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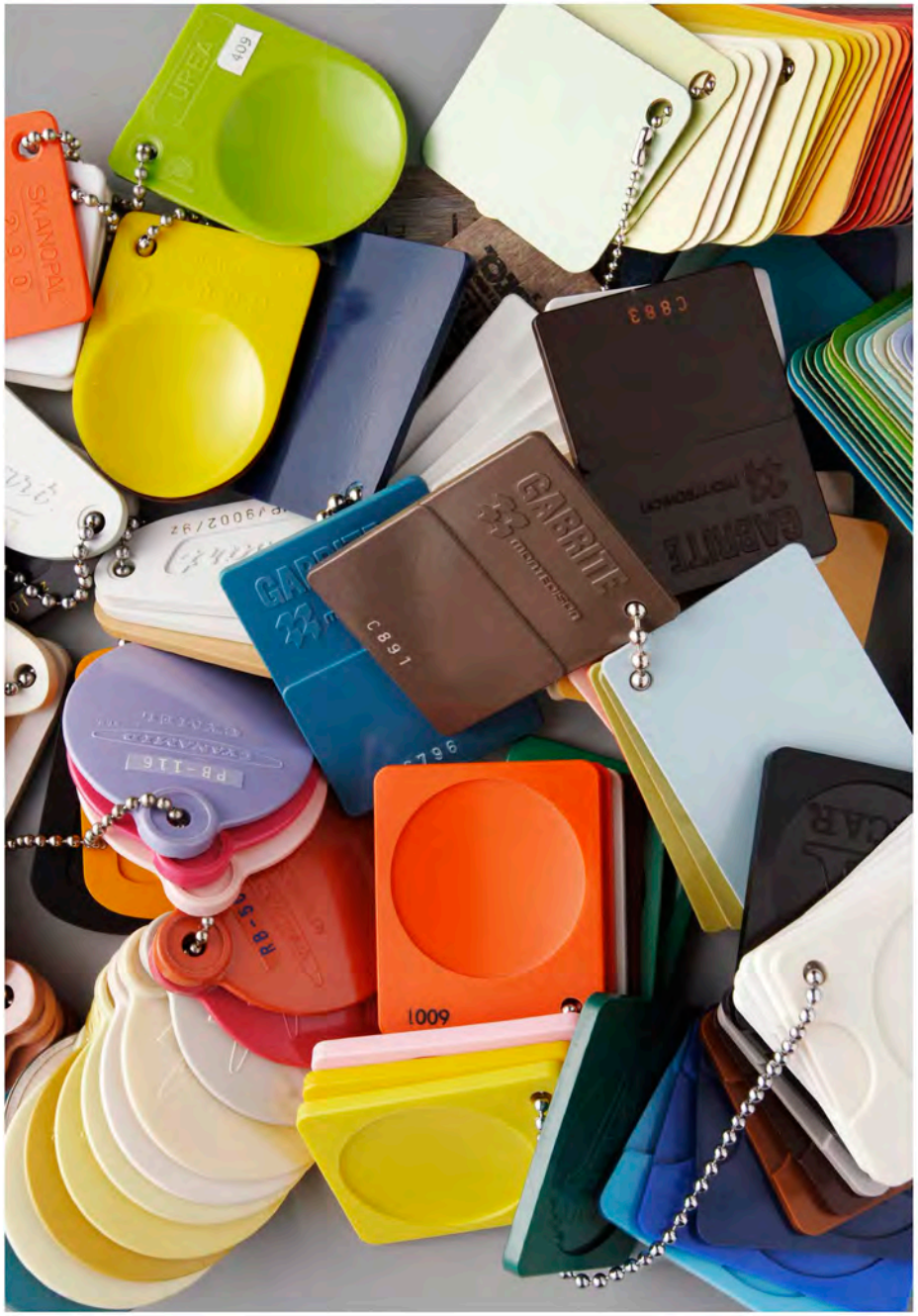

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The Amsterdam Bakelite Collection

PHS member Reindert Groot, chairman of the Amsterdam Bakelite Collection on the phenomenon of how collections expand.

Figure 1. Colour samples on ball chains.

Figure 2. Samples on rod in display case.

Perhaps the reader is familiar with the phenomenon: you collect something and then, all of a sudden, one or more sub-collections or partial collections appear to have come into existence within your original collection. It may have started through personal taste or because of items offered. Before you know it, you have a number of different collections under one denominator or umbrella but yet different. That is how it happened in the Amsterdam Bakelite Collection.

In order to be as complete as possible, I have collected all sorts of items that are not made of Bakelite, but materials that are definitely related to it. Such examples are directly related matters like literature and objects, mostly coming from the industry. They can be tools such as steel moulds and packaging materials for moulding compounds. Items that normally seldom or never become available to collectors. It is usually because packaging is discarded as trash after use and tools are re-used elsewhere or removed.

Exceptions to this are the material and colour samples. If you are allowed to browse through the materials and samples department of a Bakelite factory, a childlike joy overtakes you. It is as if you are in three stores at the same time: the toy store, with its appealing assortment of unknown types and dimensions; a candy store with delectable sweets and finally the flower shop, where you can find all the colours of the rainbow! (Figure 1).

In contrast to the packaging materials and tools, these samples certainly were not meant to be discarded, but rather to be used as long as possible. They come in large varieties, not just with regard to materials, but especially in execution (Figure 2). After all, the goal was to stimulate sales and to streamline this process by offering good service and warranties to the customers. The reproducibility of composition and colour was an important part of this service and was accomplished through standardisation of the manufacturing processes.

A code was assigned to each colour, or colour variant, in a secret language that was completely inaccessible to outsiders. What to make of: MPV9002 or X84192? Because of this subsequent orders could be regenerated in an identical way. The client manufacturers were assured of a consistent quality and in the same way could offer the same service to their own clients.

Figure 3. Samples rescued from La Bakelite closure.

Figure 4. Skanopal samples.

Where do they come from?

On November 15, 1995, the former Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Arts and Science organised a theme day in Amsterdam about the preservation and management of synthetic materials. One of the speakers was PHS member Collin Williamson. In order to add 'colour' to his presentation, he had brought a number of colour samples with him. They were labelled with 'B.I.P' or 'BIP', British Industrial Plastics Limited, the oldest English plastics firm, known mainly for their 'Beetle' brand. The participants that day were allowed to select and take away several samples. Those eight pieces were the very first colour samples in our collection! Another set of Beetle Products Co. Ltd. was added much later via eBay. The seller had divided a large set into several smaller portions in order to maximise his profits. Only once did I find a sample set of UF and MF at an old-fashioned flea market, but that was a great exception.

Sets, mostly American, are offered with some regularity on eBay where the prices can vary greatly, depending on brand and rarity. If a seller only uses the word 'plastic' in his description, without mentioning brand or type, it becomes difficult for buyers looking for certain specific names. Thanks to eBay I have come to know a number of international friends and acquaintances personally. Some of them are fellow collectors whilst others were employed in the plastics industry. Via one such acquaintance I obtained a sample set of the French factory La Bakélite, on which were paper stickers where the name Perstorp appears. La Bakélite was taken over by Perstorp AB, Sweden, probably with the intention of closing its doors. In the chemical (plastics) industry takeovers and mergers are a normal phenomenon. Employees were not allowed to take or secure anything whatever from the inventory. On this occasion the objects from a small business museum were dumped into a trash container and the hydraulic presses sold. Fortunately a French friend was clever enough to ignore these rules and that is how important photographs, documents and the aforementioned samples are now housed in the Amsterdam Bakelite Collection (Figure 3).

As a result of a special cooperation with the Dutch firm Corodex in Zandvoort, the samples collection was significantly expanded. Corodex was a Dutch company that produced thermosetting moulding powders and was active as a moulding company until the end of 2009. In 1948 about 270 employees worked there in 3 daily shifts. In addition, there were some 50 personnel in the office, in their own draughtsman's area, in a tool and die shop, a laboratory and an internal company fire department. Over the years before the company closed down, I interviewed the former owner and director, Mr J.H.W. Molijn on several occasions. He put me in contact with other people from the world of plastics, amongst whom was Mrs D.J. Ariesen-Molijn, one of his daughters, who had taken over the management. After the closing of the plant, I received a significant portion of the inventory as a gift. It included furniture, advertising signs with products, a part of the company library, historic photographic material, work drawings, steel moulds, prototypes, the original façade lettering and a generous quantity of the afore-mentioned material and colour samples.

Types and Brands

Depending on the type of material and the time period the models varied significantly. They varied in technical specifications such as pressed colour samples in book form, to a binder of sample plates of larger format. The most common format however remained the small plates or discs held together with a ball chain.

Figure 5. Etronit and Etronax samples.

Figure 6. Marblette advertising.

Sometimes packaged in a cylinder, sometimes in a cardboard box or simply individually in a small binder, as give-away samples that the salesman took with him.

With earlier urea resins the colour spectrum was more limited than in later years. Known colours are of course milky white, light blue, pink and soft green. The modern urea types and especially the melamine resins contain a much wider spectrum of more brilliant colours, than could be achieved before. The visual distinction between identical colours of melamine resin and urea resin can be difficult to distinguish. Only lab analysis can reveal the type of material in question. A good example of this are the Perstorp's samples Skanopal (UF) and Isomin (MF). Skanopal became a registered trade mark in England and Europe in 1966. (Figure 4)

Laminates

Besides the pressed plates and discs on a chain, there are also samples with a laminate structure such as those of the Italian producer Abet Laminati, the Formica described by Sylvia Katz in Plastiquarian no. 50, and the similar Creastyle of Perstorp. All may be viewed as decorative sheet materials, mainly used in interior finishes and in the furniture industry.

Other types of laminates are more technical in nature and destined for industrial use. The National Vulcanized Fibre Company of Wilmington, Delaware produced sheets, tubes, bar stock and formed pieces under the trade name Phenolite. It could be used to make insulators, and printed circuit boards, as well as gears.

A comparable Danish firm is Elektro-Isola AS in Velje. Since 1920, it has produced identical products that are used worldwide, from medical applications to space travel! The 2 brand names of these samples are Etronit and Etronax (Figure 5).

Cast Phenolic Resin

Beside the described laminates and the compression moulded products, cast material has played a large role, especially before the Second World War. Specifically in the United States it was being used for just about everything. The Marblette Corporation

Figure 7. Catalin samples in box.

Figure 8. Trafford cast samples.

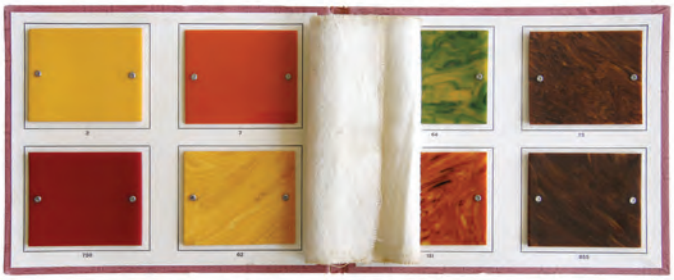

Figure 9. Trolon sheet material samples for furniture.

in Long Island City, New York, fully specialized in this material. The trade name Marblette was in use from 1929 until 1996. In addition to the production of glues, coatings, lacquers and varnishes, there was an extensive production of stock moulds. From napkin rings, jewellery, coat hangers, shoe horns, buckles, umbrella handles, poker racks to beer scrapers; no matter how crazy the product it could be cast!

These, you could call them partial products, were delivered to manufacturers of novelty articles and jewellery designers. From pure white to the deepest black, and every colour in between, was delivered. And to top it off, there were also variations of transparent, translucent, opaque and mottled effects (Figure 6).

A comparable firm was the American Catalin Corporaton. The name Catalin is possibly better-known than that of Marblette and is almost always incorrectly used to name all articles made of cast phenol resins. Although this sample set is not a part of our collection, it is interesting enough to show. It is part of the Syracuse University Library Plastics Collection. A sample set for clocks, manufactured by the Bond Electric Corp., Jersey City, NJ. (Figure 7). Trafford is a lesser known American brand that, just as Catalin and Marblette, produced cast PF (Figure 8).

In Europe cast samples were produced from 1924 by the German Rheinisch-Westfälische Sprengstoff A.G. from Troisdorf, with the trade name Trolon. Our example shows the Trolon-Möbelkollektion, sheet material that was especially manufactured for the furniture industry (Figure 9).

Figure 10. Farbenkarte sample booklet.

Compression-moulded PF, UF and MF

Bakelite Gesellschaft m.b.H, Erkner-Berlin used both printed as well as real colour sample discs to show the colours available. In the edition FARBENKARTE of 1934, 24 colours are shown. If required, the real discs, or a quantity of the particular moulding powder, could be supplied. The booklet, as well as the jute bags that were used then for packaging, always remained the property of the factory (Figure 10).

Pressalit, the Danish manufacturer of toilet seats and bathroom accessories, made relatively large samples available to dealers for their own showrooms; this made it easier for the customer to select matching colours. The coding here did not consist of inscrutable numbers, but used simple sequenced numbers, and normal descriptions such as Polar Blue, Regatta Blue, Balibraun, or Caramel. 75 Different colours were offered. The material used for these, including black, were just as the seats themselves, pressed from UF from the Swedish Perstorp. Another producer of toilet seats is the German Pagette. The number of colours of this firm is noticeably smaller than that of Pressalit. They do not, on the other hand, let you guess as to application.

Enough about samples! Time to collect something different, something entirely new: original moulding powder packaging with printing. You remember, that was being discarded after use. As trash! (Figure 11)

Figure 11. Phenolic resin packaging retrieved from trash.

Should there be readers that would like to donate or exchange their surplus samples to the Amsterdam Bakelite Collection, they would be graciously accepted!

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