

The Best of Bakelite



Vintage jewelry lovers—including Ree—are obsessed with this unique type of plastic.

The chemist Leo Baekeland didn't have accessories in mind when he invented the first synthetic plastic, Bakelite, in 1907. The material was intended for more practical purposes, like electrical insulation. But by the 1920s, jewelry makers discovered how easily Bakelite could be dyed, molded and carved—and a fantastic accessory craze was born. Women everywhere started wearing Bakelite earrings and dress clips, and stacking Bakelite bangles from wrist to elbow. Jewelry production stopped in the 1950s when experts realized that the chemicals used to make it were dangerous to inhale, so there's a finite amount of Bakelite left to go around—and demand for it just keeps growing. Ree became a fan in the '80s. "I fell in love with Bakelite flatware," she says. "The bright colors like cherry red and butterscotch are just perfection." Here are some tips on starting your own collection.

These fun pretty bracelets are collectors' items!

PHOTO: KEVIN SWEENEY/STUDIO D; STYLING: ANNE WLAYSEWSKI

So You Want to Be a Collector?

Read this before you buy a piece of Bakelite.

Brand names don't matter

When Leo Baekeland's patent expired in 1927, other companies started producing similar plastics under different trade names, including Catalin and Marblette. Most collectors use Bakelite as a catchall term for the category.

Beware of "fakelite"

The rise of Bakelite collecting in the 1990s created a market for fakelite: jewelry made overseas from cheap plastics and marketed as vintage Bakelite. Use these tricks to help identify the real stuff.

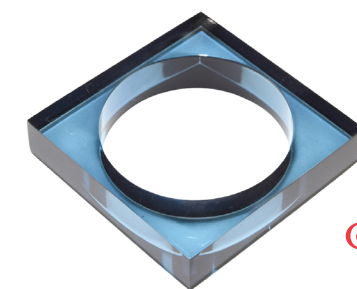
- Hold the piece in your palm. It should feel heavier than other vintage plastics, like celluloid and Lucite.
- Run the piece under very hot water or vigorously rub the surface with your thumb. When heated, Bakelite releases a distinct chemical odor.
- Gently rub the piece with a cotton swab dipped in Simichrome Polish or Formula 409 all-purpose cleaner. Genuine Bakelite will usually leave behind a yellow residue.

Start simple

Bakelite expert Karima Parry suggests building an affordable base for your collection: Buy unadorned pieces first before springing for pricier two-tone, dotted or carved ones.

Look in unexpected places

Keep an eye out for Bakelite treasures mixed in with cheap flatware and jewelry at yard sales and vintage stores. Your mom or grandmother might even own a valuable piece without knowing it! Check Etsy and eBay, too; they're both reliably stocked with Bakelite, though you'll likely pay a little more.



Lucite Square Bangle in Peacock, \$38; inkalloy.com

Resin Hoop Earrings, \$30; bodenusa.com



New Takes on Bakelite

One of the year's biggest fashion trends, resin jewelry, is a nod to retro plastics like Bakelite.

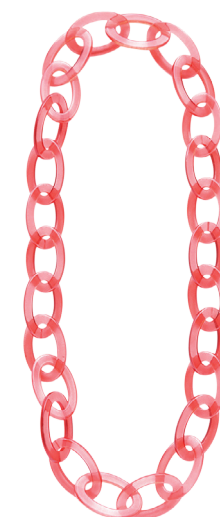
Madewell Ali Acetate Earrings in Shell Tort, \$22; shopbop.com



Simple Cuff in Teal Confetti, \$28; shopbaleen.com



Lucite Chain Necklace in Watermelon, \$50; inkalloy.com



Ask the Expert



When designer and jewelry historian Kim DeWitt Paff sold a set of her grandmother's Bakelite bracelets on eBay in the 1990s,

she instantly had regrets. "I started looking for replacements and just kept buying," she says. Now she owns more than 250 bracelets (including the ones we photographed for this story) and an online shop, kimlovesvintage.com. We talked to Kim about her obsession.

What's something unexpected you've learned about Bakelite?

The chemical composition has made the colors change over time. A piece that was originally light blue is probably dark or olive green now; a pink one might be orange. To me, the matured colors can be much prettier.

How do you store your collection?

I wear it! I have a shelf in my room where I keep all the Bakelite that I wear on a regular basis—bracelets, pins, earrings and necklaces.

How do you know you're buying authentic pieces?

Do your homework. Buy in person from someone you trust, or, if you're shopping online, read the reviews to make sure the seller is reputable. Also keep an eye out for "contemporary artisan Bakelite" or "designer Bakelite": These pieces are made with vintage material but the designs are new and they should be labeled that way.

Any advice for Bakelite newbies?

Buy the things that make your heart skip a beat. If you see something you love, don't wait to buy it, or someone else will!

A Taste of Bakelite

Bakelite bangles come in a spectrum of colors—but don't call them red, yellow or green. Collectors adopted quirkier names in the 1990s, like these, inspired by food.



❖ Creamed Corn ❖



❖ Pineapple ❖



❖ Apple Juice ❖



❖ Pumpkin ❖



❖ Butterscotch ❖

Ree's fave!



❖ Melon ❖



❖ Orangeade ❖



❖ Orange Creamsicle ❖



❖ Orange ❖



❖ Tomato ❖

Ree's fave!



❖ Cherry ❖



❖ Paprika ❖



❖ Lime ❖



❖ Pea Soup ❖



❖ Olive ❖



❖ Spinach ❖



❖ Root Beer ❖



❖ Chocolate ❖



❖ Dark Chocolate ❖



❖ Licorice ❖

KEVIN SWEENEY/STUDIO D.

What's It Worth?

Bakelite was cheap and easy to mass-produce, so it became the go-to material for many items other than jewelry. In fact, Leo Baekeland marketed it as “the material of a thousand uses.” Check out these collectibles.

WORTH \$500

Dress clip
Flashy rhinestone dress clips were must-haves in the 1930s, but cheaper, whimsical Bakelite designs like this showed up in the '40s. Some were inspired by foods, like peas and cherries.



WORTH \$100

Mah-jongg tiles

Bakelite replaced ivory-based billiard balls in the 1920s and soon showed up in other game pieces like chessmen, poker chips and these mah-jongg tiles from the 1940s.



WORTH \$24

Flatware set
Bakelite is heat-resistant, so it became a popular material in the kitchen. Single pieces aren't worth a lot, but complete sets have fetched as much as \$600.



WORTH \$1,937

High heels
At the height of its popularity, Bakelite could be found in dime stores as well as high-end department stores. These Etienne shoes from 1935 have Bakelite heels.



WORTH \$175

Earrings
Quarter-size Bakelite studs were popular everyday earrings and are easier to find than dangling statement earrings like these.



WORTH \$3,000

Emerson Tombstone radio
During the 1930s, Emerson sold tombstone-shaped Catalin radios in a variety of colors, including this rare swirled green. Though stylish, Catalin radios easily cracked, so they soon became obsolete.



WORTH \$1,500

Fada Bullet radio
In the 1920s, companies started replacing costly wooden radio cabinets with Bakelite. If you're a collector, this iconic Catalin model is the one to have, says owner Phil Bausch.



WORTH \$200

Poker chips and caddy
These poker chips and the caddy are made of Catalin. Less common blue versions can sell for as much as \$1,400.

WORTH \$254,660

Rolex watch

The GMT-Master 6542, introduced in 1954, is one of the most coveted Rolex models. This one, auctioned by Sotheby's last year, contains the original Bakelite bezel insert (the company soon switched to aluminum), so it's particularly valuable.

