

Matchbox label design: 1827–1950 (III)

[Jones, Ben, “Matchbox label design: 1827–1950”, Matchbox Cover Design, Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of BA in Typography & Graphic Communication, The University of Reading, 2004]

Technological innovations were a very popular subject for creating new brands. Names such as ‘Aeroplane Special Safety Match’, ‘The Automobile’, ‘Telephone Matches’ and ‘The Telegraph Safety Match’ appeared as the machines and devices themselves were invented. The evolution of steamships can be almost completely charted by matchbox labels as ocean-going vessels progressed from simple wind propulsion via countless numbers of sails to combinations of sails and steam, to ships using only steam and beyond– ironclads, submarines and eventually Dreadnoughts all become matchbox labels.

The exotic was also a great passion of the Victorian era, largely facilitated by the technical innovations and inventions referred to above. Faster and safer means of travelling such as trains and steam ships, together with faster and more accurate means of communication such as the telegraph, the development of the photographic camera as well as the increasing speed and quality of printing presses, all served to fuel the Victorian imagination and awareness. They also served to enhance national pride and belief in the Empire. Matchbox labels depicting animals, plants and peoples from far-off, foreign lands exploited the Victorian interest in touring and travelling and excited the desire to explore and experience the unknown – even if such activities were far beyond the means of most of the population.

Labels that used animals or plants (botany) had the additional benefit of being not only generally attractive and therefore inoffensive, but also specifically appealing to the export markets from where the subject of the label originated and were almost guaranteed not to be misconstrued. There were also matchbox labels that were based on significant events that took place, such as the swimming of the English or the Olympic games of the early twentieth century. These events were seen at the time as being triumphs and great achievements that caught the imagination of the public and were therefore wholly consistent with branding objectives.

Royalty and celebrities of the time were also frequently turned into match brand names. ‘Victoria Matches made in Sweden’ and ‘Jubilee Matches’ were popular in Britain, while Swedish royalty made numerous appearances on the front of matchboxes in Sweden as did any King, Queen, Prince or Princess of a country where matches were made or exported to. Benjamin Disraeli, one of Queen Victoria’s Prime Ministers, also featured on a label, as did the Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. The use of these people and personalities tapped into the nationalism and patriotism of a country which, at the time, yielded strong emotions and therefore could be relied upon to market matches effectively. Religion featured heavily on labels for export markets like India and China, where hundreds of labels could be created to cater to the many deities, prophets and eminent beings that form the indigenous religion and philosophy.

Another, curious group of labels were the ‘threes’ labels which used the ancient mythological, theological and philosophical significance of the number three. There were literally hundreds of labels on which the subjects are depicted in a group of three. Some of the ‘threes’ labels have an obvious connection to the number, for example ‘The Three Kings’ and ‘The Three Rings’ both feature in Christian mythology (the three rings often being used to symbolize the trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost). However, some, such as ‘The Three Cocoa Pods’ or ‘The three Legged Pot’, appear to have no meaningful connection with the number whatsoever. Some examples that together demonstrate the diversity of this theme of matchbox branding are: The Three Fish, Monkeys, Mussels, Kings, Jolly Minstrels, Storks, Crowns, Shields, Slippers, Paddles, Dice, Torches, Lancers, Legged Pot, Lions,

Cocoa Pods, Girls, Bells, Birds, Steamers, Globes, Pipes, Plumes, Rings, Tarbouches, and Stars. ‘The Three Stars’ is the most famous of the ‘threes’ labels. It is now one of the oldest registered trademarks in continued use.

Soon, matchbox label design had become well established as a highly branch of commercial graphic art, with a vast array of labels, although their design was still largely based on the early ‘Jönköping Original’, cartouche or double-oval labels. As the functional quality of the actual matches from different manufacturers became ever more uniform, the attractiveness and pertinence of the label became the primary selling point, a trend that was a forerunner of modern advertising. This was to become especially important in the twentieth century.

Label design during 1900–1950

At the beginning of the twentieth century, matchbox label design was still generally adhering to the traditional cartouche-styled formats that were established nearly fifty years before. However, while some labels had effectively remained unchanged, others, particularly new brand introductions, incorporated some of the contemporary trends of the new century into their design. This tendency for the design of some brands of match to remain steadfastly traditional and others to adopt elements of a contemporary style of design would persist throughout the field of matchbox label design, up to the present day.

The first contemporary stylistic adoption by matchbox label designers was that of art nouveau... The practice was usually to apply the new type and typography of the period, as well as the contemporary trends in the treatment of pictorial matter, to the classic layout with its borders and decoration. This was probably done at the time solely to appeal to the fashionable public, rather than for the symbolic, philosophical and artistic merit of the movement. This is well demonstrated by the label for ‘La Llama’, which is in a late art nouveau style. The label for ‘La Llama’ has the name of the brand in an asymmetric position on the label and set in a moderately bold, roman sans serif, a feature not normally associated with art nouveau and suggests the misuse of a popular style purely for commercial and production expediency. The picture behind the brand name is in the art nouveau style as is the depiction of the llama.

The scenic backdrop is in a similar style to the Japanese art that originally inspired the movement. The heavy border, albeit decorated in an art nouveau style, is a legacy of the traditional Victorian matchbox label design. Other stylistic movements that influenced contemporary matchbox label design were informative functionalism, futurism, and art deco.

The reluctance to produce cutting edge label designs, however, was limited only to branded match products produced by the manufacturers for sale through normal retail channels. This was not the case for matchboxes used for ‘customer advertising’.

