

Optimism in the Early Age of Plastics 1920s-1950s



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Abstract

The changes of uses and views of plastics from the 1920s-1950s.

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1920s –
1950s

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Celluloid billiard balls

Bakelite radio



War time advertisements, highlighting the benefits of plastic:
(Below) advertisements marketing new plastic products available for the home.



COVER OF LIFE MAGAZINE, 1955



Cover of Life Magazine, 1955

Plastic was not just being used for home goods or women's attire, but was also being made into toys for children.

DURING THE SECOND World War, production expanded as plastics offered alternatives for scarce metals and other natural substances needed for war. New plastics appeared in military equipment — Plexiglass airplane windshields and bomber windows; nylon parachute cords and canopies; combs in soldiers' field kits. After aiding soldiers fighting in the field and supplementing rationed goods available to homefront families,

plastics became even more common in all corners of American life in the 1950s. As production expanded dramatically, the plastics industry and media optimistically declared the coming of a Plastics Age — and even celebrated the coming of a "Throwaway Society" — in which people dressed in synthetic clothing, furnished their homes with plastic items, and purchased goods packaged in plastic.

IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY, new and synthetic materials began to change the way luxury and household items were produced. Celluloid was the most popular plastic at the time. Cheap, durable, and moldable, it could be colored to mimic scarce and precious materials. Celluloid replaced elephant ivory in billiard balls, tortoise shell in combs and eye glass frames, and whale baleen in women's corsets and then brassieres.

Pressure on these endangered animals declined at the same time that people gained wider access to affordable consumer goods. In the early 20th century, another revolutionary plastic — Bakelite — gained widespread use in the electrical industry as well as for radio and telephone casings, kitchenware, toys and jewelry.

THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY and product advertisers promoted rigid thermosetting plastics like Celluloid and Bakelite as democratizing mass consumption for hard working Americans. As new thermoplastics were invented in the early 20th century, these cheaper and more flexible materials inspired many to imagine a utopian age of mass American consumerism. This was even true during the Great Depression,

as ads used brilliantly colored and attractively styled plastic goods to highlight the genius of American industry and capitalism as well as the promise of a revived national economy. Advertisers sometimes targeted men when featuring plastic tools, but usually marketed products to women — assuming they were homemakers excited by cellophane food wrap, plastic seat covers, and vinyl kitchen countertops.

