

# Plastic Days

MATERIALS AND DESIGN

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1 **Aurora vase**, about 1960, Italy, polypropylene

2 **Cigarette case**, about 1920, France, cellulose nitrate

3 **Brush**, about 1950, Bristle, England, cellulose triacetate

4 **Lamp**, about 1920, France, cellulose nitrate

5 **Cocktail set**, about 1930, England, casein formaldehyde (*Erinoid* or *Galalith*)

6 **Cigarette case**, about 1920, England, cellulose nitrate

7 **Tucano lamp**, about 1960, Old Timer Ferrari, Italy, nylon 6, polystyrene

# Plastic Days

## MATERIALS AND DESIGN

The exhibition *Plastic Days*, curated by Cecilia Cecchini and Marco Petroni, arises from the analysis and the selection of about 600 items from Fondazione Plart, Plastiche e Arte di Maria Pia Incutti-Paliotto's collection, and it is made up like an original narration of the big various family of plastic materials. A witness which tells about the transformations occurred in the last 150 years of history and which reveals the innermost nature of modernity and of the mutations that marked the domestic and cultural landscape in which we are immersed. Plastic becomes a magnifying glass focused on the social and economical dynamics of our time.

The items on display represent a well-structured selection of quite rare artefacts from all around the world: first production series, mass production items by famous or anonymous designers. This selection is not intended to offer an accurate reconstruction of the history of plastic materials, but to make up an exhibition which can outline a particular reading path of our time, reinterpreted through a multidisciplinary approach between design, art and custom.

A wide look, witnessed by contributions in the catalogue by Alba Cappellieri, Laura Cherubini, Stefano Catucci, Gianluigi Ricuperati, Thea van Oosten and Anna Laganà.

The exhibition path is completed by interviews with: Andrea Branzi, Donato D'Urbino, Paolo Lomazzi, Alessandro Mendini, Maurizio Montalti/Officina Corpuscoli, Andrea Trimarchi e Simone Farresin/Studio Formafantasma, Gaetano Pesce and Maria Pia Incutti, collector and president of Fondazione Plart.



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## Sections of the Exhibition

Main characteristics and list of the most significant items

The exhibition is organized by thematic macro-areas crossing the history of plastics: from pre-synthetic ones, produced in the XIX century and characterized by an almost alchemical flavour, to more contemporary, marked by the aspiration to get free from the dependence on oil, through Made in Italy plastics, Moplen, toys, international design icons and everyday domestic items once belonging to most families.

The section **Pre-synthetic Plastic: Between Imitation and New Identity** offers an insight into the early plastics manufactured from the 1850s and fruit of ingenious combinations. The exhibition showcases rare and valuable objects of exceptional beauty, made of bois durci, galalith or Erinoid, cellulose nitrate.

**Bakelite: the First Synthetic Plastic** is the wide section dedicated to the resin made from phenol-formaldehyde by Belgian chemist Leo Baekland in 1907, a light material, insulating and resistant to high temperatures. Such characteristics made it perfect for electric devices, small household appliances, speakers, radio sets and not only. This section of the exhibition presents also boxes, lamps, scales, bottles, tie presses, watches, all of them manufactured with phenolic or ureic resins. In the section focused on **Made in Italy Innovation: from Moplen to Golden Age of Design**

on display are items produced with different kinds of plastic between the 1950s and the 1970s, which witness how these materials allowed Made in Italy design to create objects of great functionality, which decorated most Italian homes and whose paternity is not known, as well as unequalled icons part of our collective imaginary. Among the latter, some items produced by Gufram, historic company from Turin which, using especially expanded polyurethane, started producing seatings of revolutionary aesthetics, which winked at Pop Art using codes

8 **Radio set**, about 1940, Zenith Radio Corp., USA, phenolic resin

9 **Enrico Baj**, Character, Italy, acrylic resin

10 **Handbag**, about 1950, Ascot Handbags, USA, polymethyl methacrylate

11 **Box**, about 1930, England, polymethyl methacrylate

12 **Microphone**, about 1940, USA, phenolic resin

13 **Fan**, about 1920, France, cellulose nitrate

of expression such as out of scale and bright synthetic colours. The exhibition includes also some items that are part of first series subsequently gone into production.

A wide sampling of sound diffusion and reproduction devices brings to life – in the section **The Sounds of Plastic** – a sequence of sounds produced by early radio sets, portable record players, primordial boosters and some musical instruments that generate an inevitable nostalgic feeling.

The precious and rare face of these materials is revealed by the display of combs, compacts, cigarette holders, brooches, jewels and fans in the section **Plastic Vanity**, in order to arouse amazement and incredulity in the visitors who, thanks to the exposition of these historical objects of refined features, will be surprised by a precious world of lacquer, gold, ivory, enamel, gem and cristal wares, all of them produced with plastics. Their value is showed also thanks to the display of contemporary items, manufactured using the most advanced production techniques between handicraft and industry, like Andrea Branzi's prototypes of combs, or using recycled plastics, like Wanda Romano's jewels.

The section **Plastic Play** illustrates how polymers have been largely used also to produce extremely various toys, a selection of which is on display.

The exhibition ends with the section **Contemporary Alchemies** which includes two projects carried out for Fondazione Plart respectively by Studio Formafantasma and Maurizio Montalti/Officina Corpuscoli, which investigate the possible future of these materials in a more sustainable and oil-free perspective.



# Short History of Plastics

History of plastic is a relatively short one, but fascinating and engaging, characterized by both successes and failures, haphazard discoveries, rivalries between researchers, patented and copied experiments. It's the history, beginning in early decades of the XIX century, of the research of new materials developed, in an almost alchemical way, by modifying natural polymers, first of all natural rubber. American inventor Charles Goodyear in 1839 developed vulcanized rubber, a mixture of vegetable latex with different levels of sulphur. The result was an elastic and resilient material which, unlike natural rubber used until then, did not become sticky with the heat and hard with the cold.

Until the early XX century, there was a succession of new semisynthetic materials, produced by reacting different matters: gutta-percha, bois durci, cellulose nitrate... One of the most important materials is Parkesine, developed by English inventor Alexander Parkes from cellulose nitrate added with naphthalene and camphor. The first objects produced with this material were successfully presented at 1862 International Exhibition in London.

14 **Charles Goodyear**,  
*inventor of vulcanized rubber*

15 **Low relief**, 1860 - 1890,  
England,  
*bois durci*

16 **Alexander Parkes**,  
*inventor of Parkesine*

17 **Leo Baekeland**,  
*inventor of Bakelite*

18 **Laminés**,  
*melamine resins*

19 **Polyurethane**

20 **Giulio Natta**,  
*inventor of Moplen*

21 **Bottles**,  
*polyethylene terephthalate (PET)*

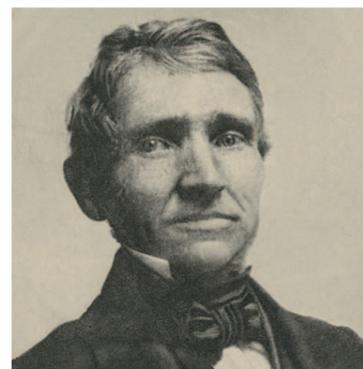
22 **Moscardino**, multipurpose piece of cutlery, 2000,  
*designers Giulio Iachetti and Matteo Ragni, Pandora Design, Italy.*  
*The most famous item produced with bioplastics, winner of XIX Compasso d'Oro*

allowed the creation of new forms and new aesthetics.

In 1954, Giulio Natta, professor at Milan's Politecnico, developed isotactic polypropylene, commercialized as Moplen, which earned him the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1963 – with Karl Ziegler. The versatility of this new material – light, heat-proof, in-frangible, colourable, easily workable and inexpensive – in a few years made it become the everyday material and opened the door to new aesthetics pursued in the following decades also thanks to the great masters of Italian design.

Polypropylene is the forerunner of contemporary plastics, ever more efficient and versatile, hundreds of which are patented every year.

In the wake of environment pollution and limitation of materials from non renewable sources like oil, from which synthetical plastics are developed, more recent researches are flourishing with the aim to manufacture "green plastics", produced with raw materials derived from renewable sources.



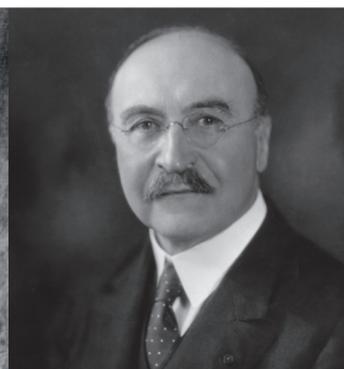
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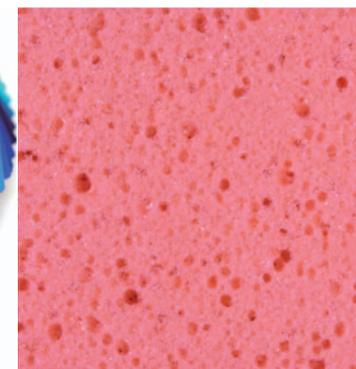
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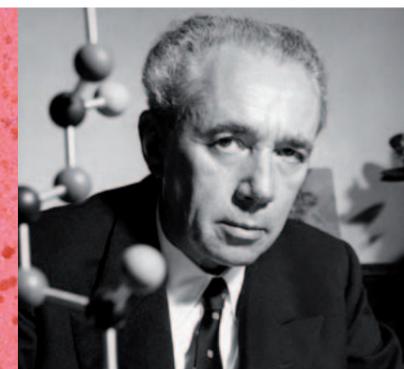
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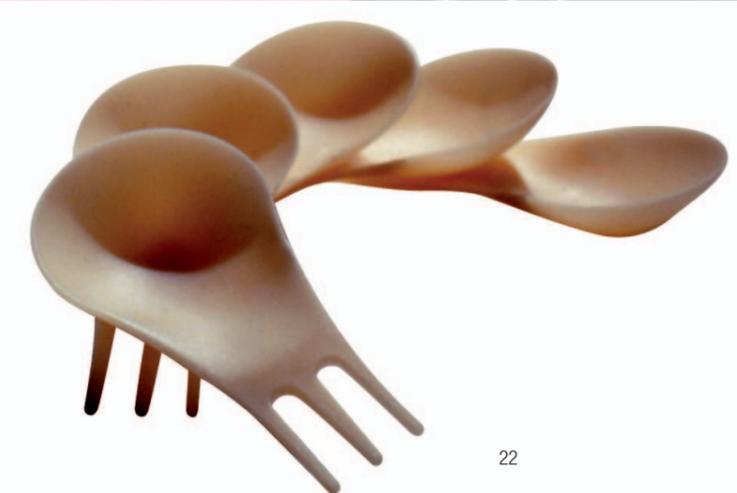
And then came celluloid, developed in 1869 by young American typographer John Westley Hyatt, after numerous attempts to produce "artificial ivory" for a contest published by a New York billiard ball factory which put up as a prize 10.000 dollars to be awarded to anyone who would find a material which could replace elephant ivory, the only material available for that purpose.

In 1907 Leo Baekeland, who is considered the father of plastics, developed Bakelite, a phenolic resin which can be considered the first synthetic plastic. This new material, at first characterized by brown/black colour, opened the door to modern plastics. It met a huge success and, thanks to its excellent insulating characteristics, was massively used also to manufacture electrical devices, small household appliances and radio sets. Later, phenolic and ureic resins were produced also in light colours, an innovation that further widened their application.

In the following years, new materials, in many cases developed for war purpose, were unceasingly placed on the market: cellophane, polyethylene, PVC, polyurethane, nylon, PET, all materials which were later used to substitute wood, metals, ceramic and



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## Fondazione Plart, Plastiche e Arte di Maria Pia Incutti-Palio

Fondazione Plart's collection of plastic works and objects is made up of about 1800 artefacts, which makes it one of the most prestigious collection in the world for importance, rarity and peculiarity.

Displayed for the first time in 1990 at Villa Pignatelli in Naples, on the occasion of an exhibition curated by Angela Tecce and Nunzio Vitale, it was then presented at Saint'Etienne Biennial, Paris Grand Palais and São Paulo, in Brasil. A heritage of undisputed value, which underpins the cultural line the Fondazione has marked ever since its establishment in 2008. A research path moving around two strictly connected polarities: the conservation of the collection of historic plastics and the projection of the polymers in our time culture. Envisioned as a museum research centre, the Fondazione develops laboratory and study tracks around conservation and restoration issues, as well as a focus at

international level on new expressions of experimental and environmentally sustainable design through a careful activity of scouting and promotion.

The Fondazione places a strong emphasis on research technical and scientific aspects, collaborating with international realities and starting up knowledge exchanges. A cultural platform dedicated to the design culture and the perspectives of the research on polymers. A cultural process which evolves developing and researching multimedia languages which can involve diverse users.

The Fondazione Plart and its collection are a unique reality in national and international scenarios for the specific cultural offer related to the multiform universe of plastic materials, their history, their present and their future, with a particular focus on environmental sustainability, re-use and recycling issues.



## Biographies

Exhibition Curators and Catalogue Writers

**Cecilia Cecchini**, architect, PhD, professor of Industrial Design at "Sapienza" University of Rome, Faculty of Architecture. Ever since its establishment (2008), she is the scientific curator of research centre Fondazione Plart; she is founder and director of the Master in Exhibit & Public Design, and she coordinated the degree course in Industrial Design at "Sapienza" (2008-2012). She carries out research in connection to materials and technology innovation, especially related to polymers.

**Marco Petroni**, design critic and theorist. He was a contributing writer for «La Repubblica Bari» and contributes on a regular basis to several art and design magazines, including «Abitare» and «FlashArt». He is Senior Curator at Fondazione Plart, where he develops innovative curatorial projects and various events related to the world of design in a transdisciplinary approach. He teaches Contemporary Art History at Abadir (Catania) and Fashion and Communication at the Academy of Fine Arts of Naples.

**Alba Cappellieri**, professor of Jewel Design at Politecnico di Milan and president of the degree course in Fashion Design, director of the master in Jewel Design and of the international master in Accessory Design. Since 2014 she is director of the Museo del Gioiello at the Basilica Palladiana in Vicenza, the first museum exclusively dedicated to the jewels.

**Stefano Catucci**, professor of Aesthetics at "Sapienza" University of Rome, Faculty of Architecture. His studies mainly focus on contemporary German and French thought, as well as on issues related to architecture, landscape and design. He is a contributor to cultural and musical programmes of Rai-Radio3.

**Laura Cherubini**, professor of Art History at Brera Academy and vice-president of Naples MADRE museum. In 1990, she curated the Italian pavilion at Venice Biennale. She was contemporary art supervisor at INGCalcografia Nazionale (2005-2007). She is a member of Mario Schifano, Franco Angeli, Fabio Mauri Archives and is part of the board of directors of Boetti Archivio.

**Anna Laganà**, restorer/researcher specialized in plastic material conservation, holds a diploma from ISCR in Rome. She was coordinator of the Modern and Contemporary Art Workshop at the Conservation and Restoration Center "La Venaria Reale" in Turin (2007-2008) and researcher at RCE in the Netherlands, where developed different projects on plastic materials conservation in art and design. She is currently a collaborator of various European and American research centres and museums and is a professor at the University of Amsterdam.

**Gianluigi Ricuperati**, writer and essayist, made his debut in 2006 with *Fucked Up*; in 2007, he published with Martegani *Viet Now-La memoria è vuota*, in 2009 *La tua vita in 30 comode rate*, in 2011 *Il mio impero è nell'aria* and in 2013 *La produzione di meraviglia*. He curated in collaboration with Belpoliti a monograph on the illustrator Saul Steinberg. In 2007 and 2008 he directed Festarch with Boeri and in 2009 co-directed Urbana. He is a contributor for important national and international newspapers and magazines. Since 2013 he has been creative director of Domus Academy.

**Thea van Oosten**, chemist specialized in the study of polymers. She developed important research programmes at RCE, Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. She published articles and essays on the application of polymers in art and design. She is also the author of the essay 'PUR Facts, Conservation of Polyurethane Foam in Art and Design', published by the University of Amsterdam.