

Donation of the Month

Celluloid Dresser Piece



1998.16.1-2 donated by Friends of the Rogers Historical Museum
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Is it ivory or is it plastic?

By the mid -1900's, inventors were seeking to create cheaper synthetic materials to replace expensive natural ones. One of these materials was ivory. Ivory was getting harder to get and the demand for more high.

The first faux ivory was introduced by English inventor Alexander Parkes and won him an award at the 1862 World's Fair in London.

His new material, made from cellulose, nitric acid, and a solvent, could be molded when heated and hardened into a material that imitated ivory. However, this new material didn't hold up very well when mass produced and many pieces cracked and warped. In 1863 American inventor John Wesley Hyatt took the same basic ingredients but changed the solvent to camphor and created a more successful, moldable material he named "celluloid." Some of the earliest objects to be made from celluloid included false teeth. Popular products were shirt collars and cuffs which resisted water and stains. Celluloid was also used to imitate tortoiseshell and marble.

Products that used to be made with ivory or bone could now be made in celluloid. These dresser set

pieces from the early 1900s are wonderful examples of celluloid substitutes for ivory. Though the plastic has yellowed over time, you can see the ivory-like look in some of them. The comb is very recognizable as it looks very much like combs made today from modern plastic. Some of the others may not look as familiar. The round object is a hair receiver. It has a lid with a hole in the top; after a woman brushed her hair, she would remove the loose hairs caught in her brush or comb and place them in this little container. Loose hair was used to create elaborate hairdos or hair braids.

The metal hook with celluloid handle is a button hook used to fasten button-up shoes. The oval object with the small handle is a fingernail buffer which fits into the celluloid case for storage. Finally, the handled object that resembles scissors is actually a glove stretcher. The narrow ends were inserted into the fingers of gloves and the wide handles were squeezed, stretching the fingers outwards.

Over the decades, new plastics were developed and celluloid was no longer used but objects like these still remind us of how plastics got started and how the power of invention shaped our history.

CREDITS

Meikle, Jefferey I. American Plastic: A Cultural History. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997. "An Introduction to the History of Plastics: Cellulose Based Plastics: Celluloid and Rayon," from <http://www.packagingtoday.com/introcelluloid.htm>, " Celluloid," from <http://www.plasiquarian.com/celluloi.htm>. Rogers Historical Museum Donor and research Library Files.