

LABELS, LABOUR, ART

by *V. Geetha*

QUAINT AND EPHEMERAL OBJECTS

Products of an intricate mix of art and economics, Indian match labels possess a beguiling charm. Created by a unique graphic culture, they straddle the worlds of commerce and culture with ease and confidence. On one hand, a label helps to brand the product to which it is attached, and on the other, its distinctive visual character exceeds this purpose and calls attention to itself. So a label not only informs and persuades a sale, but also holds out a happy invitation to itself.

COLLECTORS AND LABELS

Matchbox labels have been collected for well over a century now, and they undeniably enchant. Collectors are both zealous and passionate about their hobby. To some, match labels appear as so many windows to the world, linking them to real and imaginary geographies. Others consider labels as fulfilling an educational purpose – match labels, they claim, offer insights into commerce, culture, art, politics and attitudes. For almost all collectors, these labels appear to encrypt an early human fascination with fire and its possibilities: the matchbox thus becomes an almost primeval object, both indispensable and mysterious, and match labels are transformed into signposts that lead into an imaginative wonderland.

The history of match labels suggests that collectors are not as self-obsessed as they might appear. For one,

in decades past, match labels have served a communicative as well as mnemonic function. In the United States in the late nineteenth century, they were used to advertise shows and products, and carry public interest messages. Swedish matchboxes exported to imperial Britain sported labels that echoed the sensibilities of empire builders, driven by dreams of power and the call of the seemingly exotic. Labels have also been carriers of political messages. Labels from the Czechoslovakia of the 1960s carried pictures of well-known world leaders: Ben-Gurion of Israel, Nasser of Egypt, John F. Kennedy... Soviet labels proclaimed the virtues of socialist labour and technology. Sometimes labels were turned into objects of art: in France, a series of match labels was designed to illustrate La Fontaine's fables. In all instances, labels became sites for displaying a distinctive graphic sensibility: terse, striking, vivid, and capable of telling a tale or conveying an idea.

Labels from India are as given to message relaying and communication as labels elsewhere, but they also appear to embody a communicative intent that is all their own: a successful brand spawns a range of look-alikes that draw from and bounce off each other. This visual echoing makes for very inventive graphic art, for every label that wishes to mimic a well-known original also has to mark itself off both from the original and from other labels that are trying to do precisely the same thing. The authority invested in a particular brand is thus affirmed, but only to be



1. The symbolic icon of the key was used on Swedish matchbox labels and later adopted by Indian labels.

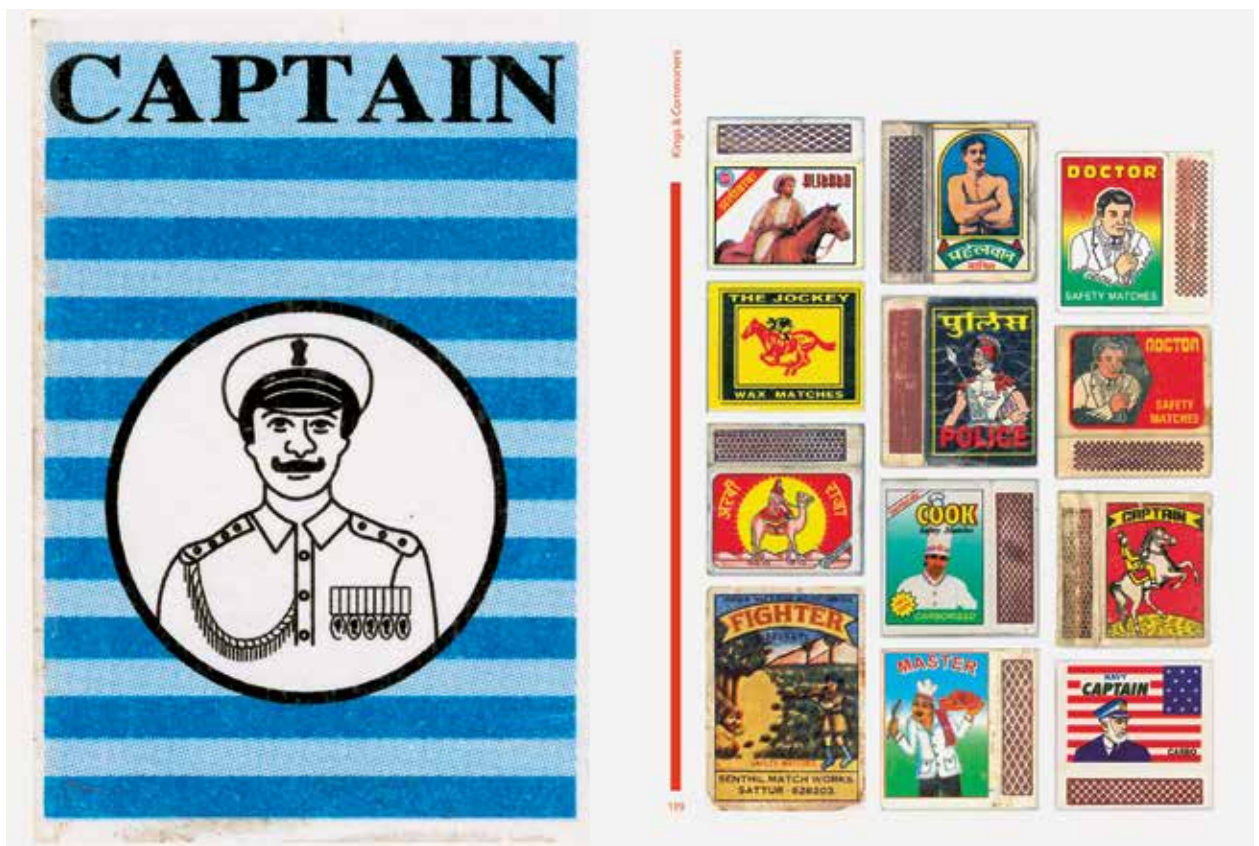
Rakto simbolinis motyvas buvo naudojamas švediškų degtukų dėžūčių etiketėse, vėliau pasirodė ir indiškose etiketėse

deflected, and in the process, match labels cease to be mere brand markers: instead, they become visual texts in their own right.

However, reading match labels is a risky enterprise. The temptation is to over-read and explain something whose allure lies in its essentially ineffable nature. Non-collectors are perhaps most likely to risk this temptation, since they are drawn to the label chiefly because it refuses to be bound by its use-value and, therefore, appears to be a worthy hermeneutical subject. Given these conditions of reading, it is perhaps best that we start with the actual object, the label, and examine the contexts that frame its existence.

LABOUR AND PRODUCTION

The match industry in India has a fascinating history. In its early days, the industry owed its existence to Swedish capital, which later acquired a domestic presence. Local production expanded in the 1920s and after, especially during the war years. It was during this period that two self-made Indian entrepreneurs from the nadar caste (a community that was, at that time, considered marginal and 'low' in the Indian caste order) in the southern Indian town of Sivakasi set up factories. An arid landscape and the relentless sun helped the industry grow. Those were



2. Motifs borrowed from various sources, advertising images among them.

Iš įvairių šaltinių, tarp jų reklaminių vaizdų, perimti motyvai

the days of nationalist self-help, and matchmaking, with its humble production context – the family home or workshop – appeared a veritable national duty. It seemed the quintessential cottage industry, drawing on local artisanal skills and resources, which rendered it dear to early Indian nationalists. (One of the early labels featured the image of Dadabhai Naoroji, an economist, whose indictment of the colonial economy fuelled nationalist anger against British rule). The war years stimulated production, but it was only in the decades following Indian independence that the industry came into its own – especially in the context of state economic planning.

The Indian state's planners wished to encourage small-scale production across the country, especially in places where natural resources were scarce and agriculture was unable to sustain local communities. The idea was to employ local labour, which was always plentifully available, and plan industrial growth on that basis. (Much of this was translated into policy in the 1970s). Rainless Sivakasi, which endured high rates of underemployment after the decline of the cotton trade in those parts, appeared a planner's dream. For one, it was already home to the match industry, which was considered 'small-scale' since it did not use machines and was committed to deploying human labour. Secondly, the



MOTHER INDIA STRIKES to FARMER Indian Nationalism



3. Patriotic icons, among them an image of a poster for the nationalistic Hindi film *Mother India* from the 1950s.

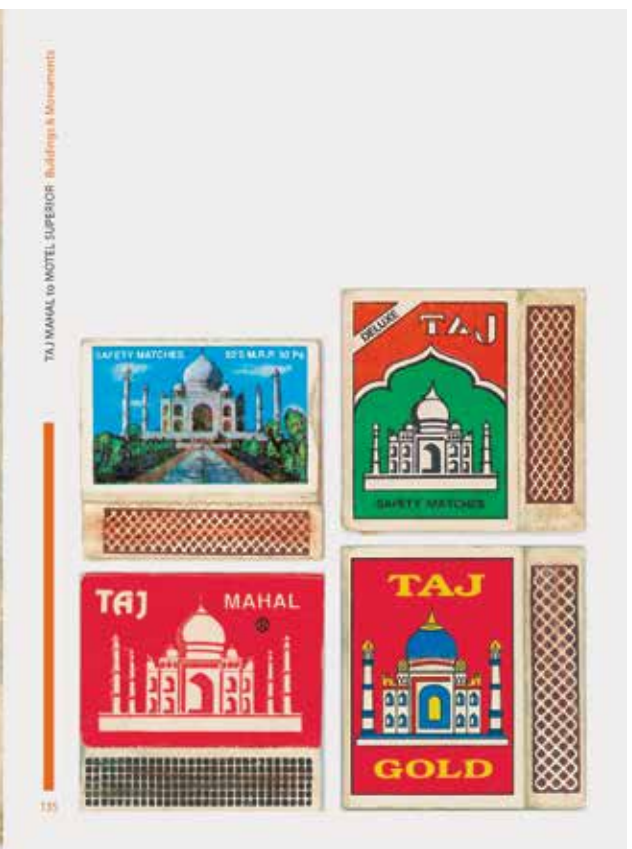
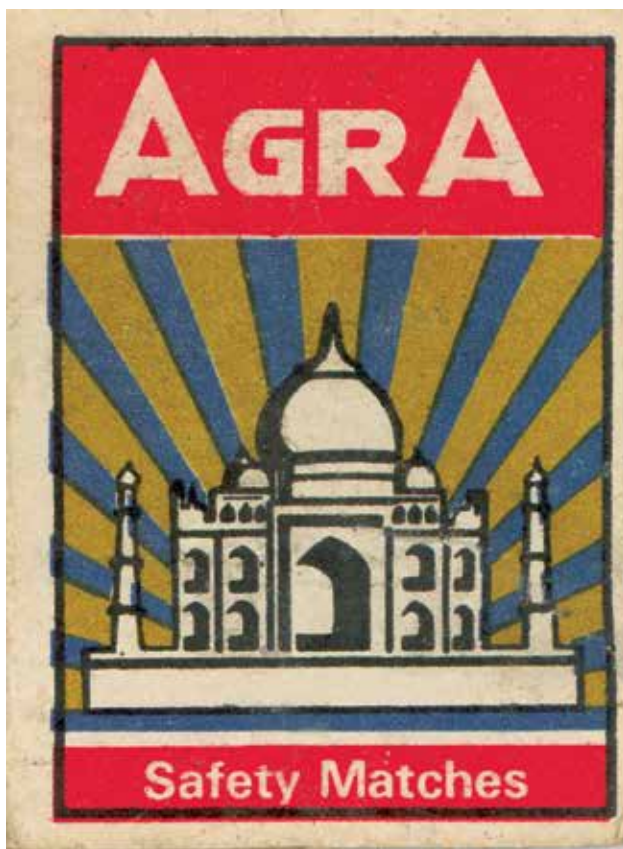
Patriotinės ikonos, tarp kurių yra ir 6 deš. nacionalistiniame hindi filmui *Motina Indija* sukurto plakato vaizdas

enterprising nadars were willing to risk experimentation and evolve challenging business strategies.

State support for Sivakasi’s match industries, when it arrived, was chiefly in the form of negative subsidies – penalising factories that used machines to make matches, and taxing those that produced beyond a certain measure fixed by the state. This meant that only smaller factories – producing a modest numbers of matchsticks – could avail state support. Further, the state also made it clear it would deal severely with those who tried to bend the law to suit their interests. It warned big producers not to sub-contract production to smaller producers and thus indirectly seek benefit from the subsidies that were so plentifully available.

It also noted that it would enquire into the use of big brands by smaller producers, since this would imply that they were actually working for the big companies.

Often, though, these measures did not always produce the desired results, and sometimes led to unintended consequences. Bigger and more established producers who sub-contracted with smaller units got around the problem of branding by pretending to sell copyrights on their brands to these units. In addition, they ‘persuaded’ the state to accept the reality of common labels being used by several producers. Additionally, in the context of Sivakasi, the top match manufacturers were all linked to each other through kinship and caste ties.



4. A favourite topic of matchbox manufacturers was the Wonders of the World, above all, the Taj Mahal mausoleum.

Mėgstama degtukų gamintojų tema buvo pasaulio stebuklai, populiariausia – Tadž Mahalo mauzoliejus

Their combined resources and mutual understanding helped keep their fortunes – and labels – in place. However, branded labels had to contend with challenges from an entirely unexpected source. The logic of dispersed production created upstart producers. By the 1980s, Sivakasi and its environs had become a haven not only for big match manufacturers who used sub-contracting to further their own interests, but also for the intrepid first-time entrepreneur. Experienced workmen in the bigger match factories set up their own small production units, and looked to both exploit as well as subvert the power of big brands: by imitating them, and by stealing their glory through inspired fakes.

In this murky twilight world of oddly reflecting and distorting mirrors and echoes, the sombre goals of India's planners gradually faded into oblivion.

There is a tangential and sad underside to this curious tale. In spite of small producers managing to outwit the big ones, this is no simple story of corporate defiance. For, small or large, all producers had recourse to lamentable labour practices. Manufacturers during this period – the late 1970s and 1980s – attempted to keep their costs down and optimised production by employing children as workers. Initially, when small-scale production began in people's homes, it appeared perfectly natural for children of the household to assist with match-related tasks. This seemed inevitable

too, since much of the work was done by women who stayed at home with their children.

Later on, when it became obvious that children could actually work as fast as, or faster than women in packing matchboxes, factories began to employ them directly. By the 1980s, Sivakasi achieved notoriety on the account that its factories and workshops employed thousands of children, some as young as six.

Thus, for the small match producer in Sivakasi, it was the work of children, as much as plucky branding, that enabled him to sell and survive in a competitive market. It is this that casts a shadow on the irrepressible energy of fake match labels and complicates our enjoyment of them. Today, Sivakasi's large factories claim that they do not employ children, but industry critics point out that unless production is mechanised, the industry is bound to remain labour-intensive. It is possible that children continue to work in Sivakasi's match units to this day – they certainly do in the smaller factories – though they may not be as visible a labour force as they were in the 1980s and 1990s.

The context of production, however, does not exhaust the history of match labels. For there are other impulses which decide their fate – like the character and the manner of their circulation.

WHAT LABELS DO

Historically, and in a general sense, match labels are like other trade labels. Attached to products whose usefulness is fairly self-evident, trade labels were expected to add value, enhance the appeal of a loaf of bread, a box of candles, a pack of peas...

They were essentially designed to incite desire and foster a curiosity that would hopefully abide.

John Johnson's collection of English trade cards at the Bodleian Library at Oxford, for example, testifies to the efforts undertaken by English tradesmen from the seventeenth century onward to render their wares attractive. Decorative borders, drawings and engravings

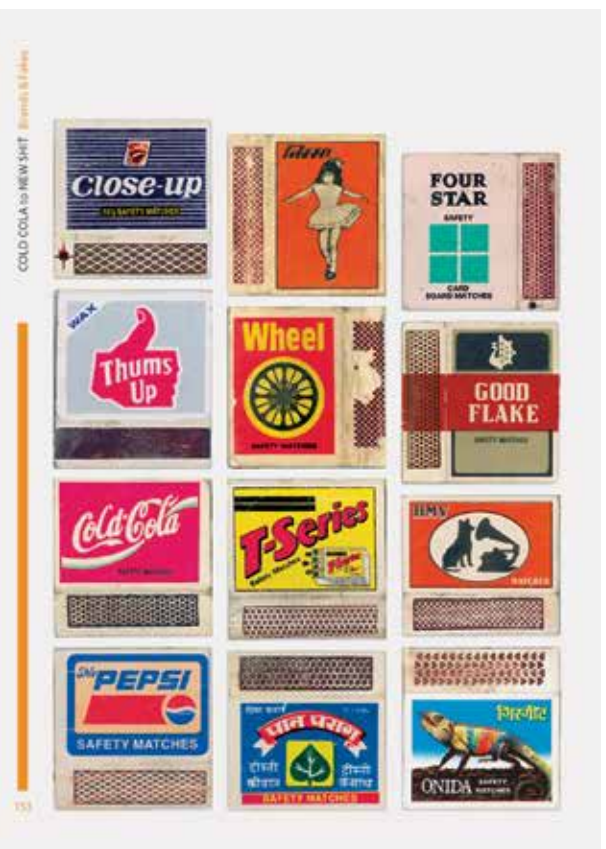
of the product, the process of its manufacture, baroque lettering and public statuary were used to make a trade card attractive. Artists and engravers, designers and printers were all drawn into this enterprise.

Clearly trade labels drew on an aesthetic of popular appeal, invoking broader cultures of seeing and significance. A seller of rare goods, such as cocoa and tea, in early eighteenth century London, commissioned a card that featured a bejewelled 'Great Moghul'. In that era of travel, trade and exploration, exotic images such as this one embodied fantasy and adventure, oriental charm and glory.

A London bookseller's card of the same period sported the dignified heads of writers Joseph Addison and John Dryden, for a readership that associated public images with moral authority and reason.

In India, during the late nineteenth century – when trade labels came to be widely used – images served a similar purpose. They advertised not merely the virtues of the product in question, but located it within a web of visual associations. For example, Indian trade labels from the early twentieth century – for beedi packets or textiles, incense sticks or snuffboxes – featured masterfully executed images of gods, goddesses, well-known actresses, cherubic babies and, very often, the manufacturer himself. Drawn from calendar art as well as modern Indian portraiture, these images not only mediated a product's value, but also helped to insert the product's appeal into shared traditions of visual appeal and the aura around them. A flute-playing god Krishna endorsing gripe water for children not just sold the product, but also managed to seamlessly associate it with the god's own enchanted and mythic childhood.

A snuff manufacturer's image on a snuffbox was both a visual guarantee of his interest in his customers, as well as his location in a community that valorised its powerful men. The ambience of trade label imagery is perfectly captured in the fact that when Mahatma Gandhi emerged as one of India's foremost national



5. Remakes of popular international brands with minor alterations of images and texts.

Populiarių tarptautinių gamintojų ženklų perdirbiniai su nedideliais vaizdų ir tekstų pakeitimais

leaders in the 1920s, beedi manufacturers started to feature his face on their packets. Gandhi objected to this use of his image and said so on many occasions.

More generally, in the Indian context, labels came to circulate as tokens of a shared culture and connoted commercial goodwill. They linked commerce to distinctly non-commercial pursuits and rendered buying and selling to be culturally significant acts. In this sense, trade and popular culture influenced each other in fundamental ways. With match labels in India, we find interesting variations on this pattern.

Match label art in India draws on shared visual cultures and appeals to the same impulses as other trade labels do. Thus, we have labels featuring gods

and goddesses, community and national leaders, actors and actresses, and national monuments like the Taj Mahal. We also have labels celebrating the ephemeral social event and personality (which trade labels have always done). Labels have carried images of the mission to the moon, a cricket world cup that India won, Shatrugan Sinha – a well-known anti-hero of the 1970s Bollywood cinema – and mundane public interest messages such as ‘help fight tuberculosis’.

The use of popular iconography acquires a reflexive edge in certain instances, as when match labels appropriate brands and icons that have sold other products. Consider, for instance, labels that imitate graphics originally used to sell washing soap, tube



6. Copies of popular brands with visual changes and grammatical mistakes.

Populiarių prekių ženklų kopijos su vizualiniais pakeitimais ir gramatinėmis klaidomis

lights, cola and cars. There are also labels with images which once enjoyed an almost mythic status in the popular imagination, such as the famous ‘Gemini twins’. The twins blowing bugles was the trademark of the famous Chennai-based Gemini Film studios, and one that served as the masthead for films produced by it. Gemini studios dominated an entire era of film-making, from the 1940s to the 1960s, and its byline, ‘When the bugles show, it is a great show’ echoed for a long time afterwards in public memory. Likewise, the courteously bowing moustachioed Maharaja is the mascot of Air India, the national carrier.

And yet, in spite of the fact that match labels are part of the general world of Indian popular culture,

there is something distinctive about the way diverse social and graphic meanings and impulses intersect in a label. Consider, for instance, those labels that endorse a widely present popular desire for modest consumption – a television set, a clock, a telephone, a tap, a pickle jar, a jug, a cup, a fork, a pair of scissors... Clearly, they wish the humble matchstick to take its place in an approved galaxy of domestic durables, which frame working class aspirations. Looked at another way, it is also true that these icons are easily available to the label artist, since trade labels for these goods are also created and produced in Sivakasi.

Another class of labels works through sly association. Match labels featuring smokers’ pipes, bottle



7. Indian variations of the globally widespread image of matchbox labels – playing cards.

Indiško pasaulio mastu paplitusio degtukų dėžučių etikečių motyvo – žaidimo kortų – variacijos

openers and rolling dice belong to this category. In a public context that is sanctimonious about pleasure, these objects connote a culture of hedonism, of care-free drinking and gambling – and presumably, since those involved in these activities enjoy an occasional cigarette as well, the subterranean message would make them reach for their matchboxes.

Indian match labels also draw from a global repertoire of icons that includes such well-known ones as the key, the sailing ship, the cheetah, a set of three numerals, the elephant, a pair of birds, the camel or the dromedary, the pistol, and the galloping horse. These were originally created by Swedish companies for a global market in the era of industrial capitalism,

and they have since come to constitute a visual archive for label artists and makers in Central Europe and South Asia. Some labels from this era are particular to the Indian context, especially those featuring characteristic ‘oriental’ images, of kings, queens, princesses, languorous sultans, dancing girls, notorious female ‘beauties’, exotic ‘eastern’ animals such as the cheetah, the elephant and the crocodile. Matchboxes sporting these labels were generally sold in the colonial markets spanning parts of Africa, West Asia and South Asia. Subsequently, when Indians started their own match industries, they were seen as useful visual precedents, and today an entire range of labels both mimic and re-work oriental themes. So, instead of kings, queens

and sultans, we have sportsmen and national leaders; exotic dancing girls have given way to actresses. The animals remain, though – the famous ‘cheetah fight’ brand has its imitators, but the feline has remained in place. The elephant, tiger and the lion images from the past have been retained as well.

There is a history of global transactions here that is fascinating. ‘Oriental’ imagery travelled to Europe – and Sweden – from India. For example, the stately Indian women who appear in Swedish match labels were created by the famous Indian artist Raja Ravi Verma and his followers, for use in nationalist propaganda calendars and prints. They were initially printed in presses in Germany and then shipped to India. But while in Europe, they found their imitators, and today, some of them have been re-deployed once again, with Indian match label artists creating their own repertoire of Indian ‘types’, lifted from the European model of the Indian original.

But in the end, despite all these fascinating twists of influence and tradition, it must be said that a label’s appearance is finally determined by the logic of commercial branding. Well-known brands remain central to label art, and visual copying is contingent on their durability and appeal. Yet, labels do encode the ephemeral social event as well. The small producer, trading on his unstable fortunes, tends to take advantage of the passing moment and so the immediate attractions of a label often become more important than convention.

LABEL ARTISTS

Labels are commissioned from commercial graphic artists. Until the past decade, large workshops serviced the art needs of Sivakasi town, which included general printing, as well as the specific needs of the match, fireworks and calendar industries. Each workshop functioned under the supervision of an established senior artist, employing up to fifty workers, busy at

different tasks. A novice would generally start with running errands for other artists, then be gradually ‘allowed’ to clean brushes, ‘touch up’ sketches, fill in colour, and gradually go on to harder tasks. Apprentices who had learnt the trade would learn to become graphic artists in their own right, and produce images for match labels, notebooks, trade logos, signage for shops, visiting cards, or greeting cards. The more talented amongst them eventually turned their skills to producing art for calendars – intricately painted images of gods and goddesses, happy babies, alpine landscapes, and fashionable ladies.

Learning the trade in workshops was through observation, trial and error. Often, it meant learning to copy, imitate and improvise. Visual sources were random and diverse: 1950s advertising from the US, images from magazines like *Time*, or *Newsweek*, hindu calendars of an earlier era, Ravi Verma originals (and fakes), Indian film and glamour magazines, pictures of celebrities, picture encyclopaedias... Clients who commissioned the images would sometimes provide their own models for the artist to work with. The artist’s task in almost all instances was to render an image to suit a particular purpose, not from his imagination or even as illustration, but as a copy of an original, however tattered or visually illegible. Sometimes, the brief was a mere idea, a suggestion to which the client might provide visual correlates – but even in such instances, the artist was expected to approximate this ‘ideal’. His talent was acknowledged to lie in the manner in which he both adhered to a model, and yet added his own to it. Expertise was marked by his ability to be faithful to an imagined original, even as he adapted and improvised. In the case of match labels, manufacturers often provided the models themselves. This appears to be the case with branded labels, such as the famous Sivakasi ‘chavi’ and ‘we two’ brands. The owners of the chavi (key) brand claim that a family elder suggested this name. Apparently, he wished this ‘key’ to unlock success after success for the manufacturing

house. Whatever the truth of this, the fact remains that the key is a remarkably resilient icon – it appears consistently in match labels in several countries. As we said earlier, it seems to have had its origins in Sweden, but then travelled widely, with the original key going through a transformation in each instance, changing shape, rendering and colour with each country that adopted it likewise, with ‘we two’: the name is characteristically Tamil, being a literal translation from the language, recalling a famous film on a nationalist theme of the same name. In the Sivakasi context, though, ‘we two’ also refers to a famous brand of fire-crackers. Yet here again, the image of these perching birds is also Swedish in origin. Bird labels came to be widely used in Central Europe and elsewhere, and the model that is commonly used in Indian match labels bears an uncommon resemblance to the original.

There are even more labels which obviously derive their inspiration from Swedish and European originals: the hurricane lamp, the pipe, the three stars, the clown, the camel, the galloping horse and the tiger. Evidently, matchbox makers do seem to have supplied their own models to the artists, for only they could have had access to Swedish originals.

Interestingly, these branded ‘originals’ exist along with countless mutations. These latter are produced at the instance of smaller producers intent on trafficking in reliable fakes, perhaps requesting the artist to manage a deft but slight alteration of the original image and name. Thus we have endless variations on the famous ship image: variations on the name, the image and the design. The most inspired imitation is surely ‘dhanalakshmi’ with the goddess Lakshmi shaped like a ship. Lakshmi also happens to be a well-known brand of fire-cracker. Likewise the label titled ‘Kali Cock’, featuring a cockerel. This bird is the carrier of the god Muruga, after whom the match label is named. At the same time, it is the flagship icon of a well-known Sivakasi house that manufactures fireworks, as well as matches. Needless to say, the cockerel also figured in Swedish labels.

Clearly, the artist’s role is central to branding efforts, for it is his interpretative skill, the manner in which he ‘fakes’ an original that seals a label’s fate. His ingenuity is evident not merely in the graphic, but also the visual blurring he achieves with the name on the label. ‘Ship’ becomes ‘Shape’ or even ‘Shit’ – and yet amazingly, one does recall the original text in and through the existing image.

The question arises: is this obsession with branding merely a ruse to evade the state’s watchful eye? Or is this an instance of successful marketing? And how precisely does branding affect sales? The answers are not self-evident. It is highly unlikely that a matchbox buyer demands a particular brand, though he would be gratified if he bought a matchbox whose label he immediately recognised. He is most likely to ask for a matchbox of a particular colour but not specify anything else. Well-known brands seldom sell in the immediate vicinity of Sivakasi, and are actually meant for larger and more dispersed markets. Local brands sell in the neighbourhood, which might also explain how public goodwill and faith in fakes is sustained: the big brands have nothing to fear really, and so they allow these charming pirates to circulate.

For the artist, illustrating a match label is labour, but one that teases his skills, and tests his ability to copy without ostensible effort. It is in this liminal space between an original and a fake that the artist’s talent comes into its own.

Ultimately, the charm of match labels, even for those that commission them, must be linked to visual pleasure, renewed on an everyday basis. And through these images, the humble matchstick resonates – in a convoluted, barely recognized fashion – with mythic and historical memory, valorised icons and images, and fantasies of consumption.

Received 31 08 2015

ETIKETĖS, DARBAS, MENAS

V. Geetha

Atsiradusios iš painingo meno ir ekonomikos samplaikos, indiškos degtukų dėžučių etiketės skleidžia apgaulingą žavesį. Pagimdytos unikalios grafinės kultūros, jos laisvai ir užtikrintai sujungia prekybos ir kultūros sferas. Iš vienos pusės, etiketė padeda stiprinti jos žymimo produkto prekinį ženklą, o iš kitos, jos išskirtinis vizualinis pobūdis pranašoksta šį tikslą ir reikalauja atskiro dėmesio. Taigi, etiketė ne tik informuoja ir įtikinėja pirkti, bet ir džiaugsmingai kviečia patyrinėti ją pačią.

Jau daugiau nei šimtmetį degtukų dėžutės yra kolekcionavimo objektas, ir be jokios abejonės, jos yra žavingos. Indiškos degtukų dėžučių etiketės transliuoja ir perteikia žinutę taip pat kaip ir kitų šalių etiketės, tačiau, atrodo, jos taip pat įkūnija tik joms būdingą komunikacijos intenciją: sėkminga etiketė pagimdo visą būrį panašių į ją, kurios ir skolinasi, ir semiasi viena iš kitos įkvėpimo. Šios vizualinės grandinės rezultatas – labai išradingas grafinis menas, nes kiekviena etiketė, kuri siekia pamėgdžioti gerai pažįstamą originalą, taip pat turi skirtis tiek nuo originalo, tiek nuo kitų etikečių, bandančių padaryti lygiai tą patį. Šitaip yra patvirtinamas konkrečiam prekės ženklui suteiktas autoritetas tik tam, kad netrukus nuo jo būtų nusigręžiama, o degtukų dėžučių etiketės liaujasi paprasčiausiai žymėti prekinį ženklą ir vietoj to tampa visateisiais vizualiniais tekstais.

Menininkui degtukų dėžutės iliustravimas yra darbas, tačiau toks, kuris tampa tikru jo įgūdžių išbandymu ir parodo jo sugebėjimą kopijuoti be apsimestinių pastangų. Būtent šioje pereinamoje erdvėje tarp originalo ir padirbinio atsiskleidžia tikras menininko talentas.

Galiausiai, degtukų dėžučių etikečių žavesys netgi jų užsakovams greičiausiai yra susijęs su vizualiniu malonumu, kuris yra kasdien atnaujinamas. Per šiuos vaizdus kuklus degtukas randa atgarsį – nors ir sudėtingai bei vos atpažįstamai – mitinėje ir istorinėje sąmonėje, vertingose ikonose bei vaizduose ir vartojimo fantazijose.

