

Thoughts on Some Japanese Match Safes:

David Pye: **THE NATURE AND ART OF WORKMANSHIP**, Cambium Press, 1968.

“Design is what, for practical purposes, can be conveyed in words and by drawing: workmanship is what, for practical purposes, cannot.”

Recently, I purchased three Japanese match safes (see below) brought them home, carefully looked at them, and when I began to catalog them for my database I thought about the differences between fine art and applied art.

Applied art objects are usually defined as objects that have designs or ornamentation to make them aesthetically pleasing as well as functional. Fine art is usually defined as art that gives pleasure or mental stimulation merely from looking at it rather than using it. To me, this is a distinction based upon function rather than artistic merit. Is it “fine” art only when it has no functionality?

I think the reality is that fine and applied art really have no distinctions between them. Today we have textile arts, graphic artists, architects, photographers, wood workers, silversmiths, performance artists, earth artists, etc., who create objects that are both functional and aesthetically beautiful. The distinctions between fine and applied art more than overlap, they have, in my opinion, disappeared, if, they ever existed.

In art schools and in serious art journals there are discussions about the difference between ornamentation and decoration in art. To distinguish between ornamentation and decoration critics usually define decoration as the entire field of the object and ornamentation is what is added to the field of the object.

The ornamentation of an object may serve to call attention to a portion of an object or it may, in some way, enhance the object. The decoration usually creates a first visual impression of the object. This brings me back to Japanese match safes because the makers of Japanese match safes ornament most of their match safes and the ornamentation usually follows one of two forms.

Either it is merely enhances the decorative perception or it is both functional and decorative. The three match safes that I recently bought, have at first glance, only ornamentation that adds beauty to the safes. But once you handle them you realize the ornamentation adds to their function. The applied mons (Japanese crests) add traction to the body of the safe making it much easier to hold the safe when extracting a match. And the raised gold and silver chrysanthemums, lotus, and butterfly do the same for the shakudo and the mixed metal safes.

Since greater value is usually given to fine art as opposed to functional art the question of whether added ornamentation that increases functionality lessens the artistic value of

an object? A perverse question when you consider the use of a functional object is to be functional.

John Summerson, a British writer, distinguishes between ornamentation that creates patterns or designs on the surface of an object and focuses the eye toward that ornament and ornamentation that tries to simulate something else, e.g., a carved rosette on a piece of furniture that is supposed to represent a flower. Or, to state Summerson's idea differently, is the ornamentation a realistic depiction or a stylized version of reality? I think Summerson, is implicitly saying there are two kinds of ornamentation - but what does it matter for the match safe collector? The real question about ornamentation is whether it enhances the aesthetics of the safe as well as its usefulness. In my opinion if the ornamentation adds to the functionality it elevates the object and removes the distinction between functional and fine art.

Note: There is a Japanese concept called Kazari that incorporates the art of decoration and ornamentation that is at the heart of Japanese aesthetics. It comprises the composition, presentation and also a kind of spiritual importance to the object. It seems to me that Kazari is kinetic and body-related in some respects. If you read some of the expert literature on Kazari the experts have a difficult time pinning the concept down; so as Kazari pertains to match safes, I think, we can just enjoy its amazingness, complexity and usefulness.



Mixed metal



Shakudo w/leaves & insects



Safe w/applied mons