
The Origin

The Origin of Labels

[from Match-Box Labels of the World, a British publication, probably written in the late 1940s]

[Ed. note: a word of explanation for newer collectors—‘labels’, here, are the removable advertising from matchboxes. Usually, they’re soaked off, as you would soak stamps off envelopes. We don’t see them on modern boxes over here, as the advertising is printed either directly onto the box, itself, or on a wrapper that doesn’t come off.]

Labels first began to adorn the matchbox in 1829, but they were a very drab affair compared to the beautifully colored labels soon to follow in an ever increasing variety of subjects, colors, and designs.

The early labels mere described the contents of the boxes and how to use them, together with the maker’s name. The first label to show an illustrated subject was probably one issued by N. Jones in 1830, showing an Englishman and a Highlander both smoking; twin serpents blowing out flame, and the Royal Arms in the center, completed the colorful label, which also bore a guarantee that the box contained one hundred matches.

Other manufacturers followed suit, and a host of labels gradually appeared, ranging from birds, beasts, and fishes—fabulous and real—to glamorous beauties, flowers, fruits, and sporting views; from famous men and women, past and present, to historical scenes; from mythical gods and goddesses, folk lore, fairy tales and nursery rhymes, to soldiers, medals, and battle scenes; royalty, new inventions, cartoons and caricatures—the list portrayed is indeed a lengthy one.

The majority were in striking colors; some, of course, were crude, but many were miniature works of art, although the humor displayed on some of the foreign labels, especially those from France and Belgium, often shocked great-grandma.

The labels are now eagerly sought by label collectors, or “phillumenists”, as label lovers prefer to be known, the word being derived from the Greek work *philos*, meaning loving, and the Latin word *lumen*, light.

The hobby is an old one, earlier than stamp collecting. Anatole France relates in his novel, “Le Crime de Sylvestre,” how a royal couple roamed Europe for rare matchbox labels in 1859; while a chapter is devoted to collecting labels in Montesson’s book, “Home Hobby Horses and How to Ride Them,” published in 1888.

In J. Abraham’s book, “Surgeon’s Log,” appears the humorous paragraph: “But look at the international complications. I’ve just bought these—they’re Swedish matches printed in English, with the figure of an Arab on the label, sold by a Chinaman in Malay bazaar to an Irishman working for an English company in a Dutch colony.

Labels certainly offer a wider range of colorful, interesting subjects than any other hobby.

Great Britain and Ireland

Of Labels: I

An early label, and among the first to portray Royalty, was the Victorian congrève of 1842. It shows the Royal Arms with Queen Victoria on one side and Prince Albert on the other.

Another striking label was one issued by H. J. Simlick showing on top The Attack on the Redan, and on the reverse side the Defense of the Gorge of Malalhoff.

Great Exhibition of 1851 appeared promptly on a label, as did the Victoria Cross soon after its creation at the time of the Indian Mutiny, Hunt & Co. of Stratford issuing their Royal Victoria Cross brand in 1857, the label bearing a replica of the medal.

One of the most unusual labels and the only occasion on which such a design has been used, was issued by Bricker & Shellard in 1865. It shows a group of firemen extinguishing the flames of a blazing building. A label claiming the most apt title is that showing Adam and Eve with the heading The First Match.

Many of the old labels depicted events of the time they were produced—the marriage of the Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandria of Denmark in 1863, the introduction of the velocipede about 1869, the war in Ashanti, 1873-74, the Arctic expedition in 1874, Mr. Gladstone's Midlothian campaign of 1885, and so on. Several bore the names of places—The City of London, the Yorkshire Match, Nottingham Matches, the Glasgow, the Blackfriars Match, and many similar names, the labels often portraying scenes in the vicinity. For example, the Lancashire Match bore a series of pictures showing the Royal Exchange, Manchester, the Town Hall, Preston, and numerous other buildings.

Bryant & May issued a delightfully humorous series in 1871—Runaway Matches, portraying a couple of matches eloping together and running away from the rest of the family in the box. Bellerby's of York also used a similar idea with their labels, showing a boxing match between two matches.

Every imaginable design has appeared. Labels issued by Palmers of London bore Shakespeare's bust. They also had to advertise for match workers in those days, and this firm issued large posters in 1864 announcing the opening of their new factory in the Old Ford Road and offering constant employment to three hundred workers.

Leading Lights depicted two of the leading men of the day on each label. Gladstone was paired with Salisbury, Healy with Parnell, Saxton with Davitt; while Discovery Matches gave us labels of Livingston, Sir Samuel, and Lady Baker, and other notables of the day.

The Marquis of Lorne (Great Britain) is a rare and lovely label; only a very few specimens exist, including one in the collection of a London physician. It shows the Marquis of Lorne, later the Duke of Argyll, and H.R.H. Princess Louise, and was issued to commemorate their engagement in 1871.

The overthrow of the French Imperial Family after the Franco-Prussian war aroused the sympathy of the English, and Collard & Co. of Liverpool, an old firm, later taken over by the Diamond Match Company, issued a label bearing the portrait of the Prince Regent and the Empress Eugenie.

Another label of 1871 showed a Prussian dragoon and a French Mitrailleuse gun in action.