

Restoring Bakelite

By Curt Arndt

I've restored a dozen plus trafficators over the years and I learned how to bring back Bakelite without removing its unique look and patina from an elderly gentleman who restored old radios (the knobs and assorted pieces were Bakelite). Bakelite is one of the first plastics (Dr. Leo Baekeland, 1908, father of the plastics industry) made from a formaldehyde formula and some sort of filler, which was in many cases wood (read sawdust). It tends to dry out over the years and needs to be re-moisturized to keep it from becoming more brittle than it already is and you will see that there are a number of ways to accomplish this.

Usually I clean the pieces first with warm soapy and a toothbrush to get the years of dirt, grime, grease and misc. crud off. If the surface is at all rough, which it will be if it has spent any amount of time exposed to the elements, the surface will need to be smoothed out. I usually will start with #0000 steel wool (equal to 600 grit sandpaper) and then work through 1000 then 1500 grit wet sandpaper. I then polish the piece carefully on a on a special soft string wheel with plastic polish on my buffer. **WARNING**, be extremely careful to hold on to the piece tightly because if you lose your grip and the piece hits the floor, it's history!

You may now notice that the piece has a speckled brown/golden tinge to it and no I'm not talking about brown Bakelite, that's different, what you see I believe are the filler specks (sawdust pieces) that have bleached out over the years from exposure.

Depending on the degree of discoloration the piece can be dyed with black India Ink.

The next step is to re-moisturize the piece. I normally use plain black Kiwi Shoe Polish and then hand buff until there is no residue left. Other folks that I know have used Neatsfoot oil, mink oil or clear mineral oil none of which I have tried but from seeing some of their finished work it looked very good. Finally I will apply a good Carnuba wax to finish. The results can be spectacular and far superior to just painting the piece, which may be your other option if the piece is broken and you repair it with filler.

I hope this helps.

Cheers

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