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“What Is It?”

How a mystery object became part of amsterdambakelitecollection.com

Reindert Groot tells PHS readers more about his research on a beer foam scraper holder



Figure 1. The mystery revealed

On the subject of the “Mystery Object” published in *Plastiquarian* 54, I have a little more to say to PHS readers. As soon as I saw this object, I had the feeling I’d seen it before. I know this one, but what’s the context? I was sure I’d seen it somewhere. It was in New York at the Showplace Antique + Design Center, where an American couple ran one of the “stores” selling only Bakelite, or Catalin as they and many other Americans call cast phenolic resin. I was racking my brains and it became increasingly familiar, but where from? It had something to do with drink. Of course... it must be beer! And yes indeed, I’ve also seen it on Internet, America in Amsterdam, back home on the computer.

I immediately set about searching further, again on Internet, on eBay. It didn’t take long to find it. “Vintage Bakelite Beer Foam Scraper Holder – RUPPERT Beer.” Three had been offered in the recent past for prices between \$ 60 and \$ 160. One had an ordinary modern glass and it was soon apparent that it wasn’t original. One of the other sellers had photographed it in great detail, and very sharply. On the bottom of the container the name of the manufacturer was clearly readable: GENERAL PRODUCTS CO. PROV. R. I. But even more important was U.S. PAT. 2,162,629. Now it was starting to get interesting to play

June 13, 1939.

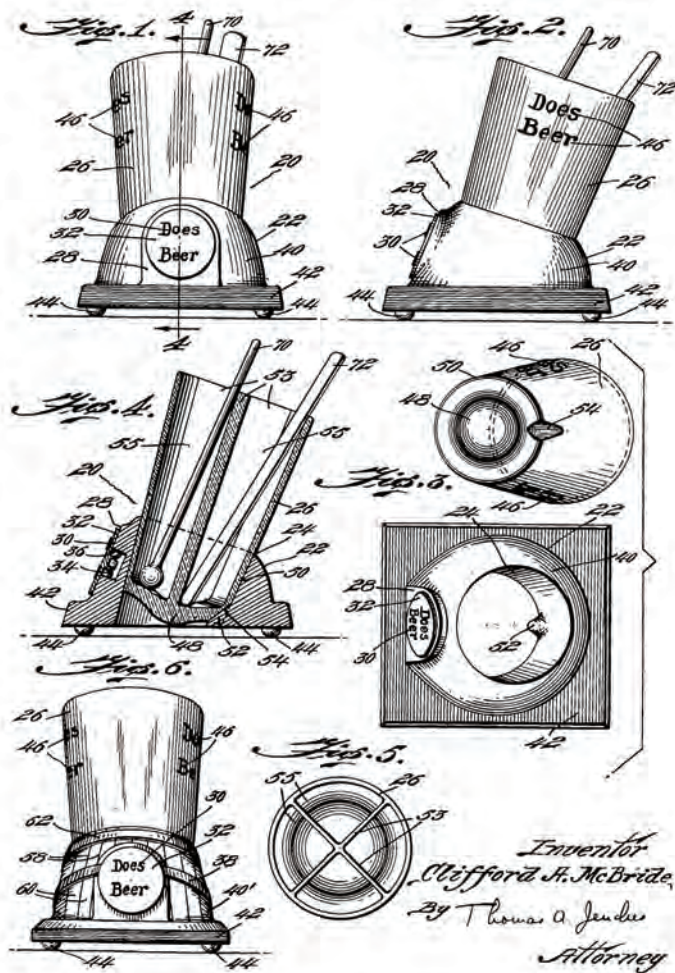
C. A. McBRIDE

2,162,629

RECEPTACLE

Filed Nov. 8, 1938

2 Sheets-Sheet 1



and nylon lampshades. But to get back to the beer foam scraper holder, which is – but also isn't – quite what it looked like at first sight. Mr. McBride had the following to say about it.

"My improved device is primarily adapted to be employed as an advertising medium, and advertising matter may be displayed not only on the body portion of the base member thereof, but also on the side walls of the tumbler, and my invention is so designed that it may also be useful, so that it will have an inherent advertising appeal, being normally used in a position on top of the counter forcing the customer to advertise the advertiser's wares to the thirsty customer at the point of sale."

Even in the practical use of his invention, the designer saw a second commercial purpose.

"A further object of my device is to provide such a receptacle adapted to hold a plurality of objects for different advertising purposes, such as beer scrapers for beer, a stirrer or a spoon for whiskey, or a spoon or straws for soft drinks."

Little is said about the production, only that the beaker could be manufactured as blown, moulded or otherwise. In *Plastiquarian* 54, this was incorrectly described as Bakelite, while it is clearly a thermoplastic material, with polystyrene being the most obvious choice. For the base, a cast phenolic resin of an undefined brand was used. As long as the material of a product is not marked, it's not possible to use a name such as "Catalin". Brand names can only be safely used if they are included in patents, company brochures and advertisements or other original sources.

The side view of the base is based on a horse's hoof and also suggests the top half of a wooden beer barrel. It rises up from a sturdy square plate measuring 12 x 12 cm, complete with staves and clearly visible seams (Figure 2). There are two metal hoops around the barrel and the lower of the two has a round shield

Figure 2. Original 1938 USPTO drawings

at Sherlock Holmes. Using Google Patent Search to the USPTO (United States Patent and Trademark Office).

I discovered that it is a set comprising a base and a container – holder, beaker, tumbler or whatever – to be placed in it. It had been designed, because I don't think it's really an invention, by Mr. Clifford A. McBride, a manufacturer of plastic products who applied for a patent on it on Tuesday 8 November 1938. The patent was granted to him on 13 June 1939. On that same day, another patent was also granted, for a similar design but in this case the base was a small model bar instead of a beer barrel as seen in the mystery object (Figure 1). Mr. McBride had previously designed a spout for drink bottles in the form of an eagle's head with the beak as the opening. While these designs are related to catering, his company also made other products such as Christmas lights in the form of Father-Christmas figures



Figure 3. Bottom view shows protuberance on the base and notch and sprue on the thermoplastic tumbler bottom

on which an advertising text was placed. In this case RUPPERT BEER - ALE. The hoops are fitted in the Bakelite with small rivets – nails with a long thread on them.

Ergonomically important is the fact that the barrel is at an angle, not only to improve the legibility of the advertising shield on the base, but also to make it easier for the bartender to insert and remove the scrapers. Fitted in the base was the purple coloured tumbler which also had advertising on two sides. The legibility of these texts was very important because people had to be able to read it from different angles. If the beaker was not in the right position, then the advertising was totally ineffective. In order to guarantee this position, Mr. McBride included an ingenious provision. There is a small protuberance in the base, while the beaker has a matching notch (Figure 3). Just like Cinderella and her glass shoe, it only fits in one way round. Another brilliant invention is the convex base of the beaker. This makes it impossible to put it anywhere else but in the base; in order to prevent theft by souvenir hunters.

Such intensive involvement with the product made it almost unavoidable that we would acquire it for our amsterdambakelitecollection.com. Unfortunately the most interesting offer had already disappeared from eBay. However regular checks were finally rewarded on 5 March. A fine example was shipped to Amsterdam. Of course it had several traces of old age, such as a number of stress cracks, almost all emerging from the seams between the staves. The photos tell the rest of the story.

For his patented description, Mr. McBride needed no less than 3400 words! It's enough to make anyone thirsty, all those words; time for a beer!

Translation by Martin Cleaver, Amsterdam