

Louis Kuppenheim

The Louis Kuppenheim company, a German gold, silver, enamel and jewellery-manufacturing firm founded in 1857 by Louis Kuppenheim (1824 – 89), was one of the most renowned manufacturers of decorative products based in Pforzheim, Germany. In its golden years, it won numerous awards and expanded to international markets in France, England and the United States¹. However, the Kuppenheims were of Jewish descent and their business declined gradually due to the outbreak of the Second World War and Nazi prosecution, which finally led to the company's liquidation in 1939, ending its 82-year history.

History

Written records regarding the early life of Louis Kuppenheim remain scarce. It is known that he was born to a family of Jewish descent in 1824 in Pforzheim, and married Bertha Levinger who together they bore six children. Kuppenheim set up a jewellery workshop with Heinrich Witzemann (1829-1906) in 1854 at the Pforzheim market square². Later in 1857, he solely founded the Louis Kuppenheim firm on Altstädter Straße (Street) and specialised in producing gold, silver and enamel portable objects, such as vanity sets; cigarette cases; matchboxes; lighters and handbags.



Figure 1. Photo of the Louis Kuppenheim firm.

Louis Kuppenheim passed away in 1889 and the business was inherited by his three sons Albert, Hugo and Moritz. The Kuppenheims expanded the business by establishing themselves in foreign markets in Europe and the United States, and gained international recognition for their quality products. In 1893, the *Jewelers' Circular and Horological Review* praised the Kuppenheim company for 'producing an article from steel that is beautiful in appearance and durable in colour'³. The firm was awarded a gold medal at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 in Paris, and soon established an atelier in Paris⁴ in order to compete in the international market.

¹ Geschichte – Louis Kuppenheim 2022.

² Geschichte – Louis Kuppenheim 2022.

³ The Jewelers' Circular and Horological Review 1893, p. 23.

⁴ Krekel-Aalberse 1989, p.135.

The Kuppenheim firm incorporated elements of the *Jugendstil* ("Youth Style", an artistic movement in the decorative arts that was particularly influential in Germany)⁵ in its designs. It produced several small enamelled pieces and jewellery designed by painter Hans Christiansen (1866-1945) in the early 1900s in which floral ornamentation, curved forms and natural motifs of the *Jugendstil* style⁶ were applied extensively. The gold, enamel, sapphire and diamond brooch (fig. 3) designed by Christiansen and manufactured by the Kuppenheim firm is a prime example with the central piece made of brick-red and blue-green enamel, swirling gold wires and diamonds⁷.



Figure 2. Photo of Hans Christiansen.

⁵ *Jugendstil*: A German Art Nouveau style that used floral motifs, arabesques and motifs of the natural world in the mid-1890s to the early 1920s. It later drifted towards abstraction and geometric forms.

⁶ Von Hase and von Hase-Schmundt 1977, p.99.

⁷ Museum-Digital: Baden-Württemberg 2022.



Figure 3. Brooch, Hans Christiansen (manufactured by the Louis Kuppenheim firm), 1901, Materials: gold, enamel, sapphire and diamond, Height 5.9 x Width 6.6cm, Württemberg State Museum.

The firm registered several patents in the early 1910s for their designs, including one acquired in 1910 for the structure of vanity cases⁸. The patents demonstrate the firm's success in earning a reputation for their original designs. Among our permanent collection, most nécessaires made by Kuppenheim are produced using the same structure as depicted in the diagram below (fig. 4).

⁸ Geschichte – Louis Kuppenheim 2022.

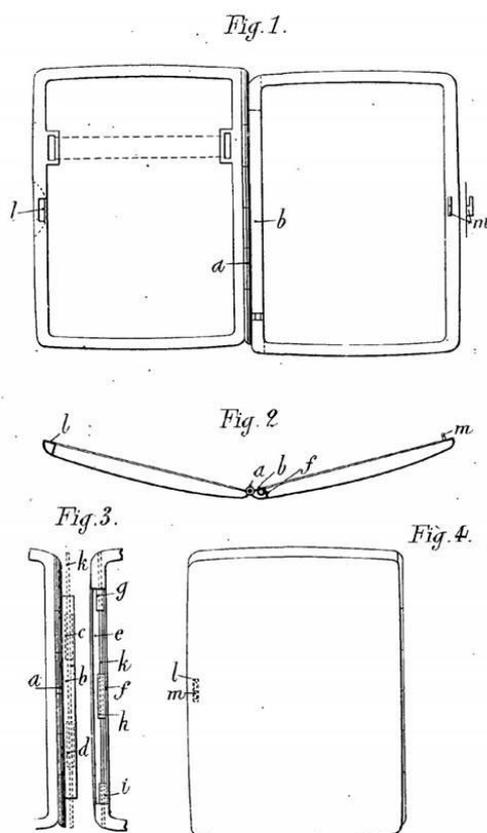


Figure 4. A 1910 patent held by the Kuppenheims.

From the 1920s till the beginning of the 1930s, the Kuppenheim company grew steadily with its thriving overseas market, and became the leading manufacturer of enamel in Germany⁹. The firm hired over 200 craftsman and employees, and created up to 100,000 products in its eighty years of production¹⁰. The company struggled after 1933 when anti-Semitism led to a wide scope of economic prosecution towards Jewish businessmen¹¹, and finally closed its doors in 1939.

In the Collection

Liang Yi Museum houses a few nécessaires made by the Louis Kuppenheim company in the 1910s to 1920s. Two of the nécessaires are of a similar design (fig. 5 and fig. 6), both decorated with a kitten on their covers. Animals are a common motif in works of the *Jugendstil* style. The kittens appear lifelike with meticulous curvy lines on the silver case. A high degree of similarity is observed not only in the motif, but also in their

⁹ Krekel-Aalberse 1989, p.133.

¹⁰ Geschichte – Louis Kuppenheim 2022.

¹¹ Richard 2004, 178.

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internal case structures (fig. 7 and fig. 8). Each nécessaire opens at the side and has a set of push buttons decorated with ruby and amethyst respectively; both have a propelling pencil fixed along the lid hinge; and a chain. They both consist of a mounted mirror and two asymmetric compartments closed by joined shutters. Over the years, the Kuppenheim firm manufactured many similar products, like these two nécessaires, in large quantities for export¹².



Figure 5. Nécessaire, Louis Kuppenheim, c. 1910, Materials: silver and ruby, Height 1.3 x Width 5.3 x Length 8.3cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 6. Nécessaire, Louis Kuppenheim, c. 1920, Materials: silver, amethyst and ivory, Height 1.9 x Width 5.2 x Length 9.1cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

¹² Geschichte – Louis Kuppenheim 2022.



Figure 7. Interior of Nécessaire (fig. 5).



Figure 8. Interior of Nécessaire (fig. 6).

Another two nécessaires (fig. 9 and fig. 10) are decorated with enamel. The kitten and puppy on each are presented realistically compared with the monotone silver nécessaires. During the 1920s, such petite yet exquisitely designed cases were favoured by many.



Figure 9. Nécessaire with kitten, Louis Kuppenheim, c. 1920, Materials: silver and enamel, Height 1.6 x Width 6.5 x Length 10.2cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 10. Nécessaire with puppy, Louis Kuppenheim, c. 1920, Materials: silver and enamel, Height 1.3 x Width 7 x Length 9.4cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

A last nécessaire (fig. 11) is decorated with alternating bands of silver and black enamel on the ellipse-shaped cylindrical case body. A string is attached and the black silk tassel at the base creates a sense of flowing beauty. The nécessaire reflects the form of geometrical and rectilinear aesthetic of Art Deco¹³, another prominent style that grew

¹³ Art Deco: seen as the continuation of Art Nouveau, it tends to be in a much simpler and modern form that is ideal for mass production; it commonly adopts geometrical and symmetrical patterns, rather than the floral curves of Art Nouveau.

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in popularity in the 1920s¹⁴. The case opens sideways with a push button to reveal a mirror and two compartments.



Figure 11. Nécessaire, Louis Kuppenheim, c. 1920, Materials: silver, enamel, ivory and silk tassel, Height 2.4 x Width 3.6 x Length 9cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

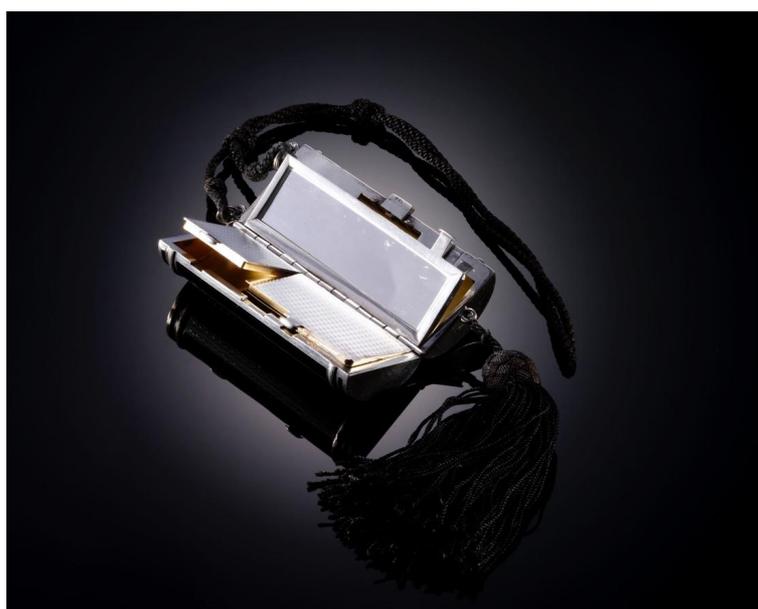


Figure 12. Interior of Nécessaire (fig. 11).

The Louis Kuppenheim company gained their success by producing items of various artistic styles, and in capturing the attention of numerous overseas markets. Its works were produced in modern workshops, and widely spread throughout Europe and the United States, demonstrating a marvellous insight into the industrialisation of silver and enamel production. Even though the company did not survive the war, the Kuppenheims have managed to leave their legacy in many works of gold, silver and enamel for curious eyes to see. The nécessaires of Kuppenheim in our collection have stood the test of time, and will remain as witnesses of the glorious era of vanity cases.

¹⁴ Krekel-Aalberse 1989, p.135.

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