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The Age of Plastics

The March 1930 issue of *Fortune* announced the “Plastics Age”. Since 1914, the value of the plastics materials had grown by a factor of fifteen. Executives expected their industry “to rank with steel in two decades”.¹ Plastics materials provide one path to examine the interactions of technology, commerce and culture that linked Modernism in the arts with the modernisation of the economy and society.

Methods of production can impede consumer acceptance. For instance, the lack of control in manufacturing delayed the adoption of kitchenware made from plastics materials. Their colours were fast only if the appropriate ingredients had been formed in the correct way. Elsewhere, dyes from bottle tops bled into consumable liquids, while the packaging of food in coloured plastics gave rise to a rash of concerns.² Hence, to map the coming to Australia of the Age of Plastics requires paying attention to the chemistry of colour, to marketing and to popular responses.³

Solid colour did not become possible in plastics until chemists could attach a colour molecule to each plastics molecule so that the colour would not scratch off, peel or bleed. The addition of pigments or dyes to resins was complicated by how each colouring agent reacted with base components. The plastics manufacturers had inherited colouring agents that had been designed for textiles, printing and paints. In need of paints specific to automobiles, Du Pont developed Duco throughout the 1920s, eventually replacing its nitro-cellulose resin with synthetics to ensure consistent colours.⁴

By 1949, some fabric firms had produced dyes specifically for rayons. Even with those aids, the technicians in charge of colouring plastics had to cope with day-to-day conditions, such as the weather, or the availability of raw materials. Post-war shortages encouraged manufacturers to substitute powders suitable for one method to another. As a result, throughout the 1950s, the search for consistency was “still largely in the pioneering stage”.⁵

¹ *Fortune*, March 1930, p. 82 & 118; the author suggested that the unbreakable nature of Beetle-brand crockery made it suitable for lunatic asylums.

² *Australian Plastics (AP)*, June 1949, p. 59; F. Bryant, *Proceedings, Plastics Convention*, 1964, no pagination.

³ *Technology in Australia*, 1988, pp. 671-714; V. E. Yarsley and E. G. Cousins, *Plastics*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1940, pp. 53-54; Lothian House in Melbourne published an Australian edition in November 1942.

⁴ Alfred P. Sloan, Jr, *My Years with General Motors*, Anchor, New York, 1972, pp. 273-74; *Australasian Engineer*, 7 November 1941, p. 32.

Du Pont Corporation underwent a glamourisation of its own in the 1930s. The du Ponts had made their nineteenth-century fortune from gunpowder before extending to powders for plastics. After Congressional hearings in 1934 revived the firm’s reputation as a merchant of death, a public relations campaign equated the corporation with “style” and “progress” in promoting plastics as the herald of a new civilization, Jeffrey L. Meikle, *American Plastic, a cultural history*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1997, pp. 133-34.

⁵ *AP*, November 1946, pp. 27-30; May 1947, p. 45; June 1949, pp. 21-25 and 56-60.

Understanding the manufacture of plastics, along with their social-cultural consequences, is invaluable for any account of the modernisation of everyday life in Australia. Plastics materials carried the explosion of colours after 1945. Before then, most of the plastics materials in use had been out of sight, or not recognised for what they were made from.⁶ Many were brown or black. Once plastics replaced linseed oil as the carrying agent in house paints in the early 1950s, the hardware industry chorused “Don’t sell paint, sell colour”. Shortly afterwards, its slogan became “Plastics are Paints and Paint is Plastics”.⁷ Yet, the glossy surfaces and sharp colours associated with plastics made it harder for buyers to shed their suspicions that the new products were surrogates, if not shoddy.

Faced with new materials, customers discriminated between products that appealed because they were the latest emblem of progress and those that betrayed the tawdriness of a synthetic. A store buyer reported in 1947 on the unpopularity of “the ‘calf’ finish on plastics for handbags. Women, they say, think it looks too much like ‘imitation leather’ and the well-dressed woman feels it is perhaps too ordinary”.⁸ At the same time, the fashion-conscious shopper welcomed clothing that was unashamedly from plastics, for instance, cheap translucent vinyl raincoats, buying more than one pastel shade to match different outfits.⁹

Although businesses sold plastics with the promise that the colour would not scratch off, fading and mismatches recurred.¹⁰ Polystyrene turned yellow in sunlight. Many of the clear tints needed for Perspex could not survive the production processes. The popularity of polythene was in inverse proportions to the range of colours that it could carry. As late as 1964, some colouring agents migrated to the surface and rubbed off.¹¹

Because of inconsistent colours and uncertain properties, plastics became the epitome of the shoddy. *Australian Plastics* in 1947 reprinted a U.K. article on synthetic fabrics as “Rubbish”.¹² In 1951, a speaker on the BBC denounced them as “beastly ... contriving”.¹³ Looking back that year on the post-war era of shortages, *Australian Plastics* admitted that the public had

bought riveted plastic baby harnesses which ripped apart, plastic patent handbags which lifted varnish from the counter, belts which stretched to ridiculous lengths, circular trays that warped and therefore wobbled, fountain pen casing that cracked at the slightest pressure – and suddenly people stopped buying ... people were inclined to judge all plastics by the poor quality of these products.¹⁴

The reputation of plastics for inferiority and unreliability persisted. A 1953 editorial confessed that “the Plastics Industry has created and is developing an anti-plastics consumer reaction ... most marked by the opposition of many housewives to the use of plastic household utensils”. Many items were said to “lack finish”. More remarkably, “too many manufacturers fabricate

⁶ Wiebe E. Bijker, *Of Bicycles, Bakelites, and Bulbs, Towards a Theory of Sociotechnical Change*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1995, p. 189; Robert Freidel, ‘Parkesine and Celluloid: The Failure and Success of the First Modern Plastic’, *History of Technology*, volume 4, Mansell, London, 1979, pp.???

⁷ *Hardware Journal*, August 1957, p. 26, September 1964, p. 36.

⁸ *AP*, October 1947, p. 17.

⁹ *AP*, April 1950, p. 18.

¹⁰ *AP*, July 1947, p. 50.

¹¹ *Proceedings, Plastics Convention*, 1964, no pagination.

¹² *AP*, February 1947, p. 19.

¹³ *AP*, March 1951, p. 47.

¹⁴ *AP*, September 1951, p. 59 Following a plunge in U.S. sales around 1948 resulting from buyer resistance to the unreliability of plastics products, *Fortune* joined an industry campaign to educate manufacturers, retailers and the public, May 1950, pp. 109ff.

plastic articles from the wrong base material".¹⁵ Not until 1963 did the industry feel confident that the public looked on its products as other than poor substitutes.¹⁶

As early as 1949, *Australian Plastics* regretted that plastics materials had been over-rated by "years of 'glamour' misreporting".¹⁷ Yet few industries remained more involved in self-glamourisation than plastics. Beutron introduced pearl-like buttons as "Glamour Types".¹⁸ Marketers announced polystyrene as the "'general maid' of the plastics domestic staff. You will find it in your 'glamour' kitchen".¹⁹

Copy-writers supplied traders with the phrases to make the substitutes sound more genuine than the real things. Du Pont, for example, introduced Nylon as "Art Silk". That term deflected attention from the newcomer's being a substitute for silk towards the thought that an artificial was more aesthetic than the natural alternative.²⁰

Coloured plastics promised to add "glamour" to spectacle frames where metal or bakelite had blighted feminine charm. Before the war, importers had stocked perhaps six styles of frame, while an optician held only three. In the late 1940s, society women were buying more than one pair, donning black or white for "evening ensembles". By 1953, a few Melbourne women were wearing spectacle frames

tinselled and in some few cases studded with semi-precious stones. This may mean that a new European vogue is arriving. For some time, France and Italy have been putting glamour into spectacles to good appearance (and business) effect.²¹

Decorated sunglasses soon came in pastel shades.²² By 1956, styles were turning over annually, a blessing for jewellers.²³

Jewel box

Jewellers and watchmakers typified small business with its ethos of individualism and penchant for fixing prices. They defined their stock by its quality: Swiss watches, Waterman pens, Crown Derby China, Waterford crystal and Irish linen. More Australians purchased these items than collected oil paintings. The proprietors saw themselves as craftsmen who could design jewellery and repair intricate mechanisms. Their livelihood depended on the trust of repeat customers who appreciated value more than a bargain, and sought service rather than speed. Snobbery was at a premium on both sides of the counter.

¹⁵ *AP*, January 1953, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Hardware Journal*, March 1963, p. 36; November 1965, p. 5.

¹⁷ *AP*, February 1949, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Draper of Australia*, July 1951, p. 54.

¹⁹ *Practical Plastics*, July 1957, p. 8.

²⁰ Susannah Handley, *Nylon, The Manmade Fashion Revolution*, Bloomsbury, London, 1999, pp. 24-27; Regina Lee Blaszczyk, 'Styling Synthetics: DuPont's Marketing of Fabrics and Fashions in Postwar America', *The Business History Review*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2006, pp. 485-528.

²¹ *Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker (CJW)*, 10 February 1953, p. 155. Custom-made frames came from a Stuttgart workshop, *AWW*, 5 June 1954, p. 17.

²² *CJW*, November 1955, p. 90 and January 1956, p. 9. This change put indenters at risk of being stuck with expensive items.

²³ *CJW*, January 1956, p. 116. Her tinselled bat-wings did not appear until she approached Damehood. Mrs Norm Everage stuck to the bland two-tone pairs she had favoured from Moonee Ponds to Highett.

As purveyors of quality merchandise, jewellers held a lien over the Good, the True and the Beautiful, despising the shoddy, resisting Jazz and chic as the standardised mass, and even holding aloof from glamour. Nonetheless, needs must. High-mindedness could not outlast the drop of sales during the 1930s depression. Instead of disparaging imitations as “shoddy”, jewellers dignified “artificial” items with the appellation “costume”,²⁴ a near-homonym for “custom”, which had required the creative setting of precious stones. The copy-writers were turning diamantes into diamonds, paste into pearls. This dodge could sustain turnover but did not bring in the same rate of profit as had selling the real thing.

The August 1946 issue of the *Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker* had welcomed plastics as a medium for artists but denounced jewellery fashioned from plastics as “Barbaric Baubees”.²⁵ A columnist praised busts made out of plastics and “in colours ranging through ruby, emerald green, pale lemon and amber”. These prototypes from a manufacturing jeweller were “an achievement that may be of the front rank importance in the history both of art and jewellery manufacture”. Expensive “figurines of Egyptian influence” represented “fascinating possibilities in modernistic decoration and, to the artist, a new range in dynamics”.²⁶ Such artworks promised an expansion of skill and sales. Jewellery out of plastics threatened both.²⁷

The gentility of the jewellers’ trade was to suffer worse indignities. After the Chifley Labor government appointed one its own, Bill McKell, as the King’s man, the *Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker* had all its prejudices confirmed by the Governor-General designate who, instead of using the traditional quill, pulled a fountain pen from his suit pocket to sign the Oath of Office.²⁸ At least he did not use a ballpoint.

Before long, Biro’s were displacing fountain pens, to be sold at newsagencies by the fistful.²⁹ The well-off began to discard cheaper watches and fountain pens instead bringing them back for servicing, which could cost more than a replacement. Advertisements for Gaytime’s Diamante tiaras and “Mother” broaches, Australiana spoons, Mexicana ceramics and poker-worked mulga were taking up more shelf space and paying for most of the pages in the *Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker*. Bone china and crystal faced competition from plastics and then Noritake.³⁰

Colour deepened the challenge from alternatives to traditional stocks.³¹ Imitation pearls in green, blue, coffee and gunmetal tones became popular during 1949.³² That year, the *Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker* condemned a “craze” for “jazz crockery”, with its “streaks of forked lightning ... emblazoned in chrome”.³³ The Director of the National Jewellers’ Association reported on British trends for 1950:

Colour is the key to many of the most exciting and widespread trends in jewel fashions in Britain to-day.... This all for colour, with its consequent demand for semi-precious stones, is not confined to any particular piece of jewellery or style.

²⁴ *CJW*, December 1955, p. 190.

From 1915, two of the larger Sydney firms backed the posh-ist trade monthly in Australia, *The Commonwealth Jeweller and Watchmaker*. Its paper stock, advertisements and colour illustrations rivalled those of *The Home* until the depression reduced its size. Unlike *The Home*, it survived the war to expand.

²⁵ *CJW*, August 1946, p. 57.

²⁶ *CJW*, August 1946, p. 108.

²⁷ *Australian Women’s Weekly (AWW)*, 5 June 1954, p. 17.

²⁸ *CJW*, May 1947, p. 106.

²⁹ See my article in *Age*, Review, 12 July 2003, p. 2.

³⁰ *CJW*, August 1954, p. 158; November 1954, p. 156H.

³¹ *AP*, November 1947, p. 27.

³² *CJW*, June 1949, p. 158.

³³ *CJW*, November 1949, p. 116.

The appeal of colour boosted a demand for reproductions of Eighteenth-century parures “in silver and coloured and white ‘diamond-set’ paste”.³⁴ This combination of costume jewellery with replicas made from synthetic materials precipitated a reappraisal of the value of the modern among the trade, and a reaction against its acceptance.

One Melbourne jeweller drew comfort from the demand for “the cheaper costume jewellery” by arguing that its buyers “have uncovered a new market”:

they certainly have not reduced demand for the quality products upon which Australian manufacturers have specialised ... These cheaper, imported lines look what they are: bright and showy, cute and attractive – but cheap. Those who wear them do not pretend they are real! This jewellery is not even imitation jewellery. It is a thing on its own. Imitation jewellery suggests that there may be some doubt as to whether it is real or only looks like being real.

Then again, quite a lot of people who own valuable jewellery are buying and wearing these cheap, shiny, pretty pieces for “Knock about” use, when they would never in any circumstances be wearing their valuable jewellery. This cheaper costume jewellery has caught the feminine fancy because it is “amusing”.

Such brooches are truly the toys of the jewellery world – certainly not a serious substitute for the real thing.³⁵

The grain of truth in that conclusion could not reverse the redirection of merchandising towards glamourising the synthetic. Plastic were media for the reeducation of taste

As more people acquired greater discretionary income, they did not adopt the spending patterns of the pre-1940 well-to-do. Customers had new demands on their funds from purchasing white goods and motor cars. They were also more reluctant to wait. Jewellery had been a cash business, with even lay-bys frowned on. In 1953, a spokesman for the jewellers observed that they and their traditional clients agreed that Time Payment was “degrading”.³⁶ Another columnist argued that hire purchase “would definitely lower the prestige and status of the watchmaker and jeweller in the eyes of the public”. He advocated the “more British and conservative methods of pay as you buy”.³⁷ The fear was that hire purchase would associate jewellers with pawnbrokers.³⁸ Still, coded anti-Semitism sold no diamonds. The trade had to accept that credit encouraged higher-priced purchases, for example, sterling silver rather than EPNS.³⁹

Some jewellers went on hoping for the return of a clientele who could afford the full price in advance, and in cash, preferably guineas.⁴⁰ They held that credit doubly devalued money, first, by stimulating inflation and, secondly, by detaching its purchasing power from the morality of thrift and hard work. This band of craftsmen saw themselves as a redoubt for the good, the true and the beautiful, in revolt against the mass.

To overcome consumer resistance to the shoddy, marketers inscribed a vocabulary of taste for their age of standardised production and mass consumption. While the Soviets were

³⁴ *CJW*, October 1950, p. 170.

³⁵ *CJW*, November 1950, p. 112.

³⁶ *CJW*, August 1953, pp. 38-39.

³⁷ *CJW*, October 1953, p. 98; he further feared that the “floating population of New Australians” would create bad debts: “Imagine the difficulty of trying to keep trace of that particular type of client, the spelling of the names of these people alone constitutes a nightmare”.

³⁸ *CJW*, September 1959, p. 132.

³⁹ *CJW*, June 1954, p. 182.

⁴⁰ *CJW*, January 1958, p. 40E.

politicising aesthetics and the Nazis aestheticising politics, the marketers went one better by aestheticising commerce and commodifying aesthetics.⁴¹

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1973, p. 244. The latter aspect is not considered here, but the Duveen-Berenson connection is a starting point.