



Deciphering Foreign Covers

by

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Many foreign covers and boxes take a bit of detective work to identify. If you're a super linguist you don't have a problem, but if you're like most of us you gotta get by with some basic common sense.

Foreign languages written in the Phoenician alphabet (the kind we can read) all have clues. You should know, for example, that the French word for matches is "alumettes"; they're 'streicholzer' in German; and the Dutch call them 'lucifers'. The logo on the inside of many European covers is a help, too, often giving a city name...and that's where some good old geography knowledge comes in handy. Most Swiss-made covers say 'terza' or 'Zurich' somewhere; Belgian-made ones say 'Bruxelles'; and Dutch-made ones say 'Eindhoven'. Be careful of Japan, though, as there are matchbooks advertising Israeli hotels that are printed in England, and the matches are inserted in Japan!

Have some idea of what languages are used where, like most Belgian matches are printed in French, and Swiss matches are usually in German. Dutch is an easy language to recognize, but covers made in S. Africa are printed in Dutch, too. If you see "UNION MATCH, DURBAN", you gotta know that Durban is in Africa, huh? Dutch has a lot of double 'o's; Swedish, Norwegian, and Finnish look similar, but you find 'Svenska' and 'Oslo' on the Swedish ones. Finnish has a lot of double 'k's, and Norwegian has some un-American accent marks. 'España' identifies Spain, and 'Lisboa' signifies Portugal.

Italian matches are, like most everything else they do, different. They have a tax stamp on them; front flap's not tucked in; and they don't taper toward the bottom. The matchsticks are wood, and their box matches are some type of icky plastic. The boxes only open at one end.

And then you get into the unreadable ones, the ones in the queer scripts that defy reading. Again, you don't have to be a linguist to distinguish between Cyrillic Russian script, the Israeli script, or the Arabian script used in many Moslem countries. I can't tell Chinese characters from Japanese ones, but there are very few Chinese covers or boxes out yet - they are not heavily into advertising.

Know your manumarks. Many Canadian covers are printed in French & English, or in French only; the manumark will separate Canadian from French for you. Bryant & May is a UK firm, but matches with 'Bryant & May NZ' are made in New Zealand. New Zealand has many covers, but too many are plain, tacky ones with lotsa printing and no art or photos. Phimco is a matchbook manufacturer in the Philippines.

Foreign covers and boxes can be fascinating, frustrating, and fun, especially if you put some of your own effort into it.

