

CARE AND FEEDING OF BAKELITE

Extreme care must be exercised in cleaning and removing scratches from Bakelite to avoid permanent damage.

Bakelite and other urea formaldehyde plastics like Catalin, were widely used during the 1930s and 1940s in the manufacture of jewelry, clocks, radios, giftware, and as handles and knobs on small appliances, cocktail shakers, and other giftware items.

Bakelite has a tendency to change colors as it ages and is exposed to air. What was ivory when produced, often ages to a rich butter-scotch color. Similarly, the blue Bakelite top to Chase Blue Moon cocktail shakers tends to turn brown with age. The original color can often be found by looking for areas not exposed to air and light, such as the inside of a cigarette box.

As a general rule, Bakelite can be cleaned with warm (not hot) water and a mild detergent such as Dove®. To remove dirt and grime from details, use a jute or hemp vegetable brush, but do not use a stiff bristle brush or steel wool.

Cracks in clock and radio cases and handles have a tendency to gather dirt, making the crack more prominent. Carefully cleaning the crack may make it all but disappear. If you have access to an ultrasonic cleaner, it will work wonders at removing grime from details and cracks.

Visible scratches in a Bakelite clock or radio case can usually be removed by placing a little toothpaste on a soft cloth and gently rubbing in a circular motion. Check frequently to see whether the scratch has been removed and avoid over polishing. Once the major scratches have been removed, polish the entire piece with a plastic polish like Novus 2®.

While a power tool like a Dremel Moto-Tool® can make quick work of scratches, such tools are hard to control and can quickly gouge a piece and remove details. They should be avoided.

Turpentine, an oil, can also be used to clean Bakelite and is especially effective in removing price stickers. Alcohol and acetone, however, can discolor Bakelite and should never be used.