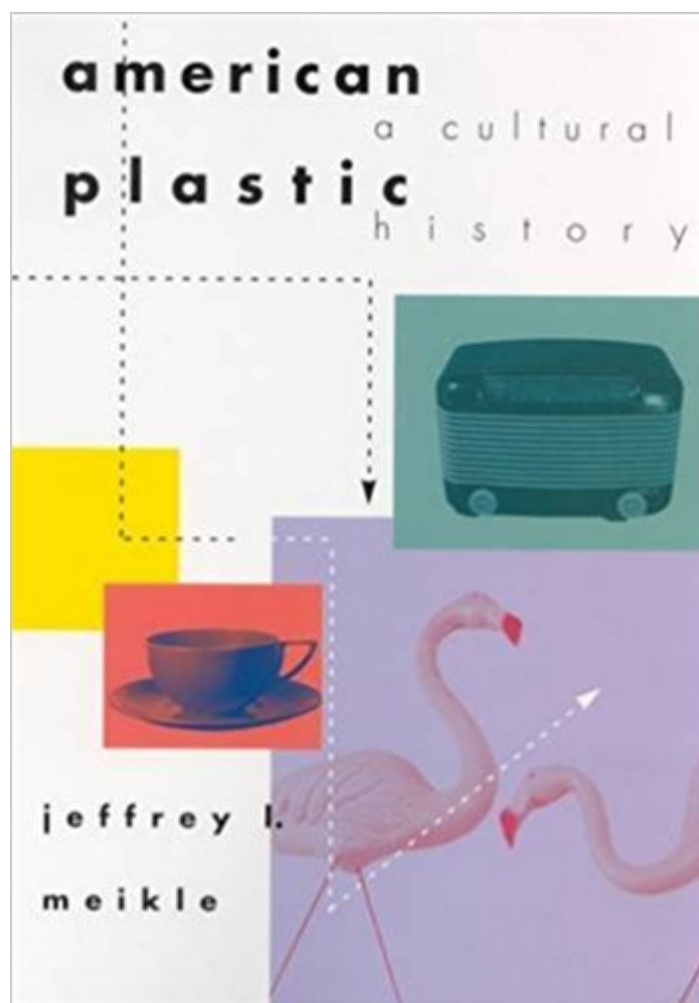


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# American Plastic: A Cultural History



## Synopsis

Winner of the 1996 Dexter Prize from the Society for the History of Technology and a 1996 Choice Outstanding Academic Book—“A splendid history of plastic.” The book is authoritative, thorough, interdisciplinary, and intriguing. . . [Meikle] traces the course of plastics from 19th-century celluloid and the first wholly synthetic bakelite, in 1907, through the proliferation of compounds (vinyls, acrylics, polystyrene, nylon, etc.) and recent ecological concerns. . . Interested readers of whatever predisposition will likely enjoy this comprehensive and thoughtful treatise. —Publishers Weekly—“A landmark account. . . . He combines a first-rate technological history with a most impressive cultural analysis of how plastics evolved from a material surrounded by utopian expectations to a material epitomizing inferiority and eventually to a part of everyday life. . . . One of the most significant works ever written in the history of American technology and culture.” —Nature— “[A] truly outstanding work . . . here is a work of intellectual strength written with great literary style. . . . This significant work is likely to be widely cited in academic circles, defining the field for a generation of readers. Don’t let it pass you by! An extraordinary contribution, for all levels of readers.” —Choice—“This is real interdisciplinary work, roaming in focus, adaptive in method.” —Journal of American History—“This scholarly and comprehensive work . . . is nontechnical and emphasizes the social and cultural impact of plastics. . . . Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in understanding contemporary society.” —Library Journal

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Meikle, professor of American studies and art history at the University of Texas, presents a splendid history of plastic. The book is authoritative, thorough, interdisciplinary and intriguing. As aptly characterized in the preface, "the narrative itself takes on a certain plasticity, touching in turn on the histories of technology and invention, of industry and marketing, of industrial design and consumer culture." The author adroitly balances the different perspectives. He traces the course of plastics from 19th-century celluloid and the first wholly synthetic bakelite, in 1907, through the proliferation of compounds (vinyls, acrylics, polystyrene, nylon, etc.) and recent ecological concerns. Amply considered in context are the cultural influences of plastics, which sprang from the original motives of "substitution, imitation, and innovation" to condition our present perceptions, language, lifestyles and expectations. The general attitude of the public toward this industry is ambivalent; the historical details prove instructive. Interested readers of whatever predisposition will likely enjoy this comprehensive and thoughtful treatise. Illustrations. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

While many people would like to think that this is the Information Age, we are in fact living in the Age of Plastics. Since 1979 the production of plastic has far outpaced that of steel. It is doubtful that any of us could envision our world without plastics. From the Barbie dolls we grew up with to the cars we drive, for better or worse, plastics have shaped the world we live in. This scholarly and comprehensive work, by an American studies professor and author of *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1938* (Temple Univ. Pr., 1981), is nontechnical and emphasizes the social and cultural impact of plastics. Meikle's book is so enjoyable that this reviewer began underlining and writing margin notes while reading. Highly recommended for anyone with an interest in understanding contemporary society. James Olson, Northeastern Illinois Univ. Lib., Chicago Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Good Read!

Very detail history of the progression of plastic in America

This is a wonderful, precise, highly entertaining book, especially when it focuses sharply on the

chemistry and business of plastics. It tells the fascinating story of the origins and development of plastics in the USA (which practically means elsewhere in the world, also) and the personalities of those that created or discovered them. Economically and stylishly written, with impeccable research, this is anything but a dry academic treatise. Certainly, it means to comment on culture as well as the progress of chemistry, and this it does, particularly in the last chapter. Even though I'm a mild Nixon admirer, I didn't mind it (much) when he was brought into the discussion in that closing chapter, which tackles the broader 'meaning of plastic'. Most academics are liberals, which naturally influences their choices of political Exhibits A -- which might not be the ones \*I\* would choose to illustrate my point. Unfortunately for the argument, Nixon was closer to a 'conviction politician' and did not have the purely opportunistic character or nature that the quoted observers believed he had -- as liberals, they no more understood Nixon's motives than they understand \*any\* non-Leftists. The author hints that they might be wrong, but in such a way as to leave untouched the suggestion that Nixon was no good but that those opposed to him (and different, and younger) were. So for me, that point fell flat because the supposed experts didn't know what they were talking about. But in the final chapter we have moved away from the real subject of the book, from the nitty gritty of creative adventure. Anyway, I'm pleased to see that this formerly out-of-print book is now available on Kindle, but if you can get the hardcover edition, the full-colour plates in the middle and numerous black and white photos throughout might be worth it.

Meikle produces a book, a text, really, that is almost imperative to every student and instructor of Sociology or Cultural History. The book serves as more than a technological manifest of an object's history, as many tend to do, and exposes a critical part of our modern lifestyles. Few can ignore that plastics exist throughout our modern lives more than ever before. In fact, plastics are so pervasive that few care to remember them any more. Such an important material, a material so born in human creation, deserves due notice. *American Plastic* is just that. The reader stands to benefit from Meikle's background in art history. The development of plastic in the Twentieth Century restricts plastic's popularity not for its utility but rather for its art. The art of plastic became manifest to me when I started working in plastics a few years ago. Before I left, I was able to witness first-hand the development of plastic parts for the myriad "toys" we see today. My division was merely responsible for coloring the material, yet this step was crucial more than any other merely because Americans have an aversion to the ugly. We shun the idea of plasticity, a word filled with images of large infinite primary colors and decades long past, but we forget that it is the same plastic we use in our cell phones, computers, soda bottles and cars that we cannot live without. Meikle's work exemplifies this

artistic aspect as a factor as important as the technology behind the material. Nonetheless, he does not fail to provide the reader with a rich history of the technological, political and sociological development of plastic. Meikle does not stray from his purpose, and perhaps this is partly why this book is so enjoyable to read.

Who would have thought that plastic was as important to 20th century American culture as Meikle persuades us it is? Well, the moviemakers of *Mrs. Robinson*, for one: "plastics, my boy, plastics," says one smug capitalist to the hapless anti-hero, played by Dustin Hoffmann. Meikle reminds us of this scene, just as he reminds us of what a revolutionary material Bakelite was, and how important to the 20th century vision of modernity and scientific-technological progress it was, as evidence that the mysteries of deep science could make an eternally malleable, shape-shifting, color-shifting material that could be used on stovetops and Kodak cameras alike. Meikle is obsessed and his obsession rubs off on us. The illustrations are great, too.

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