

# GORHAM'S MARTELÉ

## AND

# PARIS EXPOSITION MATCH SAFES

By Neil Shapiro

Beginning in 1897, the Gorham Mfg. Company of Providence, Rhode Island, created a unique line of mostly hand-made products called Martelé. While Martelé wares are of differing silver purities, .925, .950 and .9584,<sup>1</sup> Gorham also made a limited number of 18k gold

items for the Martelé line of products as well. Among them are six match safes, or as they were listed in the Gorham records, "match boxes."

Over a sixteen-day period in 1899, Gorham produced these six match safes. They were studded with gems and hand



Fig. 1. Sketch for match safe #3672 found on the bottom of a cost slip.



Fig. 2. Match safes made for the 1900 Paris Exposition. Image courtesy of L. J. Pristo.





Fig. 3. Close-up images of the six match safes Gorham sent to the Paris Exposition.

chasing that took up to twenty-four hours to complete. The exact whereabouts of these safes are not known today, nor is it known if they are even still in existence. There are, however, some tantalizing hints as to their design. But if they still exist and can be found, they may be the most valuable and beautiful American match safes ever made.

The match safes were made by a single maker, noted only as "E," on the cost records. At this time, the identity of "E" remains a mystery, but there are some clues found in the work of Gorham archivist Sam Hough and Martelé researcher, L. J. Pisto. Based on the work of these two men who studied the Gorham payroll records, the author suspects that the maker may be

either Adolph C. E. Erichsen (Erickson) or Finn (F.O.?) Erichsen. Whoever "E" was, he worked on raising the gold sheets into the match safe forms over periods that ranged from 9 1/2 to 12 hours. The time it took "E" was related to the complexity of making the match safe rather than its size. In his book, *Martelé: Gorham Art Nouveau Silver*, L. J. Pisto indicates that there are some larger Martelé objects that took less time to make because they had a less complex structure.

All six match safes were then chased by "L." Again, we do not definitively know the identity of "L," but based on Pisto's payroll analysis, the author suspects either Frank R. LaBree or Thomas Lewis. It took "L" between thirteen to twenty-four total hours to complete

the chasing on the match safes. As a comparison, "Bowls took in the neighborhood of 30 hours to make, while a coffee pot was completed in around 70 hours."<sup>2</sup>

William C. Codman, the chief designer at Gorham from 1891 to 1914, is credited by some Gorham researchers for the design of most, if not all, of the Martelé product line. Pisto, however, notes that Codman did not produce all of the Martelé pieces in the line but did create much of the earlier items.<sup>3</sup> Codman's early work at Gorham shows that his designs were influenced by the art nouveau movement. Handwritten notes on the bottom of the cost slips, as well as a sketch (Figure 1) that exists for another 18k gold safe (made in 1899 and not marked Martelé) appear to carry out the assumption that Codman influenced or designed the Martelé match safes. The "names" of the match safes as they appear on the bottom of the cost records are: "Tobacco," "Violet," "Dragon & Seaweed," "chased ornamental scroll & flower," and "Fleur-de-lis."

The Martelé match safes were all made as samples, as noted on the cost records, and bear the production numbers, #3621, #3623, #3636, #3637, #3657, and #3658. When made in 1899, they cost between \$72.15 and \$108.00. Today that would roughly equate to \$1,439.39 and \$3,192.00.

There is no evidence that the Martelé match safes were made for display and/or sale at the 1900 Paris Exposition (officially, *Exposition Universelle*). But there is photographic evidence of match safes (Figure 2) that Gorham did make to bring to the Paris Exposition. They are found in the Woodward's Album of articles that Gorham made for the Exposition, located in the Gorham Archives at Brown University.<sup>4</sup>

The six images in the center of the photograph (enlarged for Figure 3) are production numbers, X155, X156, X157, X158, X159, and X160. The cost records



Fig. 4. Close-up image of the three 18k gold match safes Gorham sent to the Paris Exposition.

note the cases were made of 18k gold, and either the hinge or spring of 14k or 10k gold. They were all made on March 22, 1900, by "E" and chased by "#40" (X155-X158), "#125" (X159), and "#21" (X160). In 1900, the safes cost respectively, \$108.00, \$104.00, \$108.00, \$120.00, \$108.00, and \$116.00. That would be the equivalent of \$2,671.44 to \$3,082.43 today. They all have applied stones and unusually, all were finished by the maker rather than the finishing shop.

Figure 4 illustrates a close-up of the

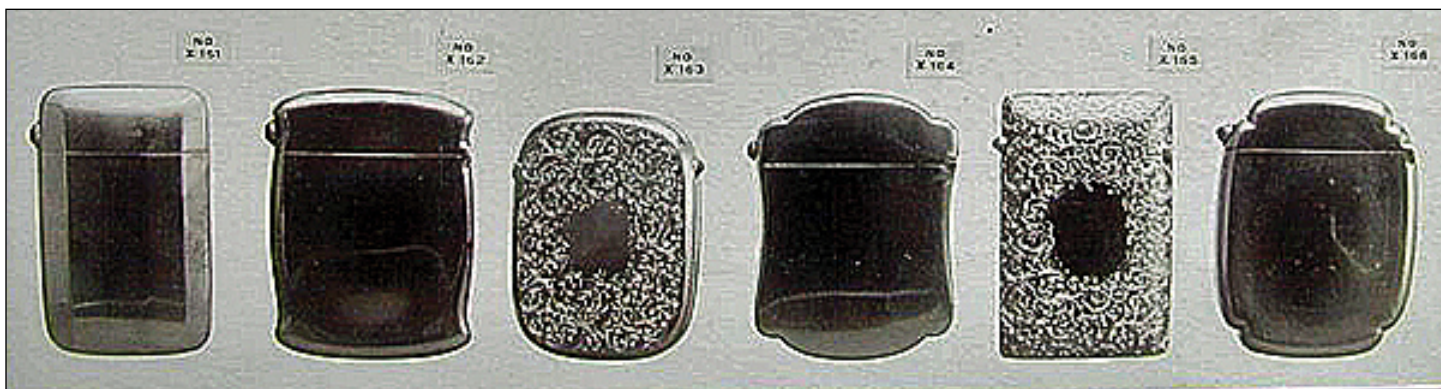


Fig. 5. Close-up image of the six 18k gold match safes Gorham sent to the Paris Exposition.



Fig. 6. Sterling silver enameled match safe by Gorham. Images courtesy of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, New York.



three match safes at the top of the photograph in Figure 2 and the six match safes at the bottom of the same photograph have been enlarged for Figure 5. Gorham made these safes in sterling silver as well as 14k gold in previous and subsequent years. There is no evidence that the six safes shown in Figure 3 were ever made again in any other material.

Gorham may have also made some sterling silver match safes for Paris. Made in 1900, these safes feature scenes of Paris and have the production numbers, B3, B4, B5, B6, B7, B8, and B9. All of them have painted enamel images except for B8 and B9 which are engraved and etched. Figure 6 illustrates one known example of these safes, B4. The painted enamel safes were made by maker "G" and cost the Gorham factory a net price of \$6.00 in 1900.

The Paris Exposition was held from April 15 to November 12, 1900. We do not know the exact dates the sterling safes were made as only the year is noted. It is possible that they were made and brought to Paris, but without definitive dates we can't be certain. The inscription on the back side of the illustrated match safe in Figure 6 reads, "From J.L. Steiner to his friend, Wm. B. Birge, Paris, 1900."

Gorham made the sample match safes #3672, #3673, #3674, and #3675 on November 11, 1899. Crafted and finished by "E," the safes were made of 18k gold and chased with gold 10k springs. Each safe cost respectively, \$64.00, \$76.00, \$84.00, and \$80.00. Notations were made on the bottom of the cost slips (Figure 7) with: "all this size and shape" for the illustration of #3672, and "snakes & scroll" (#3673), "Forget me not, similar to 3672" (#3674), and "Indian worms?" (#3675); regrettably, no one has located an extant example

	3672	3673	3674	3675
	-15 1/2	-19	-19	-18 1/2
18 K L.	12 40	15 20	15 20	14 60
add 5%	62	76	76	73
Make - E.	9 1/2	3 32 9 1/2	3 15 9 1/2	3 32
Chasing	20 10 -	20 10 -	20 10 -	20 10 -
Finishing E.	-	-	-	-
10 K Spring	1 53	53	53	53
	11.50	16	21.25	17.50
	26 87	29 73	29 64	29 18
	53	59	59	54
	13 24	15 68	15 57	15 02
	53	59	59	54
	40 30	44 60	44 48	43 77
	20 2	2 3	2 2	2 7
	11 20	46 83	46 64	45 96
	16	22	29	24
	64	76	84	80
		Snakes & scroll	Forget me not	Indian worms?
		Similar to 3672	Similar to 3672	Norman?

Fig. 7. Copy of Cost records for match safes: 3672, 3673, 3674, 3675. Courtesy of the Gorham Archives at Brown University.

or even a photographic image of any of these safes. Figure 1 is the only sketch that gives us an idea of what these safes looked like.

We cannot definitively conclude that Gorham made and sent all of these match safes to the Paris Exposition. But the timing, expense, and the workmanship on these match safes would seem to indicate that Gorham made them for the Paris Exposition.

## Notes

1. L. J. Pisto, *Martelé, Gorham Art Nouveau Silver* (Phoenix, AZ: Phoenix Publishing Group Book, 2002), 29.
2. Ibid., 27.
3. Ibid.
4. Gorham Company Photo Album, photographic records of Gorham products, Woodward's copy, Gorham Archives, Brown University.

**Neil Shapiro** is a researcher, collector, and dealer of match safes. He has written numerous articles as well as *Exceptional Match Safes*, and his most recent book, *Gorham Match Safes*, and is currently working on a book about Japanese match safes. He and his family live in Albany, NY. Visit his website [www.matchsafescholar.com](http://www.matchsafescholar.com).