

## World Phillumeny

Well, you already know that the hobby didn't start here, of course. Long before America invented the matchbook, Europeans and others around the world were already collecting labels, which is what "Phillumeny" was originally all about (collecting boxes and matchbooks came later). But, deep from within the bowels of the RMS research laboratories, a startling discovery has come to light...the first club for Phillumenic collectors was organized in Japan!

This first club for collectors was formed in 1903. The first meeting was held in Tokyo, and there was already a detailed code of etiquette for collectors >> "1) Each member has to contribute to the organization of an annual meeting by paying twenty sen per month. *[sounds like they already were putting together a convention]* 2) Members must arrive punctually at the meeting. *[still a good idea 99 years later]* 3) In order to participate in the meeting, members should be properly dressed. *[Absolutely! Personally, I'd like to see the Hawaiian shirts and flip flops go]* 4) Labels should be exchanged one for one. *[We still do that today]* 5) Members should talk of no other subject than matchbox labels. *[Yea! Priorities are priorities!]* 6) Correct ethical procedure should be observed in exchanges. *[Ha! We're still constantly trying to get that one observed—"Don't send me struck covers!" "Don't send damaged covers!" Don't send Nationals!"...of course, you're going to get them anyhow]* 7) If a new arrival exchanges matchbox tops during the meeting without the Club's authorization, he shall be expelled. *[Ooooooh, Big Brother is watching!]* 8) If someone tries to cheat in the exchange of matchbox tops, he shall be expelled. *[And, sure enough, that's what the ONE person ever expelled from RMS was guilty of]* 9) If someone connives with foreigners, he will be expelled. *[Sometimes referred to as the 'Yankee, go home!' rule]* 10) Non-members can enter the meeting one-by-one, only after authorization has been given. *[Don't ask me why]* 11) The sale of matchbox tops during the meeting is absolutely forbidden. *[There go the auctions!]* 12) A new member can be accepted only after proposal by another member." *[Some clubs today still have that rule; if there was ever any logic behind that rule, it completely escapes me]*

Later, these rules were modified, the number of meetings was increased to four per year, and the number of collectors grew rapidly after the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, when new markets gave a further boost to exports—new labels appeared.

Silk and tea merchants at Yokohama and Kobe began to use albums full of Japanese labels as gifts for their foreign clients, and they soon became highly sought-after by European collectors. In this way, a real market for the albums began; each album usually contained 500 labels. A collection of 5,000 labels cost 50 to 60 yen, and rare labels cost 5 to 10 sen each. *[I have no idea how much that was, but to put it in perspective, the salary of a blue collar worker then was about 15 to 20 sen a day, and a box of cigarettes cost 4 to 5 sen]* Thus, collecting labels was not just a hobby, but a significant domestic income earned by the children who collected labels and arranged them in albums for resale to foreigners. Old labels began to be reprinted—aged by means of a flame to make them resemble the originals. Notwithstanding the measures taken by the unimpeachable Collectors' Club in Japan, many of the albums that reached Europe contained some of these 'forgeries.'

The peak of popularity was reached in the period between 1914 and 1925. Nearly every large city had its club—the fashion of the personalized label, jewels of refined workmanship, spread rapidly, and in 1918 the Japanese government, by means of the Ministry of Agriculture and Commerce, sponsored an

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## ....Started in Japan!

enormous exhibition in Tokyo in response to public interest. At this time, in 1918, there were 204 match factories operating in Japan, producing over 900,000 tons of matches, of which only 180,000 were destined for domestic use. From then on, however, the market began to decline. Importing nations, headed by India, formed their own industries, protecting their own markets. Just before World War II, Japanese production had dropped by at least half. The great Tokyo earthquake of 1923, with 100,000 victims, was a fatal blow to label collecting, along with American carpet bombing in World War II. The great popularity and interest in the hobby never revived.

But, by then, the torch had already been passed to other areas of the world. By the 1930s, the first clubs were appearing in the United States (covers) and in England (boxes). The Blue Moon Club formed in NY in 1932; the first commercial matchcover albums appeared in 1935; the United Match Label Collectors' Club formed the following year, with the Match Folder Collectors' Alliance forming in the same year. Many veteran collectors would point to the 1939 NY World's Fair as the final impetus for launching the American branch of the hobby. In 1941, our own Rathkamp Memorial Society of Matchcover Collectors was formed in Pocasset, MA...and the rest is history! Of course, on this side of the Pacific, by the time collecting interest became organized, matchbooks had made their appearance. Since the matchbook was an American invention, matchbooks took hold here first, caught collectors' interest here first, and became the focus of interest over boxes and labels here first. But, as American collectors, we sometimes tend toward provincialism and forget that the hobby, Phillumeny, actually started out as label-collecting...then encompassed box-collecting...and only finally came to include cover-collecting. Thus, we're actually the 'new kids on the block.'

Over in Europe, meanwhile, the first club in England, focusing not surprisingly on boxes and labels, appeared in 1937, and the European clubs in general are still basically centered around collecting boxes and labels today, simply because the matchbook has never been as readily available in Europe as labels and printed boxes. The current British Matchbox Label and Booklet Society didn't get started until 1945; Britain's British Phillumatic Society formed in 1972, but it only lasted two years. France's Ass. Vitolphilique et Phillumenique Francaise (AVPF) was founded in Paris in 1954 as a cigar band collecting society but was opened to phulleminists in 1960. The main club in the Netherlands, the Studie - En Dokumentatiegroep Lucifersetiketten, first appeared in 1955. Other European clubs now include Germany's Phillumenistische Geselleschaft e. V., Malta's Hobbies Society, Portugal's Assoc. Port. Filumeniso, Rumania's Gruparea Filumenistilor din Romania, Russia's Rad Club of Phillumeny Leningrad, Slovakia's Slovensky Filumenisticy Zvaz and its Slovensky Filumenisti.

In Asia, China's Chinese Phillumenic Society (headquartered in Hong Kong) was founded in 1948 and at its peak counted an incredible 100,000+ collectors! The India Top Match Cover Club started in 1994. Other Asian clubs include Thailand's The Match Collector Club of Thailand. Ironically, there's no known club currently in Japan.

Elsewhere, Australia's AMCCS started in 1957, and its Sydney Phillumenists Club began in 1975. South Africa has its Protea Match Collectors Club of South Africa, although I've never been able to get a response from them.

*[My asides notwithstanding, the above information on Japan was taken from Guarnaccia, Matteo, I Fiammiferi, Milan: BE-MA EDITRICE, 1989, 141 pp.]*