

Matchbox label design: 1827–1950 (II)

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The specifics of matchbox label typography

The typography of early matchbox labels was also dictated by what was fashionable, and hence available, at the time. Typefaces that were in popular use such as Bodoni, Didot and others of a similar ‘modern’ serified style, were the ones first applied to matchbox label design. They were initially set in a similar style to that of the Classical period (1780-1830) when the typefaces were created. However, soon after, with the onset of the era of Historicism (1850-1890), Classical typography became incorporated into the revived antiquated forms of vegetation and architecture that symbolized the Gothic and Roccoco periods. This formalizing of the design could produce the desired result – an important looking product of quality and stature – provided a confident and informed draughtsman or printer produced it. If it were not, the label could become awkward and confused although matchbox label design probably required this sort of experimentation to find what would work best on a label.

Beginning in 1848 with a heading on the ‘Jönköping Original’s, it was eventually realized that the typeface that worked best was (usually bold) condensed grotesque as this was the typeface that, when used, would fit more words on to the label and still retain legibility. The use of serified typefaces, especially those of the modern variety with very fine serifs and a high contrast between thick and thin strokes, proved to be unsatisfactory. Given the small area available for print on a matchbox, the fine strokes and serifs became lost and would also have required finer printing – a factor that was incompatible with the requirement for higher volumes and higher print speeds. The grotesque or sanserif could be printed at a lower quality, and therefore at a lower price, or seen with poorer eyesight, as it did not contain the detail of the serified typefaces. Again, the ‘Jönköping Original’ label is an excellent demonstrator; it shows good use of the grotesque typeface and, by its final version in 1867, it contained 19 words, including the captions under the medals, all of which are easily legible (even the wording inside the 4 medals, is legible). This could also be a contributing factor to the extent of the plagiarism it incurred; not only was the product of a high functional quality but it also carried a corresponding standard of label.

Other typefaces used on contemporary matchboxes also took into account the problems of printing detail at a small size and proved to be logical choices when a diversity in typeface was called for. The square-serif, introduced in 1817 in London and later to be called Egyptian, was initially used as an advertising type, but was particularly well suited to matchbox typography. The equal weighting of the stems, strokes and serifs meant that there was nothing in the typeface that would disappear if the printing or viewer were not up to standard. Another typeface that frequently appears is that known as Estienne which was particularly favored by the Vulcan Match Factory. This type works because the serifs are so small; if the printing or eyesight is not of sufficient quality, the body strokes are able to support themselves and the serifs, which are intended to have only a very minimal presence, may be diminished but will still occur, albeit barely. Essentially, the type will still be legible without fragmenting. Of course, every conceivable typeface has, at some time, appeared on a matchbox label. The recognition and exploitation of the need for types specifically designed for advertising purposes meant that the proliferation of increasingly extravagant and fantastical typefaces abounded and, consistent with the generally chaotic state of nineteenth century



typography, this was inevitably applied to matchbox labels. Among the most common of the advertising types used on matchbox labels were three-dimensional types, typefaces with drop-shadows, and decorated types, mostly of a grotesque or Clarendon style.

The appearance of condensed grotesque on matchbox labels largely coincided with the introduction of pictures on labels – the two did not come about until around the middle of the nineteenth century but both soon began to dominate. The very first pictorial label was actually produced in 1830 by N. Jones & Co. in England and consisted of an Englishman and a Scottish highlander smoking with coiled serpents breathing fire.

It was printed in pale green but at the time was considered vulgar, the more fashionable designs involving typography and pattern only. The first widespread use of depictive labels was in the 1840s with a picture of the factory inside a cartouche which was printed on the wrappers used to package a quantity of matchboxes for distribution to shops, for sale either individually or as a quantity still in the wrapper. This continued the association of quality with the manufacturer.

Establishing match brands

Whilst the use of a picture of the factory on matchbox labels was common up to and including the 1900s, it was with the introduction of the concept of branding that matchbox design began to establish itself properly. The purpose of the trademark was, initially, to distinguish the manufacturer, so that the buying public would know who had made the product and, most importantly, remember to buy more if the quality was superior to that of the competition.

However, it was during the middle of the nineteenth century that, as the quality of matches from different manufacturers became of an increasingly high and uniform standard, the match industry shifted the marketing emphasis. The emphasis went from attempting to give customers a degree of assurance by claiming manufacturing excellence, to gaining and maintaining a loyal base of customers through branding. The challenge was to develop a set of brand characteristics that would appeal to and attract the customer in a way that was not exclusively related to quality, but rather encompassed a range of both functional and emotional features that customers could identify with, and depend upon. Whether the nineteenth century manufacturers were as sophisticated in their planning as this implies and able to equate brand loyalty with repeat purchases, cannot be proven but, regardless, this is what occurred.

The matchbox labels initially changed from containing pictures of the factory to using a picture or some other graphic device as a trademark, but branding the box with the name of the manufacturer and the location of manufacture continued. In the case of the 'Jönköping Original' plagiaries, this was possibly an attempt to apply some originality to the label while maintaining the association with the quality of the original. Following this, with the exception of the very large match manufacturers who regarded their reputation for quality as part of their products' brand strength, the name of the manufacturer and the location of manufacture gradually disappeared from the label. In their place came the name and the graphic depiction of the unrelated item chosen to be 'the brand'.

The identity of the brand, aimed at the contemporary consumer, was intended to appeal to people who lived during an era in which the social climate was defined by modernity and progress. The relevance of the brand, therefore, had to be immediate. Given this, the vast array of match brands can be grouped into categories and themes that reflect the dynamic interests of the public in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

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