

colours of a collection

Surveying museum objects on the colouring of historic plastics

Abstract

The Technical Museum Vienna (TMW) holds a remarkably old collection on the subject of plastics technology. The collection contains more than 600 plastic samples and items that were collected between 1914 and the 1980s for the purpose of documenting and illustrating types, production techniques, and applications of plastics.

As contemporary material innovations have been continuously collected, the collection is today a valuable source documenting the evolution of plastics during the 20th century. Especially 68 plastic colour samples of the collection allow to concentrate on the topic of coloured plastics based on material examples. The infinite possibilities in colour design certainly played a role in the triumph of plastics during the last century. Nevertheless, not much was published about the colouring of plastics in technical literature until the 1970s. In view of that there are few written sources, the collection as source becomes even more valuable.

My doctoral thesis in conservation, started in 2017 at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, supervised by Friederike Waentig (Cologne Institute of Conservation Sciences), aims to investigate the collection scientifically. The main objectives are to examine the collection as basis for further research and, subsequently, to design and implement a methodological approach for investigating the collection as source about the colouring of historic plastics with a specific epistemic interest in historical and technological aspects and ageing phenomena: Does the collection show how the material “emancipated from imitation”? Which colour designs are in the collection and what has been published about colourants and colouring techniques for early plastics from the first half of 20th century? And can damages related to the colouring be observed in the collection?

The approach is holistic, areas of focus are dictated by the collection and are worked out during the investigation. The investigation techniques combine research of literature and archival sources with visual examination techniques and instrumental analysis. This investigation aims to make the collection “readable” for conservators but also for curators and other professions with less material expertise and to provide conservators and curators with a better understanding of the colouring of plastics from the beginning of plastics production to the standardisation of the industry in the second half of the twentieth century.

The collection, the methodological approach and the current state of the investigation will be contributed to the discourse at the summer school. Case examples will show which new and interesting aspects are uncovered by this inductive approach.

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