

The “Codman Vase”



A Gift of Martelé

By L.J. Pristo, Ph.D.

Gorham's Martelé silver is uncommon with approximately 8,200 pieces produced over a forty year span. A dealer in silver may only have had a piece or two in their career, if they

are fortunate enough to handle any at all. Most of the silver dealers that I have spoken with over the years have never seen an actual piece of Martelé. Even with the rare nature of Martelé,

the dedicated collector can still search out and find another treasure to add to their collection. As in all collecting areas, there is always the piece that is even more unique or desirable, the

rare among the rare. The Special order Martelé vase coded "BVX" is one of those pieces.

All Martelé items have a unique production or identification code that was assigned by Gorham. A few pieces of Martelé also feature the signature of William C. Codman, the head designer at Gorham given credit as the force behind Martelé. The BVX vase falls within a code range of items produced during 1913 that are known to have a Codman signature. Surprisingly, the vase has no signature though there is a presentation inscription.

When I included a picture and discussion of the vase in the book *Martelé: Gorham's Nouveau Art Silver*, I wrote that ". . . the BVX vase is a rare piece of Martelé, not so much for the form (there are others with a similar shape), but because of ownership. BVX is the 'Codman Vase,' being inscribed on the bottom indicating that the vase was a gift from William C. Codman and his wife Emma to the Maltbys for a 25th anniversary. In other words, the vase has the distinction of being a gift of Martelé from the creator of Martelé. The present would have been given the year after Codman retired from Gorham and returned back home to England (the vase was found in England). No information has been found yet regarding the recipients."

The wonderful thing about time, the computer, and the internet is that new content is constantly being added and questions that could not be answered before may now have a solution. Such is the case with the vase as new facts have come to light. The actual inscription on the vase reads

"Lionel & Mary Coker Maltby / from W. C. & Emma Codman / May 24 1890 – 1915." While doing yet another search to find anything at all about whom the Maltbys were, I finally stumbled across a lead, enough of a clue that I decided to head to a genealogical library and see what I could find. After two hours of computer searches, the puzzle was solved.

Information was obtained from the English 1871 census, the 1881 census, and the "Greater London, Surrey Marriage Index April, May, June (1890)." These sources positively identify Mary Coker Maltby as the married name for Mary Coker Codman, the daughter of William Christmas and Emma Codman. With the new information, the significance of the inscription became clear. The Martelé vase was a gift from William and Emma Codman to their daughter and son-in-law — a celebration of their 25th (silver) wedding anniversary.

The finding was exciting and intriguing so I decided to look again at the 1913 run of Martelé, and now believe that I finally understand the presence of the Codman signatures during that time period. Codman was hired November 16, 1891, and retired from Gorham on June 1, 1914. The timing of the run would correspond to a likely announcement during 1913 of a planned retirement. All of the signed pieces produced during 1913 that I am aware of fall in the Gorham code range of "BVQ" to "BWN" and were completed between August and October. There are two pieces in the run preceding "BVQ" that, by completion date, would also fall within the group

— resulting in a total run of twenty-seven pieces of Martelé (out of 157 total pieces completed during 1913). As speculation, Codman retired from Gorham after being with the company for twenty-two years. Two of the pieces within the run are known to not have signatures, the tray for the signed BVR pitcher and the Codman vase. That would bring the possible signed pieces to twenty-five. Perhaps two or three others in the run are also not signed suggesting that there was a signed piece for each year Codman had worked at Gorham. Where does "BVX" fit into the run? By code, in the middle of the run — but by completion date, the last piece.

So in the rarefied world of Martelé where unusual forms or pieces are highly sought after, what is better than the unique last piece of a run of Martelé produced to celebrate his time at Gorham that Codman kept for his personal use? The answer to that question is the Codman Vase. A documented gift of Martelé from a father and mother to their daughter and son-in-law, and the only piece of Martelé that I am aware of that was actually owned by Codman. That, as they say, is as good as it gets.

L.J. Pristo is a psychologist working in Phoenix, Arizona. He specializes in Martelé silver, and maintains the website www.martele.com. The site contains new information about the study of Martelé in a section titled "Book Updates."

Bibliography —————
Pristo, L.J. *Martelé: Gorham's Nouveau Art Silver*. Phoenix: Heritage Antiques, 2001.