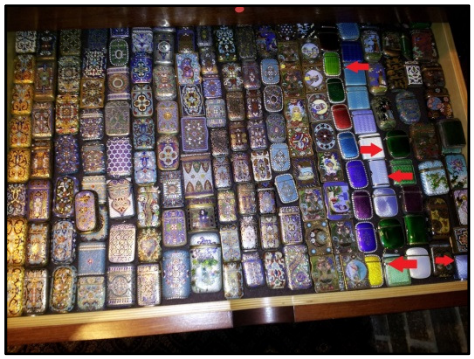
Match Safes in the Knohl Collection

by Timothy Adams, Art Historian



Fabergé Match Safes in the Knohl Collection
http://www.theknohlcollection.com/
(Photograph by the Author)

Long before the beginning of recorded history, man learned how to spark fires by rubbing two sticks together. It was not until 1680 when an Englishman named Robert Boyle discovered phosphorus and sulfur would burst into flame instantly when rubbed together. Nearly 150 years after Boyle's discovery, an English apothecary named John Walker found that a stick coated on one end with Boyle's phosphorus/sulfur combination would light if struck against virtually any surface. Voila - the first "friction match" was born. Unfortunately, these early matches worked a little too well, often igniting unexpectedly when carried loosely in a pocket or purse - Ouch!

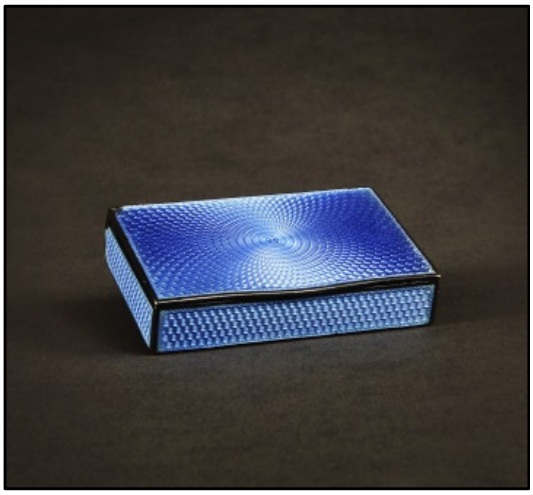
Since almost everyone carried matches in the 19th century - to light stoves, lanterns, cigars, cigarettes, and pipes - special containers were designed to prevent these fire sticks from bursting into flame unintentionally. The first containers were large tin canisters, primarily found throughout the home - on a wall near a wood-burning stove, on top of a table by a gas lantern, or in a desk drawer close to the sealing wax. These bulky match holders looked pretty silly sticking out of a man's breast pocket or a lady's delicate dance purse.

As cigarette smoking became increasingly popular, first among men and later among women, there was a need for smaller containers to safely hold matches. In 1830 "pocket match safes" appeared - the term still used in the United States. In England these containers are called "vesta cases" - named after the Roman goddess Vesta, recalling the sacred fire burning at her hearth. Whatever size, shape or material, the one thing all vesta cases and match safes have in common is a "striker" - a rough or ribbed surface, usually found on the bottom, used to ignite the match.

Although these handy containers are rarely seen today, for about 65 years - from 1850 to 1915 - match safes were manufactured on every continent and used around the globe. They were made in countless shapes, sizes and styles, and sold everywhere, from cheap souvenir stalls and inexpensive novelty stores to highly-sophisticated jewelry shops. The materials used for making vesta cases varied considerably, from inexpensive tin and brass to mother-of-pearl and tortoise shell to precious metals like gold and silver. Many of the first match safes held a celluloid panel displaying an advertisement, a political endorsement, or an image of a famous tourist attraction. Moving beyond

utilitarian, designers created match safes that were miniature pieces of art - hand-chased sterling silver repoussé, intricately carved ivory, and elaborate scenes hand-painted on fine enamel. The cases embellished with rare gems make them appear more like fine jewelry than a convenient container for sticks with chemicals on the tip. By 1890, companies, such as Unger Brothers, Shreve & Co., W.B Kerr, and Whiting, were manufacturing large quantities for the wealthier segments of society. And, the most coveted were those created by brilliant designers like Tiffany, Gorham, and Fabergé.

French Case in Russian Pan-Slavic Style



Fabergé Blue Guilloché Vesta Case
(Courtesy Knohl Collection)

Dr. Howard Knohl, an avid collector in California, has assembled the world's largest collection of pocket match safes. All 21,000 match safes (… yes, 21,000!) are organized by their country of origin (England, the United States, Japan, China, France, Germany, Egypt, etc.) and beautifully displayed in over 250 drawers throughout the Knohls' home. While touring their house, I had the privilege and pleasure to view several of these drawers. My eyes were immediately drawn to the stunning enameled match safes which were unmistakably Russian. This drawer was illuminated on the left side with rich blues, royal reds and vibrant greens in the Pan-Slavic style and patterns, and on the right side were pastel-colored Fabergé pieces with the iconic *guilloché* enameling.

It was not until the mid-1990s when match safes became a central focus of their collection, both for their historical value, as well as in appreciation of their beauty. When Knohl began collecting match safes, most people were unaware of these miniature art forms, allowing him to make purchases well below today's market value. He explained even today, match safes and vesta cases are not in the general public's consciousness. Hollywood film studios continue to erroneously show characters from 1850 to 1915 using a book or box of matches, rather than a match safe, although these ingenious containers were pervasive throughout this time period.

Dr. Knohl and I agreed the intricate details, rich colors, and the overall "masculine feel" of Russian safes make them truly special. My host added, "They have a certain weight to them that just feels good in your hand." He also mentioned many Fabergé cases have subtle rounded corners. Carol Seelig Eastman, curator of the Knohl Collection, handed me one fabulous example, a delicate opalescent blue match safe with a cabochon-sapphire thumb-piece, which opened and closed as if it were made yesterday. I was struck by the soft bombé curve of the body and the refined finish, the

hallmark of Fabergé cigarette and vesta cases. There was also a small jump ring attached so it could be easily hung from a chain or chatelaine.

Fabergé Bombé Blue *Guilloché* Vesta Case by Viktor Aarne, Workmaster, Active 1880-1904

Fabergé Emerald Green *Guilloché* Vesta Case
(Courtesy Knohl Collection)

These beautiful little objects, used by millions of people, held their own until the 1930s, when matchbooks and fluid lighters made them obsolete. Although match safes have fallen out of fashion, they continue to provide insights into life in the 19th century. These wonderful objects convey the vibrancy of an era marked by technological and scientific advancement and the revision of social and economic order. Thanks to fervent collectors, like Dr. Howard Knohl, these small and often elegant objects will be preserved for future generations and continue to provide a window into the world Carl Fabergé knew so well.