

Covers vs. Boxes vs. Labels

by
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When you explain to someone that you're a phillumenist, you invariably define it as a collector of matchcovers. But, of course, phillumenists also collect matchboxes and matchbox labels. It's just that most collectors around the world don't focus on the same types, concentrating instead on only one or two, and not the same one or two. This, in turn, has resulted in very definite geographical preferences...Basically, North America (only the US and Canada) is into covers and boxes, whereas the rest of the world's phillumenists collect boxes and labels. Why? Well...*the short version...*



The matchbox was a European invention, and labels quickly appeared thereafter. Thus, from a collecting standpoint, that's what first took hold in Europe, primarily labels at first, and then, in more recent times, boxes with the advertising either printed directly on the surface or at least in an irremovable format. And that happened at a time when European influence, especially the British Empire, was at its peak around the world. It's not totally surprising, then, that the earliest phillumenic clubs (that I've been able to find) were in Japan, in 1905 or a little earlier, and these all focused on labels. Today, not coincidentally, the largest phillumenic club in the world is the Chinese Phillumenic Club in Hong Kong...and its primary focus is on...boxes and labels.



For us, though, it's all about covers. Even though most of us also collect boxes--whether in their own categories, as in American Ace and Pocketbox, or simply as parts of our other topical areas--it's the matchcover that makes up the nucleus of our own

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collecting world, which is why almost all domestic phillumenic clubs have the word 'matchcover' in their names rather than some variation of 'phillumeny'. So why are *we* different from the rest of the world?

Well, we started out the same as everywhere else. Commercially, up to the early 1900s, here, it was all matchboxes and labels. But in the 1890s, the matchbook had been invented...and it was invented right here in America. *So you can see what's coming!* A tentative appearance on the matchbox scene...a few big orders (in the millions) in the next couple of decades...Americans get accustomed to the little cardboard folders...and voilá! The matchbook becomes the preferred means of ignition here in the US and Canada. But, as popular as the little gizmo became here, it never caught on in the rest of the world, and overseas, it's still the collector's stepchild compared to boxes and labels.

True, it got a much later start in places like Africa, Asia, and Australia, but even in Europe it was still a novelty in the 1930s. In Agatha Christie's *Murder On The Orient Express*, c. 1933, Hercule Perot has to explain what a matchbook is. Why didn't the matchbook succeed overseas? I have to assume (in light of no information at all!) that foreign manufacturers didn't push it as Diamond, Universal, and others did here. Certainly, giants of the industry such as Swedish Match and Bryant & May, which dominated the overseas match world, could have done so...but they didn't. I'll bet the story behind *that* would be interesting!

So, the world stands divided---East vs. West, democracies vs. dictatorships...and cover collectors vs. box and label collectors. Oi vey! Will we ever come together as one big happy family?...Certainly not in *my* lifetime!

The problem is...although box production continued on here, labels quickly disappeared. Technology, I presume, simply made them obsolete (Although, the same technology is available overseas, and labels *continue* to flourish there. (Go figure!) In any event, with the eventual disappearance of labels domestically, almost all interest in collecting them here disappeared, as well. And, to my knowledge, there never was a 'real' label club that developed in the US. There was the old Blue Moon Match Label Club, 1931-1942...but they were into covers, as well. The United Matchonians, 1936?-1951, ostensibly dealt with both covers and labels, but, checking several issues of its publication, any informational text was almost exclusively devoted to covers.

Indeed, when we reach the point in the early 1930s when collectors begin surfacing here, they're all pretty much cover collectors. But collectors then had to settle for general collecting organizations, open to stamp collectors and other non-phillumenic types. There were none specifically for matchcover collectors. Several years went by; some collectors decided there should be a club centered on *their* interests; and RMS was born. Then, with RMS acting as a national focal point for collectors all over the country, regional club s began appearing...and the rest is history.

In light of all this, then, it's not surprising that domestic collectors have little to no interest in labels. We could justifiably argue that we didn't grow up with them; they're all foreign (which means there's often a significant language barrier involved in collecting them); and the market has been flooded with varieties produced just for collectors...not to mention outright forgeries. Plus, labels are flimsier than the covers that we're used to working with, and that means that they can be wrinkled, creased, and damaged easier.

On the plus side, it could just as easily be argued that whereas covers offer basically a history of the US, say since 1920, labels offer a longer history (from the mid-1800s) and a much broader global

perspective (starting in Europe, but quickly encompassing most of the rest of the world...as good ol' European imperialism washed over the world!)

Also, labels offer beautiful art work; there certainly is a bigger market for them; and it's actually much easier to trade labels. It's difficult to trade covers around the world, because most overseas collectors only have boxes and labels to trade. They're easier to store and not as bulky as covers. And just as with covers, labels can come in sets, sometimes are issued as errors, and there are rarities and treasures. Additionally, labels don't come with strikers, so there's no problem with crumbling or discolored strikers.

Boxes? Here, too there are arguments pro and con. They also, of course, have a long history, come from all over the world, are readily available, and easily tradable. Additionally, although I don't have any really old boxes, myself, I've never heard that box strikers discolor and crumble as they do on so many of the older covers.

On the other side of the ledger, with the exception of American Aces and Pocketboxes, I've always found that most other boxes are difficult to cleanly open, especially foreign issues...and some of the latter I'd swear were put together with cement! The other big drawback is the size. A seemingly endless variety of shapes and sizes dulls the senses, and that's also why you don't find pages specifically designed for housing boxes (with the exception, again of Ace and Pocketbox). Of course, for a box aficionado, all those shapes and sizes could simply be another selling feature, but for collectors who concentrate mainly on covers, it all tends to be a headache. And then there are all those boxes that just don't open up at all. For example, I have a Holiday Inn (if I remember correctly) from Africa that is one-piece plastic, no seam at all. And even if there was a seam, I wouldn't be able to flatten plastic, anyway. Then there are the Barrel boxes, etc.

Specific box and label collectors might be able to come up with more pros and cons, and other cover collectors could probably do the same, but, for all of the above reasons, at the very least, the lines between collectors worldwide are drawn, and it's unlikely they would significantly change in the foreseeable future.