

HOW DO I KNOW IF IT IS BAKELITE?

Bakelite is a synthetic resin chemically formulated and named after its Belgian inventor, Chemist L.H.Baekeland c.1909. It is pronounced "Bay Ka Lite". Originally it was used for molding items that were previously done of celluloid or hard rubber. One of the original uses was for pool balls. It is collectible in all its forms including jewelry, buttons, radio cases, lamps, dresser sets and many more items. It was used commercially for parts especially in electrical wiring. After bakelite and the introduction of so many other plastics and composition materials it was easy to confuse them all. People began to lump all plastics into one generic term "Bakelite". However, experienced collectors developed ways of testing for bakelite some of which follow. None, however, can take the place of your own experience and careful inspection. Check out books in your local library (see the end of this article) and talk to other collectors.

Rub your fingers over the piece. (I grasp the piece with my hand and use my thumb to rub) until it is warm; then smell. It is unforgettable - formaldehyde or a carbolic acid. Familiarize yourself with this odor. Not all pieces will have the same odor intensity, but it will be there.

Immerse the piece in hot water (not with rhinestones, please). The smell should be the same.

Bakelite has a clunky sound. Hit two plastic pieces together; then two bakelite - check the difference. Feel the difference.

Hot needle - be careful though. Heat a needle until it is red hot and then pick an inconspicuous place on the piece to stick the needle in. Wait just a second - not too long! There's that smell again! Also, non-thermoplastics will melt and celluloid is extremely flammable so again BE CAREFUL!

There is a product on the market called "Scrubbing Bubbles" bathroom cleaner. When

put on a q-tip and touched to bakelite, the q-tip will turn yellow. I have only tested this product and have had successful results. No harm has come to the bakelite.

Colors - some giveaways are colors and shapes. Look at some of the bakelite books on the market and note the colors. Look at pieces reputable dealers have on display. Bakelite colors do change with age.

There are bakelite pieces by Lea Stein. These pieces are collectible and vintage. They are not reproduction and are usually signed - however, I have heard that even this French designer's pieces are being reproduced and signed. Information just received notes that Stein's factory closed in 1980 however 2nd edition pieces were produced in 1991. The newer ones are signed "Agatha" or "Lea Stein Paris". The new edition pin backs are riveted with the 'Lea Stein' signature. Some older editions 'were' heat or glue mounted.

There is reproduction bakelite being made. Some say the old is being melted down to make new. One way to tell is by the pin attachment. Prongs embedded into the piece to hold the pin attachment or tiny screws usually indicate an older piece. Glue or pins with 3 or more holes in the pin back 'usually' mean new. Bakelite made by Schultz is newly designed and usually signed by them. These may become collectible in their own right.



There are several good bakelite books available:

Plastic Jewelry by Lillian Baker

Bakelite Jewelry by Tony Grasso

Plastic Jewelry by Lyhngerda Kelley and Nancy Schiffer

European Designer Jewelry - Ginger Moro

© Copyright Sally Jarrett & World Intelligence Network Inc. 11/01 - 1996

