



Button, Button, who's got the Button?????

By Harriet McNeill

Buttons today are used for a functional purpose--to close and secure an article of clothing. Very early on, they were used for ornamentation or jewelry.

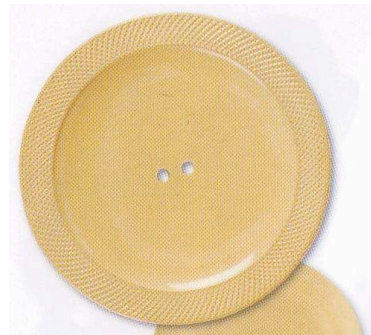
Guilds were formed to recognize artisans and craftsmen much as are guilds formed today to recognize the symphony, acting, embroidery, etc. One guild was for button makers. The quality of their work was incredible. The buttons were marked and records kept so that they could document the work of each craftsman. Stunning sets of buttons were made, sometimes one at a time using material of gold and silver set with jewels. Royalty adorned their garments with as many buttons as possible to show their superiority---so the saying "he with the most buttons wins."

The common man wore buttons made of cloth, wood or bone due to the cost. Additionally, a person's social class dictated what type of button they could or could not wear. Just by the buttons, society could tell where you ranked on the social ladder.

France and England were leaders in the button making industry using a wide variety of materials during the 17th and 18th century. Mainly men's clothing used buttons, as many as 24 to a set. Buttons were also used to fasten shoes and gloves. American manufacturers started making buttons, but the vast majority of buttons were imported from England. Later it became increasingly patriotic to wear only American made buttons. Now they were beginning to be made from wood, pewter and brass.

During the Industrial Revolution factories produced buttons in mass quantities. New types of material were discovered. In 1909 Leo Baekeland created the first true plastic, Bakelite (pronounced bay-kay-lite.)

A popular color is the amber color due to the materials it was made of.





Bakelite buttons are distinct although they do fade with time. One test to identify Bakelite is to rub the piece with your finger until it is warm. There should be an unmistakable smell of formaldehyde. Always clean Bakelite carefully as it has a very thin layer of 'finish' on it. If the button has rhinestones, the rhinestones can fall out if soaked in hot water. They should be cleaned very carefully. Use a soft, damp cloth such as an old diaper or t-shirt and if needed, gentle dish soap can also be used. Always use the least harsh method.



In the 1930's and 1940's glass, plastic, shell and china buttons were popular. China buttons were sometimes stenciled with patterns on them and were an alternative to cloth buttons that wore out before the garment did. Buttons purchased now were mainly used on women and children's clothing.

Men's tailor's magazines discussed slide fasteners or zippers but the button fly was the standard means of closure on men's trousers. Suspenders were attached to men's pants by having buttons on the inside waistband, front and back.

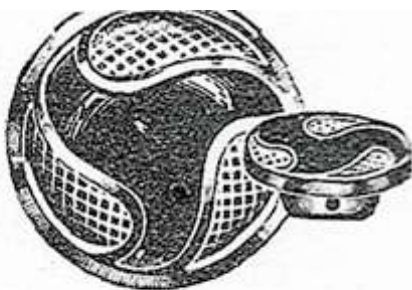
Celluloid is a plastic like substance used in the button making process. It is made from a mix of nitrocellulose and camphor. Celluloid is highly flammable and easily decomposes. Celluloid buttons were common between 1920 and 1945. If you find these buttons they will be crazed or crumbling. Today one of the most common uses for celluloid is for table tennis balls and guitar picks.

RUBBER BUTTONS
Huntington's "Ever On"
Vulcanized Rubber
Buttons
For rompers or overalls.
Stays "buttoned." Won't
break in wringer. 22 line
is 2-hole; 27 line, 4-hole. White or black.

Modern plastics were developed in the 20's. Collectable buttons from this era in plastics include Art-Deco style buttons (1930-1945) and 'goofie' buttons (1930-1949). "Goofies" are buttons that realistically mimic the shape of real objects. *Warman's Buttons Field Guide*



The Spring and Summer 1931 *National Bellas Hess CO* catalog has buttons for sale. The material is not identified, but they are listed as brilliant buttons from abroad, 12 buttons on a card and the price!!! 2 cards for 12 cents. Wow and they even pay postage.



Trimming Buttons
Made of porcelain with silvered deposit. Colors: Black, red, green, tan, royal blue or rust. State size and color. We Pay the Postage.

Brocade Pattern		Polished Finish	
Metal Buttons in half ball shape. Self shank.		Vegetable Ivory Buttons with self shank. In pretty colors.	
COLORS: Gold or silver		COLORS: Cream, white, tan, red, brown, gray, black, sea color.	
Diam. In.	Per Doz.	Diam. In.	Per Doz.
3/8 in.	12¢	1/2 in.	18¢
7/16 in.	12¢	3/8 in.	18¢
1/2 in.	15¢	1/2 in.	18¢
20 G 4217		20 G 4186	
20 G 4218		20 G 4185	
		20 G 4184	

Buttons are miniature works of art. Today they can be as simple as a shirt button or you can find them as elaborate as you can get. It's hard to believe that beautiful buttons were created first as adornment and now as the simple task of fastening clothing.