to create a “Russian style” independent of European influence.

While both centers used many materials to create match safes, including wood, papier maché, silver, gold, lacquer, and enamel, this essay will focus on enamel.



Papier Maché lacquer Pan Slavic style



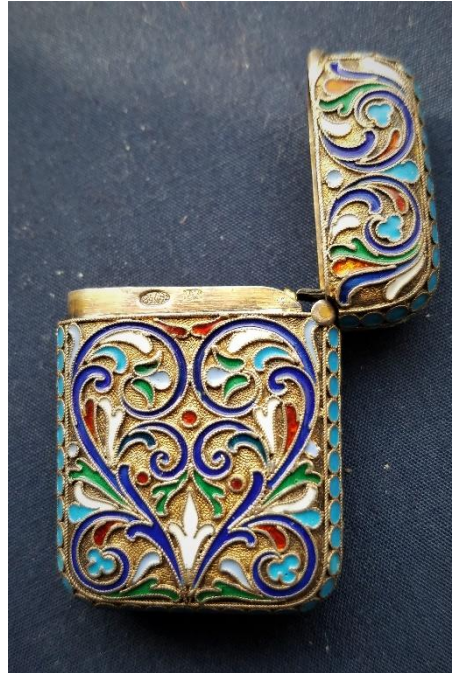
Russian wooden match safe

In St. Petersburg the smiths that created match safes mainly used *cloisonné* enamels while in Moscow the enamel decoration was largely done with *champlevé* enamels. The sophistication of both types of enamel work, from a technical point of view, was astounding. Often, the metal workers combined engraving, chasing, punching, and other techniques to enhance their enamel work.

In Moscow the prevailing Pan Slavic ornamental style was preferred by the wealthy merchants as it recalled tales of Old Mother Russia, myths, traditions and was generally created using a *champlevé* enameling technique in a flatter, heavier, more ancient form of design. Where as in St. Petersburg the wealthy preferred a lighter, perhaps more elegant style of decoration.



Pan Slavic style *champlevé*



St. Petersburg style *cloisonné*

As you can see from the images above the results of using the two different techniques yield strikingly different aesthetic effects. The Pan Slavic style produces a thicker line of enamel in a more geometric pattern as compared to the more arabesque patterns of the Petersburg cloisonné. There is no shading in the champlevé enamel and the ground is left unadorned, perhaps to make the enamel designs stand out. Additionally, the ground on the champlevé safe is plain silver while the cloisonné safe has a punched background adding a more refined look to the case.

The delicacy of line, almost like fine embroidery in the cloisonné versus the bold palette and folk-like simplicity of the champlevé match safe makes for easy choices for the contemporary consumers. For today's collectors of Russian match safes the Pan Slavic style will be more difficult to acquire as there seem to be many more Russian cloisonné safes available in the market.

