

A MATCH SAFE CASE HEAVILY DECORATED WITH MASONIC ART

by Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o
Life Member, Nebraska College S.R.I.C.F.

Illustration: St John LESMAHAGO 20 Scotland Lodge, Match Safe Case



In bygone years, people used to carry matches on their person almost as routinely as modern-day people carry car keys or house keys. In the days before pocket cigarette lighters, so-called "strike anywhere matches" were the norm to start fires to light stoves, lanterns, or other devices. To keep the matches sturdy and dry, 'match safe boxes' or 'Vesta cases' were invented. Vesta being the name of the goddess which the ancient Romans associated with the deity of fire and of the hearth. Match safe boxes had a snap-shut cover to open and close the box to keep the contents secure. They came into general use around the year 1830 with their prime usage popularity between the years 1890 and 1920, although the match-safes are still used today.....sometimes not only to carry matches, but some people even carry small reserves of their pharmaceutical pills in such boxes if they are traveling or for various other purposes. Some people even used Vesta boxes as coin purses.

Wealthy people procured match safe boxes made out of gold or silver; while poorer people bought ones made from tin, brass, nickel, steel and even wooden ones. Usually, a 'Vesta case' has a ribbed surface at the bottom to induce friction causing the match to strike and light properly. The above Vesta case with its elaborate Masonic symbols engraved thereon was made approximately between the years 1850 to 1880.

Even some razor companies, such as the Gillette Company {founded by King C. Gillette, a Freemason} produced razor-blade containers that could be improvised into Vesta cases after the razors were used-up and the containers were empty and thus available for such other uses.



As Masonic Rosicrucians, we are accustomed to the four basic Elements: Earth, Air, Fire, Water. The match-safe or Vesta case should remind us of at least three out of the four. The Vesta case is made from various Elements of the 'Earth'...whether it be gold, silver, nickel or something else. 'Air' is a component needed at the time a match is struck for its ignition and burning ---with 'Fire' being the goal that the possessor of such a box wants to assure or guarantee.

Although most of the Symbols on the above Vesta box or match-safe are uniquely Masonic...a few have Rosicrucian influences. Our ancient brethren who were stonemasons obviously used The Plumb, The Trowel, The 24-inch gauge, The Spade, The Rod, The Pickaxe, The Mallet, and The Level. They formed the arches with the Keystone at the top. Next, Speculative Freemasonry's influence is readily seen by depictions of "Jacob's Ladder" and "the Sun, Moon and Stars" "the coffin" (emblematic of mortality).

The few possible Rosicrucian Symbols always depict signs of Life. They include "The Dove of Peace" {which although is represented on Deacons' Staffs in Masonic Lodges in some Grand jurisdictions --- it is still an animal representing 'Life,' rather than a ordinary Mason's "Working Tool." Bro.: Nigel D. Brown, who, in 1991 wrote an interesting article: "The Plants and Animals of Freemasonry" for the premier Lodge of Research in England (Quatuor Coronati Lodge #2076) merely noted various animals and asserts that references to the Dove are derived from Holy Scripture and he notes Genesis 8-8-12. I basically agree with Brother Brown, yet my only assertion was that a Masonic-Rosicrucian hybrid of interlaced symbolism. While the ancient stonemason used inanimate "Working Tools" adopted by the earliest Speculative Freemasons....I maintain that Rosicrucian influences of "living organisms" made their way to more modern Freemasonry as early as the late 1600's...including, but not limited to --- The Beehive, The Lion, The All-Seeing Eye of Almighty God, as well as the Dove of Peace.

We, as Masons, and as Masonic Rosicrucians are living human-beings.

We are not as cold and lifeless as a stone or ashlar. We 'square' {perfect and improve upon} the living characteristics we possess. A "lifeless body" cannot be molded or perfected in stature, morals or conscience.

In those areas, we must be grateful that Rosicrucian symbols and influences have aided our Masonic Education. To me, one set of symbols works hand in glove with the other set of symbols. Even that sentence is more of a truism than an allegory: A human hand has flesh, bone, and blood in its veins --- whereas a glove is merely a glove --- an impersonal piece of cloth.

As Freemasons: Let us Meet upon the Level and Part upon the Square.

As Masonic Rosicrucians, let us study Life, let us enrich our Life and the Lives of Others.

Let us pursue knowledge with an abiding faith in Almighty God in our hearts....and let us keep our powder dry, and our Vesta cases handy for such times when we need to strike-a-match for "More Light."

Sources / References / Exhibits /Recommended Readings:

- EXHIBIT: Illustration: St John LESMAHAGO 20 Scotland Lodge, Match Safe Case. Made circa 1850 to 1880.
- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33^o and a Knight Templar.
- "The Plants and Animals of Freemasonry" by Bro. Nigel D. Brown. Written for Quatuor Coronati Lodge #2076, England. Volume 104. Year 1991 Transactions.
- Archives of The Masonic Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, Canada.
- Archives Grand Lodge of Kansas A.F. & A.M
- Macoy's Masonic Manual by Robert Macoy, 33^o and a Knight Templar. Fifteenth Edition. New York. Published in New York, Year 1861 by Clark, Austin, Maynard & Company located at 3 Park Row & 3 Ann Street, New York, New York. "A Pocket Companion for the Initiated".



About the Author:

Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o is a Perpetual Life Member of Mulvane Masonic Lodge #201 A.F. & A.M. in Mulvane, Kansas. He is a Life Member of The International Peace Gardens Lodge of Freemasons (Canada-USA) and also an Honorary Member of Golden Rule Masonic Lodge #562 in Willard, Ohio; as well as an Honorary Member of Nelson Masonic Lodge #77, in Nelson, Nebraska, which has recently consolidated with the Superior Masonic Lodge at Superior, Nebraska. Companion and Sir Knight Jim is a Life Member of the Wichita York Rite Bodies (Wichita Chapter #33 R.A.M.; Wichita Council #12 R. & S.M.; and Mt. Olivet Commandery #12 K.T.). He is also a Life Member of the Lincoln Nebraska Scottish Rite Bodies; The Robert-the-Bruce Association (California); The George Washington Masonic Stamp Club; Masonic Order of the Gordian Knot (Indiana); Masonic Order of the Sword of Bunker Hill; Kentucky Chapter #134 of National Sojourners and Heroes of '76; North Texas York Rite College #118 of Sherman, Texas; and Nebraska College S.R.I.C.F.

He is a Regular Member of The Allied Masonic Degrees; Grand College of Rites; St. David Conclave of The Red Cross of Constantine; Shawnee County Kansas Square and Compass Club; and Holyrood Council #61 of Knight Masons (Nebraska).

