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Christmas in March: An Unexpected Gift

PHS member Reindert Groot, founder of the Amsterdam Bakelite Collection on a surprise bequest.



Figure 1. The author in front of the tea crates
Credits: Photo: Daan Dickson

“What are we supposed to do with this?” (Figure 1) That was my initial response to an offer to acquire an extensive bakelite collection. It was spring 2019. We had been approached, via our website, by a Mr Ronald Janssens, who told us that, as an executor of her will, he was settling the estate of Mrs Johanna “Cocky” Langeberg (1959 - 2018). Mrs Langeberg, it turned out, had been a woman from Zutphen who had decided, four days before her death, to leave her entire collection to the Bakelite Museum. She had wished to find a good home to conserve her property in its entirety. Adhering to her concern and after exploring our site, Mr Janssens decided that we could offer that good home.

The collection we received was begun by Mr A ‘Dolf’ Koekoek (1934 - 2001), Mrs Langeberg’s partner. While she was likely a contributor to their collection during their marriage, he was the driving force behind their holdings.



Figure 2. Unpacking

Mr Koekoek had been a Rotterdam art and antique dealer who regularly travelled to England, which in the 1970s was the mecca for the antique market due to low prices and a favourable exchange rate for the pound. In the mid-seventies, he had moved with his wife to England, where he started an antique business in London. He probably started collecting bakelite in the 1970s. While in England, he met Mrs Langeberg, and together they returned to the Netherlands, where they bought a house with a shop in Zutphen in the late 1990s. After he died in 2001, their bakelite items were stored in tea crates and boxes in their attic until Mrs Langeberg died. This is where our story begins.

Upon our acceptance of the collection, the executor wrote to me, saying, “I wish you every success with your collection, and I am glad that it turned out so well, following the wishes of Mrs Langeberg.”



Figure 5. The Bourjois packages

Receiver, made by E.K. Cole Ltd., Southend on Sea. The discoveries went on and on. Sorting through all the different species and brands sounds like a simple task, but it is very time-consuming in practice. Now, two years on, most objects have been inventoried and we are nearly finished. We have divided everything into three groups; A. in excellent order; B. in good condition but neglected and dirty; C. defective or incomplete. About 30% of the items are in perfect condition, 60% needs something to be done, such as cleaning, polishing, or repair, and 10% can only be used for spare parts or disposed of entirely.

As in the BBC television programme The Repair Shop, each object is almost always wholly disassembled. While partly due to curiosity, this task is primarily undertaken to give every part of the object the best possible treatment. Knowing



Figure 7. Some Carvacraft items



Figure 6. The EKCO 15 KG A.C.T.96 radio receiver ready for treatment

about the working parts of a device and how they fit together are essential aspects of collecting. Also, hidden information often appears, such as manufacturers' names, years of fabrication, and serial numbers.

In most cases, cleaning and polishing are sufficient for simple objects, such as boxes, ashtrays, and the like. The more complex devices, radios, for example, require more attention. After an initial inspection, the object is completely disassembled. The interior parts are removed from the case, which is then cleaned to shine again.

With the American Emerson radios, we found that both dial covers for the tuning scale were too damaged and would have to be replaced. That sounds simple, but first, you have to determine



Figure 8. The streamlined General Electric Company BC4941



Figure 9. Tiny little memory helpers

whether these parts are available. We consulted with various American radio collectors via the internet, who referred us to a source where suitable replacements could be ordered.

Next, all the interior parts are examined to determine what repairs may be necessary and be possible. First, we remove the radio tubes, make drawings and photos to avoid confusion, clean the tubes carefully, and treat the metal chassis. This task often involves removing rust from small loose parts with a biological de-rusting agent and an ultrasonic cleaning device. At the same time, the round bakelite tube sockets are covered with masking tape to protect them. The chassis itself is carefully cleaned with the finest grade steel wool and WD40 lubricant.

Meanwhile, the cardboard back panel is cleaned, smoothed, and returned to stable condition by a professional paper restorer. Once all the parts and the case have been cleaned and repaired, we reassemble the items.

Only afterwards do the radios shine as conversation pieces, ready to be photographed and described. For me, the cosmetic condition is more important than the functioning of a receiver. Sometimes the radios play, sometimes they don't. In short, the Langeberg Collection includes hundreds of objects impossible to describe in this article.

Among the smaller objects were several extraordinary things, some of which I have never seen before. Now that we have iPhones and computers that offer so many functions, you can



Figure 10. The Ordermatic, patented (No 488210) by "BULVIN" Productions Co. London

hardly imagine that people ever used simple desk calendars; (Figure 9) they have an endearing charm, just like the mechanical ordermatic we found that would have been hung on a wall at the outside door. Using pre-printed rolls, the housewife could indicate the orders for the baker or milkman with a key: 'usual eggs & butter' or '1 pint extra' please (Figure 10)

I hardly need to elaborate on Ebena, the scarce and highly sought-after Belgian material from the 1920s (Figure 11). PQ readers are likely familiar with this brand. Unlike thermosetting materials, Ebena is very fragile.

Damaged objects are currently the rule rather than the exception, chipped edges and inexpert 'repairs' are unfortunately too common. Strangely enough, extremely high prices are asked and paid for them. In my opinion, only a small number of professional (ceramic) restorers are capable of performing proper repair work. A few nice boxes in good condition are included. (Figure 12) Speaking of boxes, there is a remarkable number of these, large and small, for all kinds of things such as face powder, cigarettes, card games, perfume, name and address cards, chocolate, and even menthol ointment.

We found photo cameras, such as the de Purma Special invented by Tom Purvis and Alfred Croger Mayo, with its ingenious shutter speed system activated by gravity. And the 1934 Kodak Hawkette, whose bakelite body parts were made in London by Solidite & Synthetic Mouldings Ltd. from North Street, Clapham. These are pressed with the utmost precision.



Figure 11. One of the three Ebena boxes

All mechanical devices such as clocks and radios quickly make me reach for a screwdriver. "What's in it?" and "How does it work?" The French COMPAGNIE INDUSTRIELLE DE MÉCANIQUE HORLOGÈRE PARIS produced a series of beautiful bakelite Art Deco timepieces in the 1930s. This 1934 Fantic model features solid plates, detachable escapement, conical staff pivots, a safety wheel to prevent over-winding, and a red warning sign when winding becomes necessary (Figure 13).

In London, the company had a branch at 6, Holborn Viaduct London; JAZ CLOCK Co., Ltd. To restore this clock, we set about cleaning again, polishing the bakelite, which has the trade name Jazolite. Next, the 8-day movement was disassembled by the clockmaker, who removed the dried-in oil, checked,



Figure 12. Urea-formaldehyde and Phenol-formaldehyde, from left to right: Cromwells Ltd Dudley Port England, Made in England, State Express Cigarettes, Telenduron Thomas de la Rue & Co Limited and a Tjoklat chocolate box

and adjusted the movement. Finally, the clock was provided with a newly lacquered dial; precision work carried out very expertly by fellow collector Richard Schoevaart.

And finally, to complete the authentic Christmas feeling, we found all kinds of candlesticks from short to tall, such as the elegant Linsdenware. (Figure 14). Without realizing it, Mrs Langeberg has filled a gap in our collection by substantially expanding the number of English objects. Thank you, Mrs Langeberg, for this once-in-a-lifetime bequest!

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Figure 13. The restored JAZ Fantic 8



Figure 14. Christmas in March