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BUTTONS BY THE BILLIONS

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By Olive Williamson

Keeping pace with feminine fancy is never an easy task, but nowhere is it more difficult than in the manufacture of those fetching bits of artistry that serve both a fastening and a fascinating function.

When the lady of fashion ponders over her wardrobe and devises ways and means of adapting the current "Look" to her personality, she considers every item of apparel in detail. Not least among these are the size, style, colour and number of buttons on her garments.

With styles as dated as yesterday's newspaper, today's fad seldom bears any relation to tomorrow's fancy, hence a tremendous turnover in button designs. The advent of the zipper has had no noticeable effect on the industry and more buttons than ever are being made today in Canada and in an ever-increasing variety of shapes, sizes and colours. During the past twelve months alone more than a billion and a half buttons were produced in thousands of different styles.

It is easy to see that the button manufacturer is faced with a peculiar set of problems. Flexibility, above all, is a necessity of the industry. Keeping a few jumps ahead of demand has at last been made possible by the versatility of the chemically-produced materials now basic in the button business—plastics.

Not all plastics are suitable for button manufacture, of course, just as not all metals are suitable for making automobiles. Among the most popular varieties of plastic for this purpose, however, are "Plaskon", "Plastacele", "Pyralin", "Lucite" and latest of all, "nylon".

The popularity of these materials is largely explained by the quality of the finished products but from the manufacturer's point of view the important consideration is adaptability for mass production.

One process well adapted to mass production is compression moulding, which utilizes "Plaskon" urea formaldehyde moulding powder. The powder is compressed into "pills" or preforms which are similar in size to the buttons into which they will be transformed. These preforms are placed in the holes of a special tray which slides between the upper and lower halves of a heated, highly polished mould mounted in a hydraulic compression press. Tremendous heat and pressure are applied for up to a minute, then the buttons are removed almost ready for wear. Edges are now smoothed and the buttons polished by "tumbling" in rotating barrels. The bright new buttons are hard and solid but light in weight. ~~Even the plastic,~~ ~~lour is a~~ they can be laundered or even scratched with little effect.

The injection moulding process uses "Plastacele" an acetate compound. Here the powder is heated to a workable plastic condition and extruded into the centre groove of a hollow, unheated mould branching off into individual die cavities. When removed, the buttons are attached to "sprues" like leaves on the end of branches. These sprues, which are waste pieces resulting from the overflow, can be reground and the material used again.

Casein plastic buttons, more expensive than those already mentioned, are fabricated on machines. The plastic, made from the protein of skim milk, is formed in long rods the diameter of the finished buttons. These rods are cut to form discs, and patterns are machine-worked on each one separately. To get two-tone effects the buttons are dyed after the design has been only partially cut and re-dyed after the pattern has been finished.

Also fabricated in this manner are exotic "Lucite" buttons, which show up strikingly on milady's gowns or tailored suits. The beautiful material, and acrylic resin, simulates crystal almost perfectly. Odd as it sounds, "Lucite" combined with scrapings from fish scales gives an effect which nearly outdoes the glow of mother of pearl.

Knots, bows, floral clusters or other fanciful shapes are most often seen in buttons made of the cellulose plastic, "Pyralin". This adaptable product is easily hand-worked to produce the variety. "Pyralin" can be used clear, clouded in the centre like agate. Coatings of gold, silver or other metals can be added to give an "antique" look. "Pyralin" can also be combined with other materials. While machines are used to produce buttons of simple design or to cut basic shapes, fanciful twists are all done by hand.

The various button companies take great pride in their unique products. They admit that button manufacture may not be one of Canada's biggest industries, but, they ask, where would