

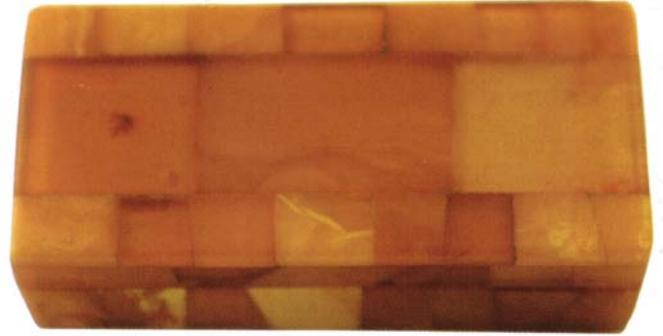
Stamp Boxes and Cases Made of Plastic Material

The definition of “plastic” used here is “a material which can be moulded or shaped into different forms under pressure and/or heat”. This can embrace materials which can be considered natural (such as amber, bone, horn and tortoiseshell) as well as those which are man-made synthetics (such as papier mâché, bois durci, vulcanite, celluloid).

This is a report of a talk on the various types of plastic, illustrated with examples of stamp boxes and cases made of those materials. The talk followed the order of materials by age used by Sylvia Katz in her Shire Album book *Early Plastics*.

Amber

The talk started with natural materials which can be moulded, beginning with amber. This is a fossilised resin derived from trees – it is thermoplastic, which means it can be resoftened and remoulded many times. An example of an amber box (wooden base with applied amber panels) had been in the “Paris Collection”, auctioned by Christie’s in 2002.



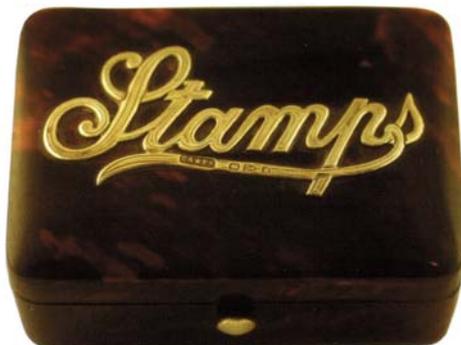
European wooden box decorated on lid and sides with Amber with three compartments.

Bone, Horn and Tortoiseshell

Bone, Horn and Tortoiseshell are also thermoplastic – they are animal materials, based on the protein Keratin, that have been worked by man since prehistoric times.

A lovely example of a Japanese two-compartment bone box was shown, decorated in the Shibuya technique which fashions inlays of mother-of-pearl and coloured stones into motifs of flowers, branches or butterflies. Plain bone boxes have also survived, as have those with fishing scenes decorating their lids, which were most probably made in Dieppe, where ivory and bone articles have been manufactured since the 15th century. Although there are similarities in appearance of ivory and bone, one way to distinguish them is that ivory is whiter and cooler to the touch than bone. Also, bone tends to have flecks of slightly darker colour (blood?).

A box made entirely of pressed tortoiseshell was displayed, but such construction is not very robust and most stamp boxes have wooden carcasses clad in tortoiseshell. The finest of these were made by Lund and we saw two different examples marked Lund 57 Cornhill, London EC address in the characteristic ivory facing above the catches and both had satin wood sloped compartments inside. The Lund family is known to have traded from 57 Cornhill from 1841 to 1913 and one can but guess that the stamp boxes were made sometime between 1860 and the end of the 19th century.



English wooden box decorated on lid and sides with Tortoiseshell and the word 'Stamps' set on lid in silver, hallmarked 1895 with two compartments.

Another type of tortoiseshell stamp box has the word “Stamps” fashioned in silver inlaid in the lid. An example of a two-compartment box of this latter type was shown, with the silver hallmarked for Saunders & Shepherd at Chester in 1912.

Papier Mâché

Papier mâché has a long history of manufacture and decoration in different countries. It is a press-moulded product made from cellulose and glue which is oven-cured. Many of us will have made a simple version of this as schoolchildren, using old newspaper and paste, and subsequently painting the moulded result. In France, this material was fashioned into stamp boxes, with hinged lids and often two, three or four compartments. These are nearly always lacquered in black, with decorations on the lid ranging from the word “Timbres” to the



Russian papier mâché with hand painted lid showing three ladies being driven in a “Troika” three horse-drawn carriage with three compartments for stamps.



French papier mâché with four early 20th century stamps set on lid and postal regulations and rates in gilt lettering on sides and base. Marked ‘GD-Paris-depose’ with four compartments for stamps.

actual stamps and postal rates current at the time of box manufacture. Examples of these boxes were available, as was a more unusual one in grey with all-over decoration and a cute painting of a child painting. Papier mâché boxes made in Russia are also nearly always lacquered in black on the outside, but in a rich red on the interior. A typical lid is decorated with an oil-painted scene of the classic Troika. Papier mâché boxes are also made in other countries, and the chinoiserie craze led to boxes produced with all over decoration, and which could have been made in China or England.

Bois durci

Bois durci is made from wood flour and egg or blood albumen moulded under heat and very high pressure. This is, perhaps, the first true plastic material – the process was patented in 1855 by Lepage, then bought by Latry who made medallions etc in Paris to the 1880s. Production continued in Sezanne from 1887 to 1914 by the Arnoult family. The manufacture of bois durci died out in 1926.



Classic bois durci box made in Sezanne, France with four compartments.

Chinese Lacquer

Chinese Lacquer is natural lac (resin), tapped from rhus (sumac) trees, mixed with coloured pigment, built up in layers on metal or wood stamp boxes, and then carved. Bright red boxes are made using a cinnabar pigment and the white is derived from white lead. Other colours include dark green and burgundy. Examples of this type of stamp box also illustrate the fashion for chinoiserie.

Vulcanite, Shellac and Gutta Percha

Vulcanite is rubber vulcanised with sulphur to become hard rubber. Shellac is derived from the secretion of the beetle *coccus lacca* – made into a very hard material with fillers such as slate (eg early gramophone records). A circular stamp box thought to be made from shellac was shown – it was a trade give-away from Massachusetts Life Association, with a photograph of their president on the lid and a calendar for 1897. It was a good quality product, with a very fine thread by which the lid screws onto the base of the box. Recently, another very similar box has been offered for sale in USA but described as being made from Gutta Percha, and, incidentally, called an “Oreo case” Gutta Percha is another completely natural plastic scraped by hand from Palaquium trees in Malaya. After processing it could be press moulded and was used for both decorative and utilitarian items. However, its most important use was for electrical insulation. Gutta Percha was invaluable as the insulation of the earliest submarine telegraph cables for which purpose it was unrivalled for nearly a hundred years.

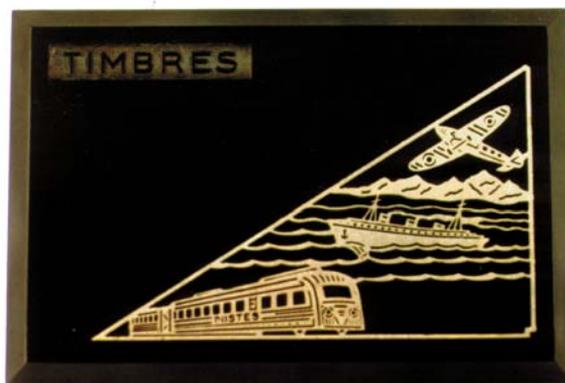
Determining which material is which has its problems. *Early Plastics* contains a brief guide for some of the materials based on applying a hot pin to the object but not everyone wants to subject their treasures to this treatment! Collecting together tatty examples of little value or even buying broken items could be a useful project for the future, with a view to then commissioning a plastics chemist to test the materials .

Celluloid

Celluloid was invented by Alexander Parkes in Birmingham in 1862 and called “Parkesine”. This material is made by dissolving cotton fibres or wood flour in nitric and sulphuric acids and plasticising it with oils including camphor. It was further developed by others and patented in 1869 as “Celluloid” but its chemical name is cellulose nitrate. Other trade names include Xylonite, Bostonite, Ivorine and French Ivory. It could be extruded and its best-known uses were for cine film and table tennis balls! Flammability was always a problem with this material but it survived in use until after the Second World War.

A variety of early boxes were made in celluloid, their construction indicating that the sheets of this material would have been

difficult to form or mould. The sheets could be mounted onto a cardboard base. Panels of celluloid could be pressed out with a design of flowers and hand-painted. One box has panels sewn onto card – another has the word “Timbres” stitched on the lid panel and another has “Postziegels” punched out. These must have been made in France and the Netherlands respectively, while one made for Queen Victoria’s 1887 Jubilee would have been made in England. Its construction is also different as the sides have been glued into corner posts. Many French ivory boxes have survived and these were probably all made in the Dieppe area. Some have an integral hinge on the lid. A variety of decoration was used – “Stamps” in gold on the lid, or etched floral decoration, for example, while many have fishing scenes and the names of French channel ports. More unusual, but of similar construction, is one with an applied Mother of Pearl panel with carved fisherman which is marked Calais. Celluloid can also be made to look like tortoiseshell – examples illustrating this were a case with metal fittings and



French Bakelite in Art Deco style. Inscribed inside 'Laboratoires du Docteur Zizine' with list of his medicaments for the relief of digestive disorders. (10 sloped compartments)



American Celluloid stamp wallet advertising the 'Buckeye' Boiler Skimmer. Includes calendar for 1913 and USA foreign postage rates.

a magic (puzzle) wallet, with a painting of a crinoline lady with hollyhocks on the front. Imitation tortoiseshell can be quite realistic but just lacks the mottled ripple of the real thing. Sheet celluloid was also made into small

pocket cases – mainly in the USA but there were also some English examples available. Many of these were made for insurance companies and must have been trade give-aways. Some American ones contain waxed pages and calendars around 1906.



A souvenir French box fabricated from Celluloid, sometimes called 'Dieppe Ivory', with, fishing scene etched on brown tinted lid and inscribed 'Cherbourg' with four compartments.

Cellulose acetate and Casein

Cellulose acetate, which could be injection moulded and was non-flammable, was developed early in the twentieth century. In the same period, Casein also came onto the market. It was made from milk and lactic acid and, as with celluloid, any colour could be achieved. Under the trade name "Erinoid", it became popular for making buttons and colourful fountain pen barrels. It is possible that some of the mottled magic (puzzle) stamp cases might have been made from casein rather than celluloid.



'Magic Wallet' with iridescent Celluloid (or Casein) multi coloured covers.

Bakelite

Phenolic (phenol formaldehyde) was the first totally man-made plastic, patented in 1907, and best known by the trade name "Bakelite". Moulded under heat and pressure, it is a thermosetting material with colours limited to dark shades and the best-known example of its use is probably the standard old black telephone. One example was of a French-made 10 compartment black stamp box – late 1930s – and offered for sale by a manufacturer of digestive pills, Dr Zizine. It was noted that the quality of the mouldings on this box is superb.



Bakelite stamp box with advertising slogan 'Cigarettes BALTO', a French brand, inscribed on inside of lid with four compartments.

Polyethylene

Polyethylene is a more modern material, first made in the 1940s and best known under the trade name polythene. On show was a two-compartment box in this material, with a neat catch on each compartment, well-made by the Tupperware company – although the compartments could indeed well hold stamps, it had probably been made as a pill box!

Polystyrene

The most recent example of a box/case made in man-made plastic was a miniature suit-case (probably made of Polystyrene) decorated in bright blue – a souvenir item from the Musée de la Poste in Paris and dating from the 1990s.

Reference: Early Plastics by Sylvia Katz, published by Shire Publications Ltd. ISBN 085263 790 X.