

Gorham Japanese Match Safe?

By Neil Shapiro

This essay is about an unsigned match safe that has the same body construction and configuration as a Gorham B7 safe but is patinated, decorated, and constructed like a Japanese safe.

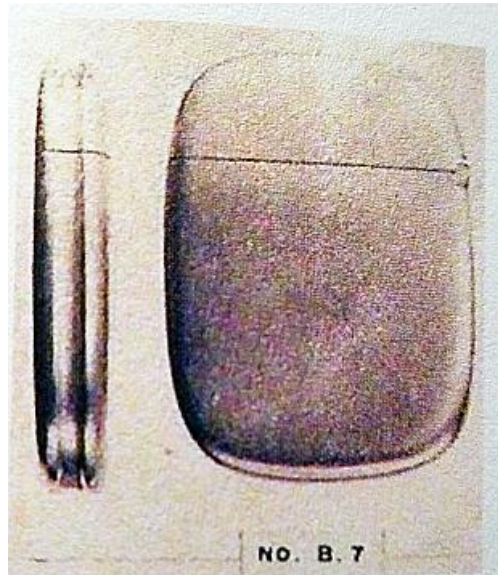


Image from the Gorham archives at Brown University

There is no reference to the match safe discussed in this essay in the Gorham Archives at the John Hay Rare Book Library at Brown University. It is also unusual, but not unknown, for a Gorham piece to be unsigned. Gorham was proud of its products and did much to acknowledge its work, including marking most of its products and engaging in widespread advertising campaigns. But the similarity to the quality of Gorham's work, the structure of the safe and the myriad types of ornamentation used on the same body types of Gorham match safes leads to speculation that this safe was a product of the Gorham workshops or a collaboration between Gorham and a Japanese metalworker.

The match safe measures 2' x 1 1/2" x 3/8". The body is patinated iron. The patina is probably what the Japanese call *niage*. *Niage* is a basic and important patina for Japanese metal work. It can produce a dark brown color, which is the overall color on this safe. The silver, gold-washed interior is double-walled, a common Japanese construction, but unusual for a Gorham piece. The sides are indented to form a modified "U" and the corners are rounded – one to enable easy grasping and the other to not snag the pocket it is carried within.



See the interior wall rising higher to form the bezel.

The front has an applied descending, three-toed, silver dragon covering most of the face of the safe. Japanese dragons have three toes. The Japanese believe that all eastern dragons originated from Japan. They also believed that when the dragons began to leave Japan, they gain toes. The farther the dragons went, the more toes they gained. This is why the other dragons, e.g., Chinese, Korean, have more toes. The breath of Japanese dragons turned into clouds, which could produce rain or fire.

This is probably a female horned dragon also known as Lung. Female dragons usually hold fans in their tails and male dragons clubs.

It is the most powerful of the Asian dragons and is completely deaf. It should also be noted that the head points South, and the tail points North. In addition, they are a symbol of the East and the sun; fitting for an object that gives light.



The back side of the safe has a small silver cartouche with an elaborate “B,” indicating that it was a specially ordered piece.



An analysis of the Gorham work records shows that all of the B7 match safe were first made in 1898 and all were special orders. Of the five B7 safes made in 1898, two silver safes were made for the Paris Exposition in 1900 (this safe in this essay was not specifically made for the Paris Exposition as it not listed in Woodward's Album of articles that Gorham made for the Exposition, a special brochure made for that event.) But one 18K gold safe made for the Paris Exposition, production #X163, is the same shape and configuration as the B7 Gorham safe and the safe discussed in this essay.



The Gorham Manufacturing Co., also made a number of special items that Gorham called “samples.” Some of these samples were items that were formed and assembled in the Gorham plant in Providence, RI, and then shipped to Japan for decoration. After Japanese artisans worked on the items the pieces were returned to Gorham and sold in their New York City store. Initially, this trade was facilitated by a middleman, a company called A.A. Vantine, a retailer of Japanese products.

These unique samples (Gorham made many samples for expositions, world's fairs, salesmen, etc.) were listed in the Gorham records as being made in 1897. In 1898, *The NY Times*, wrote, “...The Japanese have their own original ways of doing their silver work, which is a combination of chasing and applied work, and shows the characteristics

of the country. So when the American manufacturer wishes Japanese designs made from his own silver he sends it to Japan, and there the silversmiths of the country put on their chrysanthemums and their monkeys, making them stand out as in life, or incised, and they come back to America silver with the pure Japanese design.”(“Silver For American Tables,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1898, p. 20.)

In the Gorham archives are a number of match safes without production numbers and at least one notable safe that is of undoubtedly Japanese workmanship.



Both sides and lid are shown-in middle image is Japanese signature

So, is the unmarked match safe discussed in this essay a product of the brilliance of the Gorham Manufacturing Co., and Japanese artistry? I think it is an object made for an elite and wealthy connoisseur, the type of client Gorham cultivated with this limited production of American and Japanese art; a part of a small amount of products Gorham created in concert with Japanese workers that was not replicated for several reasons: the Japanese government changed the trade rules and allowed direct trade with other nations, imposed new, higher tariffs on non-Japanese products (particularly gold and silver), and allowed Japanese workers to bring their talents to the America, so Gorham could hire their own Japanese artists.

Resources:

Magazine Antiques January/ February 2018, “Global exchange: How the craftsmanship of two cultures met in Gorham's "Japanese Work" silver, “by Spencer Gordon and Mark McHugh