

GORHAM MATCH SAFES AND THEIR ARCHIVAL RECORDS

By Neil Shapiro

Would not every match safe collector like to know who actually made their safes, who chased, etched or decorated their safes? Even better, if the safe was made for a specific individual wouldn't the collector like to know for whom it was made? And even better yet, all collectors would like to know how many of a particular safe were made over the course of time.

The answers to some of those questions have been found with regard to the Gorham Corporation's match safe production from 1855–1930. George Sparacio and I, working under an IMSA grant, have been sifting through hundreds of thousands of archival documents at the John Hay Library at Brown University in Providence, RI. The preliminary results of some of that work are shown below as they were presented to IMSA members at the Manchester, UK meeting in 2005 and in California in 2004. Our preliminary report from 2004 follows:

The Gorham Corporation has a large number of very detailed records on all of their products. To search for their production of match safes the researcher needs to examine their Costing Ledgers, the Samples and Specials Costing Boxes, the Photographic Albums and other miscellaneous records.

Since Gorham appears to have made match safes from 1855 until well into the 20th century it is not possible to limit the search to a particular time period, nor is it possible to look only in certain logical places for match safes, e.g., silver manufacturing. Match safes are found in every conceivable record location, ecclesiastical, silver, gold, jewelry, specials, samples, copper, bronze, etc. To fully search all of Gorham's records means sifting through hundreds of thousands of documents. After two long research visits we have looked at about 100,000 documents of all descriptions. [The number of documents reviewed has significantly increased since the preliminary report was written.]

When the study is completed we will be able, in many cases, to know the maker, the person who ornamented the safe and in some cases how many were made. We will determine who did the work on the safes by cross referencing the payroll records with the work assignments. Gorham designated certain rooms and particular desks in those rooms to individuals and particular kinds of work. On each cost record are the amounts of safes made that day. Each time that Gorham made another order of the same safe they added the totals made to the cost record. Hence, by adding up all the recorded entries, a total of safes made will be determined.

Finally, we hope to upload all the data to the IMSA web site so that anyone will be able to access this information from anywhere that they have the facilities to logon.

How Gorham actually manufactured match safes will be an essay for future IMSA newsletters.

Lists of the tables that I used in the database. This will be available to all IMSA members and has all of this information as it applies to each individual safe along with archival and real images of the safes. The motifs, types, decorations, finishings and materials are all taken directly from the Gorham records.

MATERIALS: Aluminum, Brass, Bronze, Copper, Enamel, Glass, Gold 10K, Gold 14K, Gold 18K, Gold 22K, Gold green, Gold inlaid, Gold red, Gun metal, Iron, Ivory, Mixed Metal, Mother of Pearl, Platinum, Silver 950, Silver plate (electro), Steel, Sterling Silver.

TYPES: Exhibition, Experimental, Martele, Production, Sample, Special.

DECORATIONS: Acid etched, Applied work, Brite cut, Champleve, Chasing, Cloisonne, Cuban coins, Diamonds, Embossing, Engine turning, Engraving, Etching, Gilding, Hammering, Initials, Inlaid gold, Jewels, Mixed metals, Monogram, Niello, Oxidation, Painted enamel, Pearls, Piercing, Plain box, Push stone, Raised border, Repousse, Ruby, Stamping, Stones, USA coins.

MOTIFS: Animals, Art deco, Art Nouveau, Asian, Basketweave, Border design, Botanical, Cartoons, Cherubs, Classical design, Cuban coin, Devils, Dragon, Drinking, Enamel, Equestrian, Faces, Fairies, Figural, Flags, Floral, Fraternal, Gambling, Geometric, Golf, Hammered, Hunting scene, Indians, Insects, Mask, Man, Mixed metal, Monogram, Myths, Nationalistic, Nudes, Paris Exhibition, Patterns, Political, Presentational, Rococo, Schools, Scrolls, Sea creatures, Smoking, Snakes, USA coin, War, Women.

FINISHINGS: Bobbing, Burnishing, Coloring steel, Fluting, French Finish, Gilding, Gold wash, Green rouge, Hand burnishing, Lathe burnishing, Polishing, Red Rouge, Stoning.