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Student contributors include: History: James Scribner III, Michael Spagnola, Jarae Jones, Theodore Rabe, Samantha Waldvogel Design: Courtney Cahoon

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Optimism in the Early Age of Plastics 1920s-1950s

James Scribner III, Michael Spagnola, Jarae Jones, Theodore Rabe, Samantha Waldvogel
The College at Brockport, State University of New York

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Abstract

The changes of uses and views of plastics from the 1920s-1950s.
Optimism in the Early Age of Plastics 1920s – 1950s

IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY, new and synthetic materials began to change the way luxury and household items were produced. Celluloid was the most popular plastic at the time. Cheap durable, and moldable, it could be colored to mimic scarce and precious materials. Celluloid replaced elephant ivory in billiard balls, toothpick holders in combs and eye glass frames, and whale bone in women's corsets and men's brassieres.

Pressure on these endangered animals declined at the same time that people gained wider access to affordable consumer goods. In the early 20th century, another revolutionary plastic— Bakelite—gained widespread use in the electrical industry as well as for radio and telephone casings, kitchenware, toys and jewelry.

THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY and product advertisers promoted rigid thermostetting plastics like Celluloid and Bakelite as democratizing mass consumption for hard working Americans. As new thermostetics were invented in the early 20th century, these cheaper and more flexible materials inspired many to imagine a utopian age of mass American consumerism. This was even true during the Great Depression.

as ads used brilliantly colored and attractively styled plastic goods to highlight the growth of American industry and capitalism as well as the promise of a revived national economy. Advertisers sometimes targeted men when featuring plastic tools, but usually marketed products to women—assuming they were homemakers excited by celluloid food wrap, plastic seal covers, and vinyl kitchen countertops.

DURING THE SECOND World War, production expanded as plastics offered alternatives for scarce metals and other natural substances needed for war. New plastics appeared in military equipment—Plastic airplane windshields and bomber windows; nylon parachute cords and compared to soldiers’ field kits. After aiding soldiers fighting in the field and supplementing rationed goods available to homefront families, plastics became even more common in all corners of American life in the 1950s. As production expanded dramatically, the plastics industry and media optimistically declared the coming of a “Plastic Age” and even celebrated the coming of a “Throwaway Society” in which people dressed in synthetic clothing, furnished their homes with plastic items, and purchased goods packaged in plastic.