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A MIXED METAL WHITING SAFE IN THE JAPANESE TASTE

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The Whiting Manufacturing Company of New York (1866-1924) produced a mixed metal match safe that measures 1 ¼" x 2 ½" x 3/8", circa 1880 - 1890. When the safe is examined by collectors they generally assume that it portrays a rooster on one side and a devil on the other, but that is not the case at all. Rather, Whiting, who produced three known mixed metal safes in the Aesthetic mode, has made a safe that is in the Japanese manner and depicts important Japanese cultural symbols.

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The match safe actually has a cockerel on one side standing on a rounded mound. This is the American artist's attempt to re-create the Japanese symbol of a cockerel on a drum, an enduring Japanese symbol of peace and happiness. The obverse has an *Oni*, a Japanese devil or imp, which is generally depicted as fierce-looking but is usually considered a prankster rather than a malignant devil.

When artistically rendered, *Onis* have large heads with small horns protruding from the forehead, a large mouth, fierce fangs and bristling eyebrows, much like the one on this safe.

The Japanese almost always carefully considered the background of their art. On this safe the artist has created a tactile overall pattern that fits easily into the hand and creates a stunning backdrop for the figures. The design erases the space between the lid and the body of the safe as well as the striker, which is integrated into the overall pattern.

The elements of this safe - subject matter, color, shape, symmetry and surface area - are all affected by the artist's attempt to create a Japanese aesthetic. The Japanese considered a bright, shiny background as vulgar; hence, the artist tried to emulate a technique known as *ishime* (stone ground), a pattern of various irregular shaped surfaces in the fretwork-like background. The mixed metal techniques and the subject matter all echo the Japanese artistic style of the late Edo and early Meiji periods.



While not as well known as Tiffany or Gorham, Whiting was an internationally famous manufacturer of silver products. An official French government report on American silver-smithing in 1893 ranked Whiting third behind Tiffany and Gorham in both taste and production. The production part is puzzling since Whiting was known for its relatively small production output: "... Whiting, unlike bigger firms, Gorham's and Tiffany's, produced exceptional handmade silverware in *relatively small quantities*." (Charles L. Venable, *Silver in America*, Harry Abrams, New York, 1994, p. 153, italics added.)

Using Charles Osborne's designs, Whiting produced some of its most remarkable silverware. Osborne's style was a mixture of "Hindoo, Japanese, and Chinese" (Venable, p.153), and this is evident in this safe. Many of the foremost

silver manufacturers in America were led by brilliant designers - Gorham's F. Antoine Heller and Wm. Codman; Tiffany's Albert Southwick; and Reed & Barton's W. C. Beattie and A. F. Jackson, etc. - who had either received their training or were born in other countries, and who had early access to Japanese artistic sensibilities, as Japanese art was first circulated in France and then throughout Europe. Osborne was born and trained in America, but he undoubtedly had access to some of the Japanese artistic ware that was available in America, as well as the Tiffany library where there were a significant number of Japanese art books - Osborne worked for Tiffany for a period of time.

This safe by Whiting, rather than focusing on the reproduction of the natural world, which is what the Japanese influence on American design was noted for, attempts to depict a Japanese myth and symbol and is undoubtedly an early attempt by Whiting to capture the Japanese idiom in silver. It is an American exercise in trying to represent a part of Japanese culture rather than an artistic style.