

Cultural Stewardship Program

Conservator Hack: It's A Match!

By Jane Dalley, CSP Conservator

Several types of hazardous artifacts can be found in collections. These include early taxidermy specimens that contain arsenic, poisons found in old medicines, fabric containing arsenic, asbestos in old appliances, radioactive paint on old clock faces, and nitrate film base. Have you ever considered the humble matchstick to be a hazard?

In the days when smoking was common, monogrammed matchbooks were given away as mementos at social events, or as free advertising in restaurants and bars, and you may have several types in your collection. The design and artwork of older matchbooks and matchboxes can be quite impressive. Examples can be seen on collector James Lilek's online site at <http://www.lileks.com/match/index.html> . A curated exhibit of a set of matchbooks at the Smithsonian can be seen at [Matchbook Exhibit](#).

In the 19th century, before the advent of matchbooks, "strike anywhere" (friction) matches were made by coating a wooden tip in a sulphur mixture. The matches were first sold with a piece of sandpaper to strike against, but this was later replaced by the rough side of the box they were later sold in. Strike anywhere matches can be ignited on any rough surface and brave souls would strike them on a zipper or on a thumbnail. It took even more courage to make them, as the phosphorus used in the sulphur mixture caused factory workers to suffer from a disfiguring and often fatal condition known as [Phossy Jaw](#).

These matches have been largely discontinued due to their flammability. They have caught fire by being jostled in a pocket or rubbed against one another in the matchbox. They are on the UN list of dangerous goods and cannot be shipped by mail or courier. By contrast, the cardboard safety matches in matchbooks will only be lit by striking them against the striking surface on the cover (close cover before striking).

Safety matches were also made of wood so if you have wooden matches in your collection, it is important to check whether they are safety matches or strike anywhere matches. You can tell the difference between the two by looking at the head. The strike anywhere matches have a white spot on the tip and the safety matches do not. If you have these matches in your collection, you can replace them in the matchbox with wooden safety matches or store them in a glass Mason jar or tin container.

If you have any questions about matches or any other type of hazardous artifact, please contact me through the Cultural Stewardship Program at [conservator \(at\) museumsmanitoba \(dot\) com](mailto:conservator@ museumsmanitoba.com). I would be happy to help, and CSP services are being waived for Members until further notice.