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# plasticquarian

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# Bakelite: Everybody knows it

Gerson Lessa, PhD, teacher of Design History at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro reviews the recent exhibition of PHS member Reindert Groot's Amsterdam Bakelite Collection in Rotterdam



Figures 1-7 illustrate the scale and variety of content.

This March I had the opportunity to visit Kunsthall Rotterdam, where the exhibition 'Bakelite: Everybody knows it', was on show. This exhibition was a display of around fifteen hundred pieces from the Amsterdam Bakelite Collection, the work of specialized Bakelite collector Reindert Groot.

Setting aside considerations about the beautiful museum and the town around it, I was greeted by an impactful display of jaw dropping Bakelite objects. A feast to the eyes for everyone interested in material culture and design history, not to mention the rarer breed of plastic collectors like myself.

The first impact comes from the size and scope of the collection that includes a huge number of fascinating objects, many with functions and applications that may defy even design and technology - aware individuals. The collection encompasses the whole century in which Bakelite evolved from early attempts in

the chemist's lab to the present day, when the material has been mainly relegated to fringe applications, largely substituted by plastics with updated characteristics and processes.

An easy task is identifying well known classic designs, objects that we commonly see in books and museums but even experts could have a hard time identifying and guessing the uses of many of the objects exposed. This exhibition must be even more challenging to youngsters, to whom many of the objects made in past styles like Art Deco and Streamlining surely look outlandish and sci-fi-like. Adding to this feeling and the richness of the experience is the way authored designs share the same space with anonymous objects for daily use, like electrical plugs, cups, kitchen appliances, toilet seats and toys. This approach, well known to the collecting community, may seem odd to a broader museum audience, used to highly valued works of art, precious elements of material culture or objects designed by



well-established designers or architects. The presence of objects made from thermoset materials from everywhere, from the Americas to Australia, attests the importance of such materials, fundamental to industries in countries with such different historical backgrounds; a true global technological phenomenon of the 20th century.

Along with the vast array of objects made from thermoset materials, the exhibition also displayed objects related to the early days of production: raw materials, moulds, vintage pictures of factories and machinery. Amazing to see the collector was able to retrieve laboratory equipment used by Leo Baekeland himself.

Also on display were items related to the commercialization of Bakelite materials and objects, like advertisements and sales samples, elements that always help put things in context and perspective.

The collection is amazing not only for the rich mix of shapes and colours, but for the pristine condition of the objects, thorough restoration carried out by the collector himself using sophisticated and careful techniques. He also works with several well-known and professional Dutch conservators specialized in wood, paper and metal to help him restore non plastic parts and related documents.



Although focused on Bakelite, the collection also benefits from the presence of objects made of materials available prior to the existence of Bakelite, like Bois Durci and Shellac; these could help giving visitors some historical perspective to the technical evolution of moulded materials. Unfortunately this potential was undermined by superficial curatorial options made by the Kunsthal staff. These decisions turned the exhibition into a very beautiful display of rare and appealing objects but lacking a deeper narrative that could lead to insights on material culture, design, industrialism in the 20th century and so on. Instead, what was left for the general public was a display of curious objects from the past; a more inquisitive audience was left with few answers. Such a pity. Nevertheless, the experience was really worth flying half way across the globe just to see it.

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