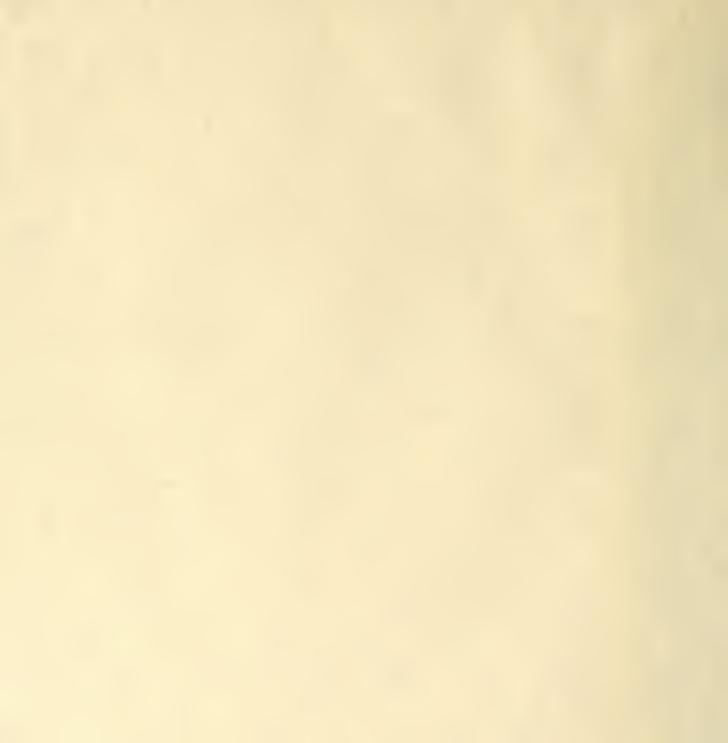
COOPER-HEWITT MUSEUM

BUTTONS

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in the Collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum

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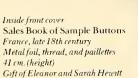




66.

The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design

Press and by Humisses Stanilly 1921



Cover

Sales Book of Sample Buttons France, late 18th century Metalfoil, thread, and paillettes 32 cm. (height) Gift of Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt

Diameter is given, unless otherwise specified. Roman numerals refer to donors; see page 31.



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in the Collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum

The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design



Foreword

1

The little object of ornament and utility called the button is not so trivial as the scant literature about its history would suggest. At the present time, there is a new wave of enthusiasm for button collecting, stimulated no doubt by the low cost and modest space-requirements of buttons, as well as by the variety and quality of their design. Button collectors have available to them an astonishing array of materials, techniques, and designs that offer a miniature-sized glimpse into the history of decoration, as well as a view of the social and economic history of fashion. Petit Courrier des Dames: Modes de Paris, Paris, April 30, 1835 Detail plate 54: "Modes de Long-champs" Gift of Vywan Holland 1980-36-5286

The Cooper-Hewitt's button collection was featured in an exhibition entitled *Four Thousand and One Buttons* organized by Carl C. Dauterman at the Cooper Union Museum in 1940. To accompany the exhibition, Mr. Dauterman contributed an article on the history of buttons for the Museum *Chronicle* of that year. He has graciously consented to have this article reprinted, adding to his original text new information and materials that have become a part of this collection since then.

We are pleased that the appearance of this handbook on our delightful collection of buttons coincides with the showing of the exhibition *Button*, *Button*, which has been funded by the New York State Council on the Arts. The publication of this handbook was made possible through the generosity of the Wellington Foundation, Inc., and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. We are deeply grateful for their kind support.

Lisa Taylor Director



The Milliner & Dressmaker and Warehouseman's Gazette, Paris, May 1877 Detail plate 1406: "Bridal Toilets" Gift of Vyvyan Holland 1880-36-4008

Buttons

3

France, late 18th-early 19th century Painted miniature, glass, metal, 3.8 cm., 111



What is the earliest known button? The answer depends entirely upon the kind of button that is meant, for many things have been called buttons that have nothing at all to do with holding articles of clothing together. The buttons that the Egyptians are said to have worn as early as the Sixth Dynasty were actually badges worn suspended singly from a string about the neck. Buttons of glass and gold leaf have been found among the Mycenaean ruins of 1500 B.C. Many of us are familiar with the buttons that appear on the bridles of horses in Assyrian sculpture, and the Schliemann site at Mycenae yielded buttons of gold. Nevertheless, for documenting the use of buttons attached to costumes we have no conclusive evidence among the remains of any of the early Mediterranean cultures.

Some of the first records of true buttons on European costume exist in the architectural sculpture and the literature of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Among the sculpted figures on Chartres Cathedral may be seen women wearing a row of small closely spaced buttons on each sleeve. That the fashion was shared by men is documented in lines from one of the medieval manuscripts assembled by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton:

> "Botones azured wore ilke ane From his elboth to his hand."



5



Millwille, New Jersey, 1942, Made by Winfield Rutter: Glass, 1.2 cm.; 1.7 cm., XVI



The fashioning of gold and silver buttons was for several centuries most often restricted to the workshops of jewelers, because pearls, sapphires, and other precious stones were used in their embellishment. In the middle of the thirteenth century, a corporation of button-makers was formed in France to supply the growing market. Gradually craftsmen appeared who made buttons of more ordinary materials; in the fourteenth century, ivory, bone, and horn were fashioned into buttons by beadmakers. Sheet metal and wire, especially brass and copper, were also used at this time. These early costume buttons were essentially ornamental; the prosaic task of fastening one's clothing was still left to pins, buckles, and girdles.

As time went by, the demand for buttons grew. While in the fourteenth century a woman's cloak might have fifty buttons, and a man's doublet nearly eighty, in the sixteenth century 13,600 gold buttons were used on a single costume belonging to the king of France, François I. With buttons so prized by royalty, a demand for them among the lesser folk was a natural development. It is not surprising that during the sixteenth century buttons were adopted by the common people as objects of utility and fashion.

Without question the great period in the history of button design was the eighteenth century. Jeweled buttons in particular became increasingly ingenious in design, as evidenced by the diamond buttons worn by the Comte d'Artois, Philippe d'Orleans, Regent of France, each of which encased a miniature watch. More usual were buttons of other cut stones and of mother-of-pearl encrusted with silver and gold. By the middle of the century, the English had brought the manufacture of buttons of cut steel to a high development. These always rank among the most interesting of buttons from the standpoint of

Hauti, about 1775, Painted by Agostino Brunias, Canvas, oil paint, glass, metal 3.7 cm...XV



tons. The wording of the Act of Parliament proclaimed that the "maintenance and subsistence of many thousands of men, women and children" were dependent upon this protection.

Other specialized types of buttons grew up during the eighteenth century; one of the most interesting is the "picture" button. Many such buttons carry small scenes painted on metal or ivory, fitted with domed glass covers to protect the fragile painted surfaces. Among the classes of ornamentation for such buttons were subjects after the antique, historical scenes, and portraits.

Jean-Baptiste Isabey (1767-1855) is known to have painted buttons during his youth, copying tableaux of lovers, flowers, and landscapes derived from Boucher and Van Loo. Similarly, figures after Watteau and Greuze were applied to buttons in paint and in enamel. In the Cooper-Hewitt collection is a particularly distinguished group of buttons painted with scenes of everyday life in Haiti.



craftsmanship as each of the faceted bits of steel with which they are studdedon some it may be a hundred or more was separately cut and polished before being riveted to a disc of metal. In the last quarter of the century cut steel buttons enjoyed great popularity in France and became an important article of commerce. Buttons have even contributed their special importance to the field of legislation; during the reign of the English King William III, a law of 1698 was recorded as "An Act to Prevent the Making or Selling of Buttons made of Cloth, Serge, Drugget, or other Stuffs," in an effort to protect the makers who relied upon the fabrication of silk, mohair, gimp, and thread but-

7

Europe, early 19th century, Ivory, metal glass, 3.7 cm., III



True miniatures, they were the work of the Italo-English artist Agostino Brunias (active 1763-79) and are traditionally believed to have been owned by the colorful Toussaint l'Ouverture, Governor of Haiti from 1801 until 1802.

In the late eighteenth century architectural subjects became popular, and collectors were able to form "galleries" of button pictures of the monuments of Paris. Another variety of painted buttons was the balloon button, reflecting the interest in balloon ascensions aroused by the Montgolfier brothers. Revolutionary themes and symbols replaced these subjects in France during the closing years of the century. Makers of these functional ornaments during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries showed great inventiveness in the variety of materials they employed. Some excellent work was

done in porcelain decorated with delicate figures and flowers, sometimes with the surface modeled to represent woven material. Wedgwood and his contemporaries supplied blue-and-white stoneware buttons with portraits, trophies, and antique subjects in very low relief. Little shells, insects, and mosses were arranged under glass into compositions resembling miniature habitat groups, and in the same way small butterflies and birds were fashioned of brightly colored feathers. Metal buttons were made for both civil and military wear. Chiefly used were silver, copper, and alloys such as pewter, bell-metal, pinchbeck, bronze, and brass. Plating of

Natural Substances

8



5





1. Probably China or Japan, late 19th century. Ivory, 4.3 cm., 111

2. "Habitat" button: Europe or United States, late 19th-early 20th century. Glass, shells, seaweed metal, 3.6 cm., V

3. France, late 19th century Antler, 3 cm., IX

4a, b. Japan, late 19th century Ivory, shell, 3 cm., X1, III

5. Europe, mid-19th century Wood, 1.2 cm., I 6. Probably France, late 19th century. Antler, 5 cm., I

7. Probably Europe, late 19th century. Tortoiseshell, inlaid silver wire 3.5 cm., 111

8. Probably United States, 20th century. Elk horn, 2.8 x 3.6 cm., X



1. France, 19th century Metallic foils, copper, brass, glass 3.7 cm., 1

2a, b. Japan, late 19th century Shakudo, copper, gold, silver 3.3 cm., III

3. France, late 18th century Brass, 3.4 cm., I

4. France, late 18th-early 19th century. Copper, plaster, glass, 4 cm., I

5. United States, late 19th-early 20th century. Brass, 3.8 cm., III

6. Europe or United States, late 19th-early 20th century Brass, 3.8 cm., V

7. France, about 1880. Made by A. P. & Cie., Paris, Brass, wood 4.4 cm., I

8. Italy, 19th century Brass, copper, tin, 4.5 cm., 1

9. United States, late 19th century Made by John Patterson & Co., New York. Brass, 2.6 cm., IX

10. France, late 19th century Gilded brass, 2.4 cm., 1 11. France, late 19th century Made by Auguste Dusautoy, Paris Gilded brass, 3 cm., 1

12. France, late 19th century Brass, steel, 1.4 cm., 1

13. Europe, late 19th century Metal, glass, 4.8 cm., III

14. England, 19th century Brass and steel, 2.2 cm., 1

15. Europe or United States, late 19th-early 20th century, Brass, 3.1 cm., 111

16. Possibly Scandinavian, 19th century. Silver, silver filigree 4.8 cm., XIX

17. France, late 19th century Cut steel, brass, 2.7 cm., 1



18. France, about 1890 Nickel, 3.8 cm., XII

19. France, 19th century. Steel widescent, 4.4 cm., 1

20. France, 19th century. Steel brass, copper, tin, 3.8 cm., I

21, France, 1800–1850. Steel gilded, 3.8 cm., I







11

base metals with silver and gold was common. When the nature of the metal made it practicable, buttons were cast in one piece with the shank; otherwise, loops of durable wire were soldered to the backs to increase the length of wear. Frequently a tooled or stamped metal foil was applied over a core or mold of wood, bone, or ivory. Buttons made in this way were colorful when decorated with spangles or embroidered designs in metal thread.

United States or Europe, late 19th-early 20th century. Brass, 3.9 cm., V



United States, late 19th-early 20th century. Made by Waterbury Button Co., Waterbury. Connecticut, Brass, gilded, 2.2 cm., 111



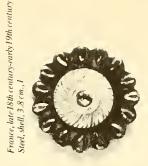
In America, the colonists were chiefly supplied with buttons by England. Colonial American button-makers entered the scene in 1706, when a manufactory was established in New England. In Philadelphia, Casper Wistar made brass buttons and buckles before 1750; shortly afterward, Henry Witeman, another Philadelphian, began the manufacture of metal buttons near the Fly Market in New York. Joseph Hopkins, in Waterbury, Connecticut, made sterling silver and silver-covered buttons in 1753. Benjamin Randolph, the master cabinetmaker of Philadelphia, announced in an advertisement dated 1770 that he was making buttons "of apple, holly, and laurel wood hard and clear." In 1774, the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts recommended the use of domestic papier-mâché buttons to reduce the imports from the mother country. Very soon after the Revolution, however, "buttons, buckles, and other trinkets" were

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being imported annually into this country to the value of \$60,000. At that time silk buttons were being made by household manufacture, especially in Connecticut. The familiar name of Baron von Steuben figures in button history through his invention, in 1789, of a button of conch shell to be worn with costumes of pepper-and-salt colors. In those years people made horn and pewter buttons at home, sometimes using the molds which itinerant peddlers carried as part of their stock-in-trade. Gradually button making became an occupation for group employment. In Waterbury in 1790 the brothers Samuel, Henry, and Silas Grilley opened a shop for the manufacture

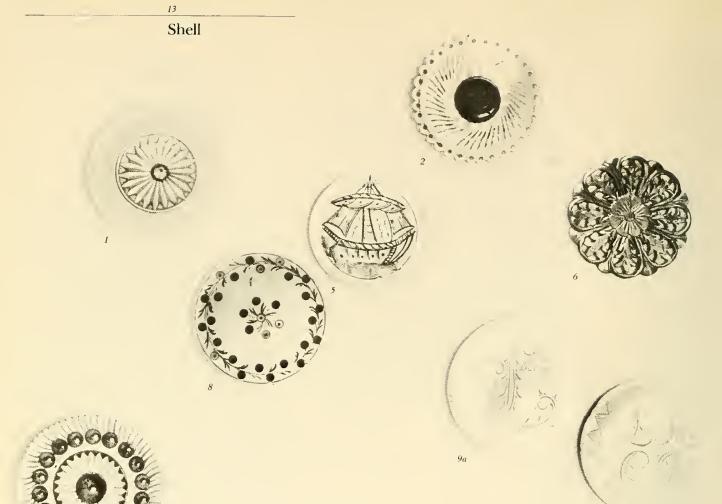
> Europe, 19th century, Shell, engraved paint, 5.1 cm., III





of pewter costume buttons. At the same time groups of Shakers were turning out jacket, coat, and sleeve buttons in polished brass, pewter, and horn covered with cloth. In Philadelphia there were two button factories in 1797; by the following year metal buttons were being made in large quantities in Massachusetts, particularly in the counties of Plymouth and Bristol.

In the middle of the nineteenth century about twenty thousand people were employed in making buttons in France. There was an especially great demand for porcelain buttons, the manufacture of which flourished at Montereau and Briare, respectively within fifty and one hundred miles of the capital. Paris was the center for covered buttons and those of metal, enamel, shell, bone, and horn.



13

1. France, 19th century Shell, paste jewel, copper 3.8 cm., 1

2. France, 19th century. Shell brass, 3.5 cm., 1

3. Europe, 19th century. Shell, paste jewel, metallic thread, 3.7 cm., I

4. France, 19th century. Shell, paste jewel, copper, 3.8 cm., 1

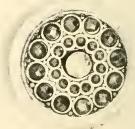
5. France, 19th century. Shell engraved, paint, 3.1 cm., 1

6. Europe, 19th century. Shell (pierced), 3.2 cm., III

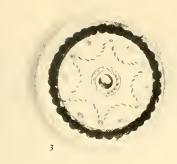
7. France, 19th century. Shell 3.8 cm., 1

8. France, possibly 18th century Shell, copper, 3.5 cm., I

9a, b. Europe, 19th century Shell, engraved, 3.8 cm., III

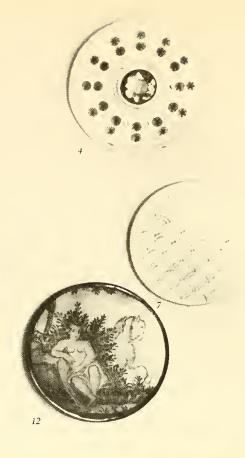


9b











10. France, 19th century. Shell, engraved, paint, 3.8 cm., I

11, France, 19th century Shell, copper, 3.2 cm., I

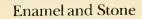
12. France, 19th century. Engraved shell, copper, tan, 3.6 cm., 1

13, France, 19th century. Shell, steel, copper, 4 cm., I

14. France, 19th century Shell, paint, 3.3 cm., I 15. France, 19th century. Shell, and copper, 3.4 cm., I

 France, 19th century. Shell, steel, glass, and copper,
6 cm., I





2a

2b

15



1. France, 19th century. Enamel on

2a, b. United States, 19th century Nephrite, brass, steel, 4 cm., I

3. United States, 19th century

Composition stone, 4 cm., 1

Enamel on brass, 4.2 cm., 1

4. France, 19th century

metal, 3.8 cm., I

5. Europe, late 19th century Enamel, gilded metal, shell 3.5 cm., XIII

6. Europe or United States, 19th century. Composition stone 3.1 cm., 1

7. Italy, 19th century. Carved lava metal, 3.2 cm., 1

8. United States, late 19th century Enamel on metal, 3 cm., IX

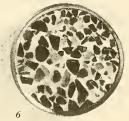
9. Europe, 19th century Enamel on metal, 3 cm., 111

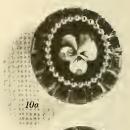
10a, b. Europe, 19th century Enamel on metal, garnets 2.5 x 3 cm., I

11a, b. France, 19th century Agate, 2.3 cm., I



9 Surveyan

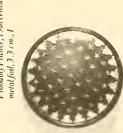








Probably France, 19th century. Enamel and metal foil, 3.3 cm., 1



Germany ranked second in number of workers. In addition to her active home market, she furnished great quantities of cheap buttons to England, Russia, Spain, Italy, and the United States.

In England, Birmingham was the leading producer of buttons, and made a particularly large number in shell. This position of prominence was challenged only by the button-makers of Vienna. The East Indies, Manila, the Bay of Panama, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf were the main sources of supply of the raw shells, and the industry thus necessitated an active international trade. Not all British buttons were of shell; any Dickens reader will recall the large buttons of brass or horn which men wore on their Pickwick coats in the late 1830s. Indeed, quantities of covered buttons and others of metal, nut, and hoof were also made in Birmingham. Notable types of buttons from other parts of Europe were engraved silver ones made in the Netherlands, silver filigree buttons

fashioned in Spain, miniature mosaics from Italy, and glass buttons from Bohemia.

The nineteenth century marked the establishment and growth of several branches of button manufacture in the United States. The worn-out kettles of the New England rum distilleries and the discarded sheathing from the shipyards were valuable sources of copper that were alloyed with imported zinc to produce brass. The brass was converted into sheets before being stamped into buttons. Waterbury became the leading center for this process.

16



Ia, b, c, d. United States, early 20th century. Glass, 1.2 cm. to 1.5 cm., X, V

2. Millville, New Jersey, 1942 Made by Winfield Rutter Glass, 1.2 cm., XVI

3a, b. United States, early 20th century. Glass, 2.3 cm., X

4a, b. France or England, early 19th century. Glass, composition, metal, 3.7 cm., 111

5a, b. France or England, early 19th century. Glass, composition, metal 2.2 cm., 111

6a, b. Italy, 19th century Glass mosaic, metal 2.5 cm., 111

7a, b, c, d. Italy, 19th century Glass mosaic, malachite, gold 1.8 cm., III

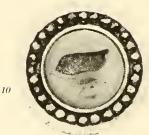
8. France, 19th century Glass, gilding 2.8 cm., 1 9. Pressberg, Czechoslovakia, about 1930. Glass; made for Mainbocher 2.9 cm., VIII

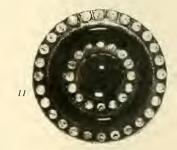
10. France, 19th century. Glass, shell, 3.8 cm., 1

11. United States, 1900-1910 Glass, metal, 3.5 cm., VII

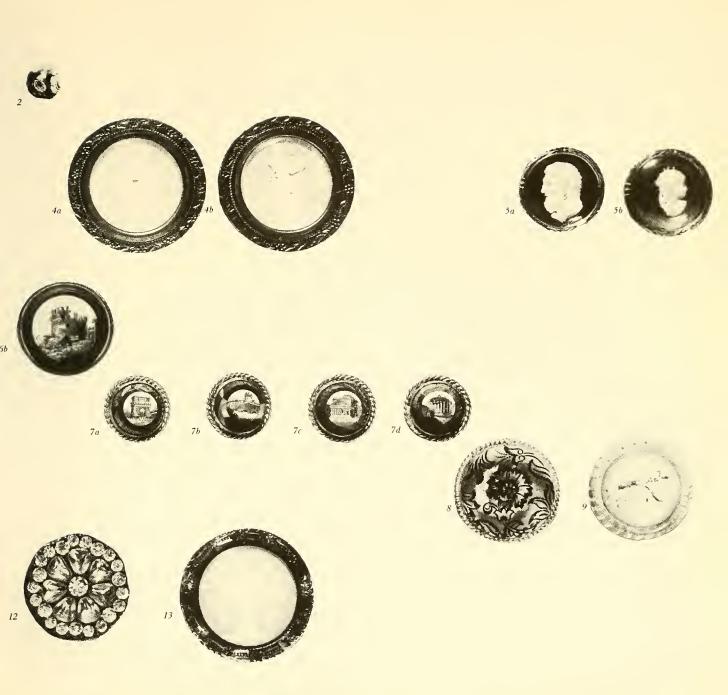
12. France, 19th century, Paste jewels, steel, 2.7 cm., 1

13. Possibly England, early 19th century. Glass, composition, metal 3.6 cm., 111









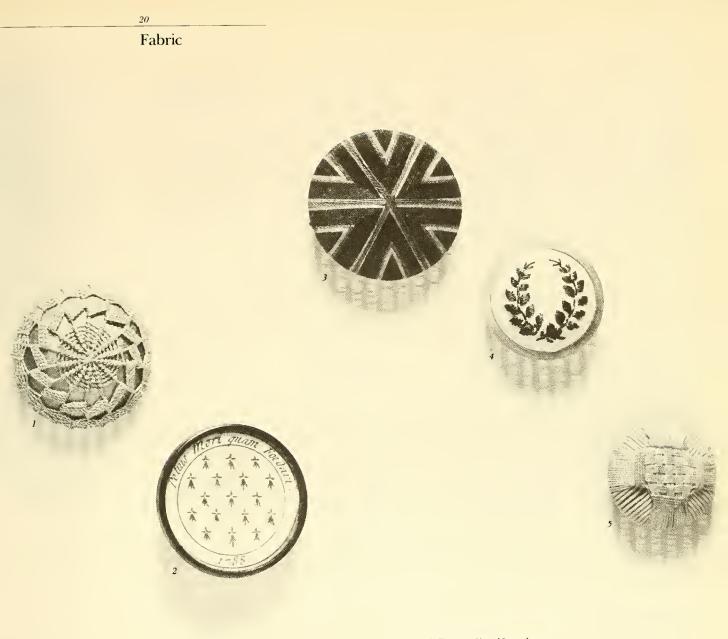


As early as 1802 the firm of Abel Porter and Company was formed, engaging thirteen men in making gilded buttons from sheet brass. With the declaration of war in 1812 Aaron Benedict of Waterbury foresaw the demand for military buttons of brass. He forthwith bought all the old brass wares he could find, and when his supply of brass was gone he resorted to pewter. His success eventually led to the establishment of a large organization which became the Waterbury Button Company.

In 1816, Abel Porter and Company became Leavenworth, Hayden and Scovill, and continued to make buttons of naively high quality until 1821, when Jonas Craft, an immigrant, revealed to them a British method of making threepence worth of gold go as far as a dollar's worth. In 1868, the Scovill Manufacturing Company produced 1500 gross of brass buttons daily. Among the interesting designs struck here were buttons with the portrait of George Washington, a set of which was given to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1824, buttons for the projected Texas Navy, for the Pony Express, and for trainmen of the "iron horse" era. Other localities which became prominent for their metal buttons were Attleboro and Haydenville, Massachusetts.

> Holland, 19th century, Porcelain, enamel decoration, shell, brass, 3.5 cm., I





1. Europe, 19th century Silk, 3.4 cm., V

2. Europe, late 18th-early 19th century. Fabric, metal, glass 3.5 cm., 111 3. Europe or United States, late 19th-early 20th century. Silk, 4 cm., XVII

4. Europe, 19th century Silk, metallic thread, 2.9 cm., III

5. Europe, late 19th-early 20th century. Silk and cotton, 2.5 cm., V





1a, b. France, late 18th-early 19th century. Painted ivory or parchment, glass, metal, 3.7 cm., 111

2. France, 19th century. Porcelain enamel decoration, 3.5 cm., I

3a, b, c, d. France, 18th century Painted ivory, glass, metal 3.5 cm., 111 4a, b. Europe, late 18th-early 19th century. Painted ivory, glass, metal 3.6 cm., III

5a, b, c. France, 18th century Silverpoint drawing on paper, glass metal, 3.6 cm., 111 6a, b. France, late 18th century Painted ivory, glass, metal 3.7 cm., 111

7a, b. France, late 18th century. Cut paper, silk, glass, copper, 3.5 cm., IV

8. Europe, late 18th-early 19th century. Painted paper, metal 3.8 cm., 111 9a, b. France, early 19th century Painted glass, copper, 3.5 cm., 111

10. France, late 18th-early 19th century. Painted paper, glass, metal 3.6 cm., XVII Europe, late 18th-early 19th century. Painted rvory, glass, metal
7 cm., III

12. France, late 18th-early 19th century. Glass, reverse-painted, metal 3.7 cm., 111

13. Europe, carly 19th century Porcelam, enamel decoration, gilding, 4.2 cm., 111

23

Frank Reuss Kelly, Norwalk, Connecticut tbout 1940. Earthenware, 2.8 cm., VI



Probably England, about 1870, Porcelain enamel decoration, 1 cm. to 2.9 cm., XVIII France, 19th century, Metallic foils, copper, brass, glass, 3.7 cm., 1



In 1855 the manufacture of shell buttons was introduced into the United States. Soon vast quantities of mother-ofpearl were imported from China, Australia, and the South Sea Islands. A new note was sounded in 1891 when J. F. Boepple recognized the potential value of the fresh water mussels at Muscatine, Iowa. By the turn of the century the annual production of fresh water shell buttons stood at 4,759,671 gross, and button factories dotted the banks of the Mississippi from Goodhue County, Minnesota, to Pike County, Missouri.

In 1859 a new material of vegetable origin made its appearance. This was the nut of the corozo palm (genus Acrocomia) of Ecuador, Colombia, and Panama. Its commercial name, vegetable ivory, suggests its color and texture. It is France, late 18th-early 19th century Glass, reverse-painted, metal, 3.2 cm., 111



strong, readily worked, and easily dyed. For decades, this material was used for buttons on the more expensive grades of suits and overcoats.

The trend away from natural materials made itself felt as early as the 1770s, when papier-mâché was used. This was followed by hard rubber, of which buttons were made for the Army and Navy from 1851 to 1869, and for civilian wear as well. In Newark, New Jersey, the brothers J. W. and I. S. Hyatt invented celluloid in 1869. This was the first of the chemical blendings of unexpected substances that form a material totally different in appearance from any of their ingredients. In the long list of modern plastics an important place in the button field is held by those made of cotton treated with acids and camphor, of carbolic acid and formaldehyde, of furfural, urea, and the case in of milk.

What future is there for buttons? People who know the industry say that, in spite of the slide fastener and other devices which have replaced buttons to some degree, the industry will continue to grow and to improve. Buttons, freed again for decorative use, are beginning to attract the attention of designers capable of expressing the nature of the newer materials. Perhaps they will enjoy a second golden age.

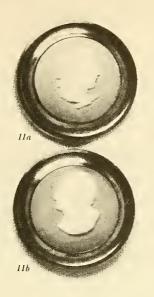
This publication salutes those who enjoy the historical and aesthetic allure of buttons. Although button collectors are legion, their pursuit need not be formal, methodical, or even habit-forming. Still one of the simplest amenities of modern life, the ubiquitous button box is the mark of a well-run household. Thus well entrenched, the button need never yield to the upstart slide fastener. Who ever heard of a family zipper box?

Carl C. Dauterman









1. Europe or United States, 19th century. Porcelain, enamel decoration gilding, 3.3 cm., 111

2. Europe or United States, 19th century. Porcelain, enamel decoration, gilding, 3.3 cm., 111

3n, b. England, late 18th-early 19th century. Jasperware, glass, metal 3.6 cm., 111

4a, b. Probably England, early 19th century. Jasperware, shell, silver 3.6 cm., 111

5a, b. Europe, 19th century Porcelain, enamel decoration 2.6 cm., 1

6a, b, c, d, e. Probably England, about 1870. Porcelain, enamel decoration, 1 cm. to 2.9 cm., XVIII

7a, b. Hungary, about 1940 Earthenware, 2.6 cm., 2.8 cm., 11

8. Frank Reuss Kelly, Norwalk, Cannecticut, nbout 1940 Earthenware, 2.8 cm., VI

9a, b. England, late 18th-early 19th century. Jasperware, 1.5 cm., 2.5 cm., 1 10n, b. England, late 18th-early 19th century. Jasperware, paste silver, 3.5 cm., 111

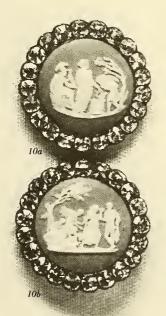
12a

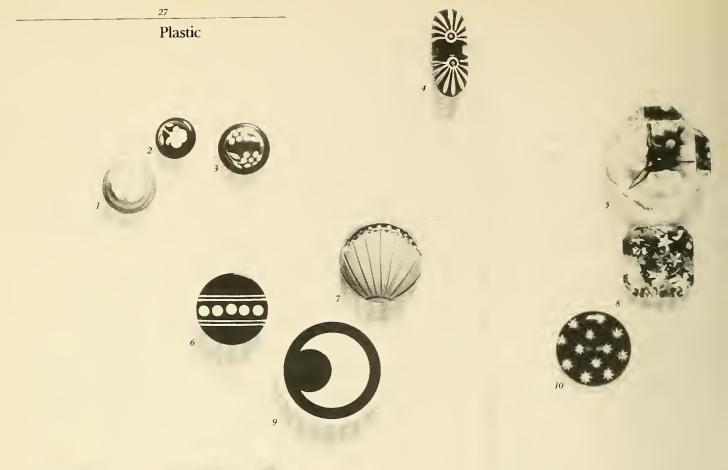
12b

11a, b. England, late 18th century Jasperware, copper, 3.3 cm., XIV

12a, b. England, late 18th-enrly 19th century. Jasperware 1.9 x 3.6 cm., 1.5 x 3 cm., 1

13. England, 19th century Jasperware, copper, steel 3.7 cm., 111







11a

1. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 1.7 cm., V

2. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 1 cm., V

3. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 1.5 cm., V

4. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 1.1 cm., V

5. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 3 cm., V

116 12

502001

6. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 1.9 cm., V

7. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 2.5 cm., V

8. Probably United States, 20th century, Plastic and foil, 2 cm., V

9. Europe or United States, 20th century, Molded and cut plastic, 2.9 cm., V 10. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic and foil, 2.2 cm., V

11a, b. Probably United States, 20th century, Molded translucent plastic, -2.3 cm., V

12. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 1.8 cm., V

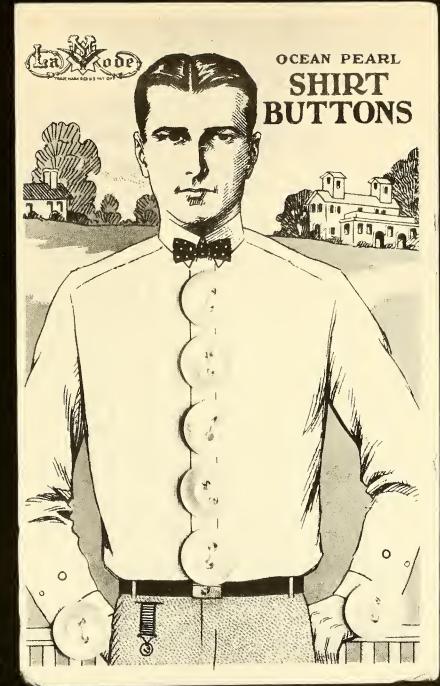
13. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 2.7 x 2.3 cm., V

14. Europe or United States, 20th century, Plastic, 3 cm., V



13

14



Display card of peorl buttons, United States, 20th century, Peorl, Joger, 12 cm. (height) Cooper-Hewitt Museum Picture Library

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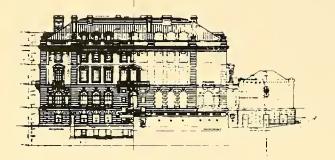
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II:	Gift of William Heimann
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