An early twentieth-century breast insignia of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel

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Abstract

A breast star insignia depicting Our Lady of Mount Carmel produced by the Brussels-based company of jewellers, Maison Gustave Wolfers S.A., has been identified to date to the period 1930-1960. The implications of this insignia are discussed.

Keywords

Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel; insignia; Gustave Wolfers Jewellers

Introduction

The *Wolfers Silver Ordre de Saint Lazare et de Notre Dame du Mont Carmel Breast Star* is an ornate insignia exemplifying the high standards of European decorative art and jewellery, being executed by the celebrated Belgian firm, Wolfers Frères, a house renowned for its refinement and technical mastery. The breast star insignia depicting Our Lady of Mount Carmel has recently [September 2025] been offered for sale on e-bay. The location of the artifact was in New Milford, CT, U.S.A.[1]

Description

The star is crafted in silver-gilt (vermeille) and takes the form of an eight-pointed cross with four fleur-de-lis placed between the arms of the cross. The central lozenge depicts in red and blue enamel the image of Our Lady of Mount Carmel holding the infant Jesus on the left side with a raised arm on the right side holding the scapular. The reverse side has a clip and hooks to facilitate attachment, while centrally the star is marked

[1] *Wolfers Silver Ordre De Saint Lazare Et De Notre Dame Du Mont Carmel Breast Star*. https://www.ebay.com/itm/326438373227 [accessed 16.ix.2025]

with a plaque showing the maker's mark. The mark identifies the maker as 'G. WOLFERS 35 RUE DE LA MADELEINE 35 BRUXELLES'. The star typically rests in its original fitted case of black leather, lined with velvet and white silk, which enhances its prestige and emphasizes its role as a ceremonial and honorific emblem. The presentation box is similarly labelled by the maker as 'M^{son} G^{ve} WOLFERS 35 RUE DE LA MADELEINE BRUXELLES FOURNISSEUR DE S.M. LE ROI'. There are no features linking the insignia to St Lazarus.

Obverse and Reverse views of breast star

Presentation box

The makers – G. Wolfers

The Wolfers family has a long and distinguished history in the gold- and silversmithing tradition, with its origins in Linden, Germany. In 1812, the brothers Édouard and Guillaume Wolfers relocated to Belgium, establishing themselves in Brussels where they began producing innovative, high-quality silverware and tableware. Their success drew other family members into the trade: in 1842, their younger brother Louis Wolfers (*1820 †1892) joined them, and by 1850 he had founded a separate company in Brussels. This enterprise achieved widespread recognition in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly under the artistic direction of Louis' son, Philippe Wolfers (*1858 +1929), who became one of the foremost designers of Art Nouveau jewellery, and later Philippe's son, Marcel (*1886 †1976). The company founded by Louis

stopped production in 1975, but not before leaving an enduring legacy in European decorative arts.[2]

Parallel to Louis' enterprise, Guillaume Wolfers established his own workshop in 1836, focusing on the creation of high-quality insignia for various royal Orders of Chivalry.[3] His shop, located at 35, Rue de la Madeleine in Brussels, quickly became known for its craftsmanship and precision. By 1870, Guillaume was joined by his son, Gustave, and in 1875 the firm was formally registered as "G. Wolfers et Fils."[4] A trade listing of jewellers producing insignia for royal orders in 1882 suggests that by this time the business had come under Gustave's sole management.[5] While originally set up for a period of three years with the possibility of annual renewal afterwards, the company continued under the joint management of the father and son until 1888 when the name of the firm was changed to "Gustave Wolfers", presumably after Guillaume's death.

Gustave Wolfers, *bijoutier* (jeweler), expanded the firm's profile and prestige. In 1897, he was listed as a member of the *Société d'Études Coloniales de Belgique*,[6] and advertisements from the period describe the workshop as "*fournisseur de D.M. le Roi des Belges, de la Chancellerie belge et du Ministère des Colonies*"—official supplier to the King of the Belgians, the Belgian Chancellery, and the Ministry of Colonies. This designation underscores the company's role as a leading supplier of

[2] Wolfers. *Hancocks website* https://hancockslondon.com/makers/wolfers [accessed 14.ix.2025]

[3] A past advertisement for the Maison Gustave Wolfers states that the company was founded in 1836. See: *Triju zvaigžņu gaismā*, vol. 1 (1997), p.33.

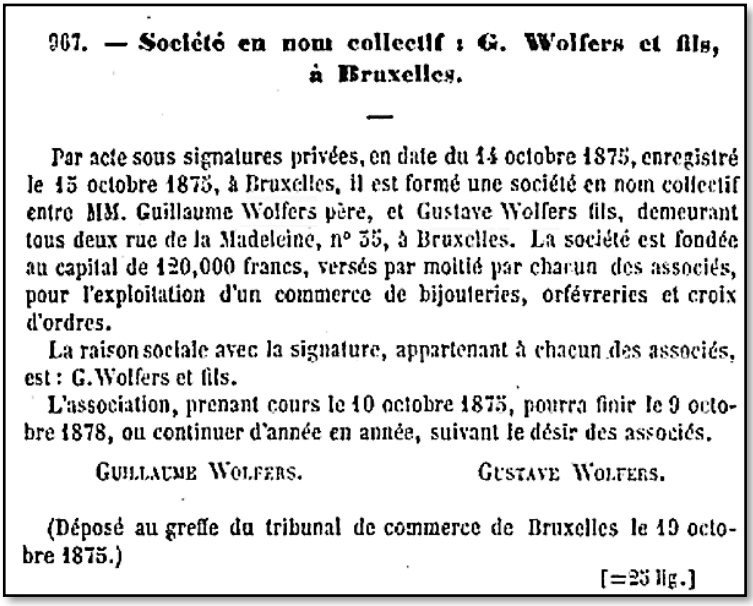
[4] *Société en nom collectif : G. Wolfers et fils, a Bruxelles*. Annex au Moniteur Belge du 24 Octobre 1875. In *Recueil spécial des Actes, extraits d'Actes, Procès-verbaux et documents relatifs aux sociétés* (Brussels: Imprimerie de la Régie du Moniteur Belge, 1875), Notice 967, p.691.

[5] Décorations et croix d'ordre. In *Leuchs Adressbuch für Industrie , Handel und Gewerbe*, vol. 9 (1882), p.70.

[6] *Bulletin de la Société d'Etudes Coloniales*. Quatrième année (1897), p.404

official insignia and decorations to both the Belgian Crown and State institutions. [7]

The company's structure evolved further in the 20th century: in 1930, it was re-registered as "Maison Gustave Wolfers S.A.", a title it retained until 1960, when it was renamed "Ancienne Maison G. Wolfers." The firm ultimately ceased operations in 1975, closing a chapter on more than a century of continuous craftsmanship and international renown. [8]



967. — Société en nom collectif : G. Wolfers et fils, à Bruxelles.

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Par acte sous signatures privées, en date du 14 octobre 1875, enregistré le 15 octobre 1875, à Bruxelles, il est formé une société en nom collectif entre MM. Guillaume Wolfers père, et Gustave Wolfers fils, demeurant tous deux rue de la Madeleine, n° 35, à Bruxelles. La société est fondée au capital de 120,000 francs, versés par moitié par chacun des associés, pour l'exploitation d'un commerce de bijouteries, orfévreries et croix d'ordres.

La raison sociale avec la signature, appartenant à chacun des associés, est : G. Wolfers et fils.

L'association, prenant cours le 10 octobre 1875, pourra finir le 9 octobre 1878, ou continuer d'année en année, suivant le désir des associés.

GUILLAUME WOLFERS. GUSTAVE WOLFERS.

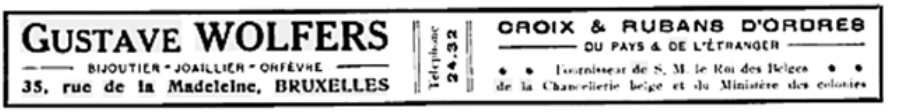
(Déposé au greffe du tribunal de commerce de Bruxelles le 19 octobre 1875.)

[=25 lig.]

Registration of the company G. Wolfers et fils

[7] *L'Expansion Belge – Revue Mensuelle Illustrée*. 11 (November, 1910), p.890 ; 12 (December, 1910), p.981.

[8] Orders of the Lion and Sun made by Gustave Wolfers, Brussels. In *Medals of Asia - Guide to the Orders, Medals and Badges of Asian Countries*. Website https://asiamedals.info/threads/orders-of-the-lion-and-sun-made-by-gustave-wolfers-brussels.28470/ [accessed 14.ix.2025]



Advertisement for the company Gustave Wolfers dated 1910

The insignia under discussion, bearing the maker's marks associated with Wolfers, can be dated with some precision to the period between 1930 and 1960. This attribution is supported not only by stylistic features, but also by the distinctive maker's mark found on the accompanying case, aligning with the branding practices of Maison Gustave Wolfers S.A. during this mid-20th-century phase of production.

Discussion

The Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was established by Pope Paul V at the request of King Henri IV of France, through the Papal Bull *Romanus Pontificus* on 16 February, 1608, and further expanded by the Bull *Militantium Ordinum* on 26 February of the same year. Shortly thereafter, on 31 October, 1608, King Henri IV merged the newly founded Order with the more senior and established Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem. This planned union ensured that the fledgling Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel would enjoy financial stability and administrative continuity. The amalgamation was later granted formal canonical approval, first on 5 June, 1668, by Cardinal Legate de Vendôme acting under the authority of Pope Clement IX, and again on 3 May, 1695, through a bull issued by Pope Innocent XII.

For over a century, the two Orders shared joint governance until 1779, when their functions were distinguished by royal decree. The Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was thereafter reserved for graduates of the prestigious *École Militaire Royale*, situated on the Champs de Mars in Paris, while the senior Order of Saint Lazarus was to recognize individuals who rendered distinguished service to the French crown or to the nation. This arrangement was short-lived, however, as the *École Militaire Royale* was formally closed in October 1787, with no further students admitted.

The final recorded admissions to the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel occurred in 1788. Although the Order was never formally suppressed, it was allowed to lapse into extinction—an outcome that, under Canon Law, would take effect one hundred years after the death of its last surviving member.

Obverse & Reverse side of post-1778 insignia
Ordre de Notre-Dame du Mont-Carmel

Given that most members graduated at around the age of seventeen, it is highly unlikely that any members survived beyond the 1930s, and no evidence exists of admissions in either the 19th or 20th centuries.

Nevertheless, a curious anomaly persists: the existence of a breast star crafted by Maison Gustave Wolfers, closely resembling the silver neck cross traditionally worn by graduates after 1778. Its production suggests that, at some point, individuals may have attempted to revive the Order. Yet, the purpose and context of this insignia remain a historical mystery, adding an enigmatic epilogue to the legacy of the Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.[9]

[9] A similar enigmatic award was that of the *Order of St Lazarus of Belgium* given in 1879 to Christopher Sykes (*1831 †1898). Sykes was an English Conservative politician and a close friend of Prince of Wales Edward VII. There has never been a specific national Belgian Order of Saint Lazarus. See: 'Sykes, Christopher (SKS848C)'. *A Cambridge Alumni Database*. University of Cambridge. https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search-2018.