

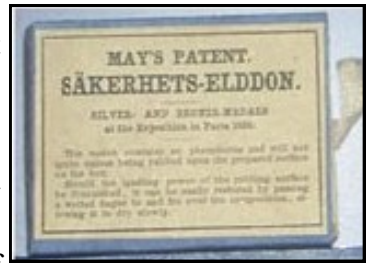
Matchbox label design: 1827–1950 (I)

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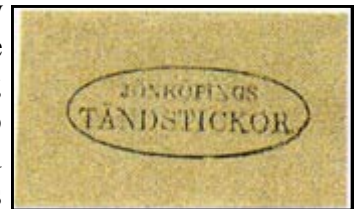
The design of matchbox labels, from their very beginning through to the end of the nineteenth century, was a process of developing practical design theories in order to deal with the medium and to establish traditions and styles that would appeal to the match buying public. This hundred and twenty-year period was one in which the functional qualities of products made by almost all the competing manufacturers became virtually identical. This ultimately led to the only other variable factor, the packaging, becoming the primary selling point and therefore the basis of competition, although initially not all the match manufacturers recognized its effectiveness. With the onset of the World Wars and other variables in the cultural climate of the first half of the twentieth century, the practices and traditions of making, marketing and selling matches were profoundly changed. This, in common with many other commodity products, had a significant impact on the design of matchbox labels.

Early matchbox label design factors

The first matchbox labels were, as with any product packaging from a fledgling industry, of a rudimentary nature. By definition, the very first match packaging was that applied to the friction matches invented and sold by John Walker in Britain in 1827. There are, however, no definitive examples of Walker’s products and so they cannot be commented on (a few are reportedly in circulation amongst philuminists, but they are probably fakes). Most of the very earliest match packaging took one of two forms; they were either very simple capsules with the factory name or location and often ‘Tändstickor’² applied with a stamp or they had more wording, including the name and location of the manufacturer, and instructions on how to use the matches. These forms of packaging could not be said to have been ‘designed’, graphically or typographically, as the wording on the packaging was there as a matter of necessity and appears to have been simply fitted on as the printer thought best at the time. This changed quickly, and within a few years of the industry having been established, matchbox labels started to be structured and designed with much greater consideration.



The beginning of matchbox label design was significantly influenced by the lack of copyright law at the time in Sweden. When matches started to be produced around 1830, there were no ‘trademarks’ in the match industry; only the manufacturers name and the place of manufacture were put on to the box. This implied that the same design and often the same wording could be used by different manufacturers from different localities. Initially, this did not prove to be problematic due to the fact that the match factories were primarily supplying only their local markets; the same market rarely saw two similar or identical designs from different parts of the country. However, the introduction to Sweden in 1856 of steam power, and consequently steam powered trains, enabled the shipment of goods to a much wider geographic area. This in turn led to the sale of matches from different manufacturers of different qualities in boxes that were virtually indistinguishable from each other by consumers. This was obviously detrimental to the company making the better-quality matches but it was beneficial to those making the inferior matches to be associated or even mistaken for a manufacturer of superior matches.



The best example of this plagiarism in the match industry, and possibly in all of industry, is that of

the matchbox label issued from the match factory owned by the Lundström brothers in Jönköping that has become known as the ‘Jönköping Original’. This is the first label used at the factory and to begin with, was the only brand produced. Because the quality of the ‘Jönköping Original’ matches was so high, every match manufacturer would have liked to have been associated with it. This resulted in over 450 known imitations of the label being produced by different match producers. Due to the extent of this plagiarism, the ‘Original’ design came to be seen as a generic design of matchbox labels. This was obviously not the view taken by the Jönköping Match Factory or the courts when, in 1884, Sweden introduced an effective Trademark Protection act.



As copyright laws tightened, manufacturers were forced to make their plagiarized labels original or face the penalties of being sued. To successfully create a label that could be called ‘original’ they simply found any ‘thing’, – any object, item, concept, or personality that had not already been taken and used it as the identity or trademark for a label, often by merely incorporating it into the previously plagiarized design. This resulted in hundreds of different labels being produced because each time a new label was introduced a different ‘thing’ had to be used.

While the ‘Jönköping Original’ label was not the only registered proprietary label to be defended successfully in court, it was the only label to go through this process and yet still exert a significant influence on future matchbox label design. The elements of its design – the predominantly typographic appearance, the positioning of the medals and the positioning and layout of the text – became a defining style for other matchbox labels.

There were two other styles of matchbox label that emerged to dominate label design in the latter half of the nineteenth century, both being a variation on the same theme. One of them is the decorative cartouche label that appeared very early on in the history of matches and usually consisted of an ornate cartouche on a patterned background with the name of the label (usually the factory, its location and ‘Tändstickor’) printed inside the cartouche. The other is similar in concept but has a double oval instead of a cartouche with the name of the label printed in the middle of the double oval. Later, a picture of the factory or a depiction of the brand appeared in the middle, with the text positioned inside the double oval. These three styles of label became the dominant standards for matchbox label design in the second half of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries. There was also a further device that became extremely popular, this being the use of an outer frame of alternating light and dark fields which first appeared in 1847.

The use, from early in the match industry’s history, of these relatively sophisticated designs can be attributed to the timing of the invention of the match. The early nineteenth century’s industrial revolution, during which match products began to be commercialized, inspired typography and printing to become much more ambitious than they had previously been. Designers of matchbox labels were no exceptions to this trend, and produced comparatively complex designs after only a very short period of establishment. The use of the cartouche and the double oval devices on consumer product packaging was already widespread – it was considered to be modern and fashionable. As it was invariably the printers who designed the labels, the designs reflected what the printers were familiar with and had available to them. The frequent appearance of vegetative patterns and the almost universal use of a border on matchbox labels, was because they were popular on other printed material in other fields. Their applicability to matchboxes was taken for granted. Additionally, the use of a border around the design meant that there would be an edge area that was un-printed, which allowed for a degree of tolerance of inaccurate cutting and slitting of the skillet.