

## **Deco Bookshelf** **by Jim Sweeney**

### **BAKELITE JEWELRY**

After making a fortune selling his invention--Velox photographic paper--to Kodak, chemist Dr. Leo Baekland turned his attention to another field. In 1910, he invented a synthetic resin he called Bakelite.

This was the beginning of modern polymer science. But Bakelite is probably best known today for the jewelry, boxes and other decorative objects it could be molded into, as highlighted in "Art Deco Bakelite Jewelry and Boxes: Cubism for Everyone" by Peter and Deborah Keresztury and Nancy Schiffer (\$39.95 hardcover, Schiffer Publishing Ltd.). The book has hundreds of nicely done photos and pricing information.

The authors see Art Deco as a more populist evolution of the cutting-edge Cubist style. They call Deco "domesticated Cubism."

Bakelite immediately found uses as a substitute for amber, hard rubber and celluloid. It was cheaper to make than those materials, the authors note. It also offered some superior properties as well, such as insulation and resistance to friction.

Increasing use of cosmetics and tobacco in the first quarter of the 20th century produced a need for lots of small containers, the authors say. "Bakelite was a popular choice for these boxes because it was durable and 'new' looking to the public at large."

In 1926, the patent on Bakelite expired and other companies started making it, sometimes under other names such as Catalin. In 1938, the Bakelite Co. became the plastics division of Union Carbide Co.

Most Bakelite jewelry and boxes weren't signed or dated. Collectors tend to be attracted to form and color, the authors say. From the book's photos, it's clear that Bakelite could be molded into

smooth forms that had a pleasing sheen somewhat like lacquer, could be colored uniformly and attractively, and was versatile. The photos make it obvious why a collector would be attracted to Bakelite.

Bakelite objects could look like luxury objects or five-and-dime buys, depending on coloring and what other materials they used. Many of the boxes in this book were presentation boxes, used for presents, product demos or sales. A necklace and earrings in the book, made of chrome and red and black Bakelite, has a high-class, high-cost look.

At the other end of the scale is a necklace, bracelet and earring set consisting of green, orange and yellow Bakelite wedges. They look like fruit slices.

The mood of Bakelite objects is often set by the color. A set of boxes in the book is somber-looking in black, brown and dark red.

When Bakelite was first produced, the authors note, it had "a limited range of dark shades of brown, red, blue and black for industrial use primarily." Once the patent ran out and other companies started making it, they discovered that mixing Bakelite with other substances could produce a much broader range of colors. The book notes that the new, more colorful Bakelite became a substitute for jade, carnelian and goldstone.

A round box with three legs, seen here in black, green and ivory, had a whimsical look. But a similarly shaped box, of black Bakelite and chrome, is very elegant in style. Chrome and Bakelite seem, from the selections in this book, to have been a very common combination.

The book includes a variegated red disk clip earring. The design and appearance are timeless. It's hard to tell if it's from the 1930s, 1950s or 1990s (most of the objects in the book are from the 1930s).

One of the book's most unusual objects shows the many uses found for Bakelite. It's a group of plastic lidded boxes. A label on the underside says "This souvenir is made of the same Plastic that is used on the beautiful instrument panel of the 1941 Chrysler. It was produced in our own Plastic Department expressly for you."