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# SPRIT OF PROGRESS



## **CARVACRAFT**

SHUFFLE OFF TO BUFFALO!

**A PENGUIN CALLED NAPIER**

BACKYARDS - A FAMILY HAVEN OF SELF SUFFICIENCY

**DEVIANC IN WHITE CITY AND OTHER ODDITIES**

AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST ART DECO SOCIETY—ESTABLISHED MELBOURNE 1992

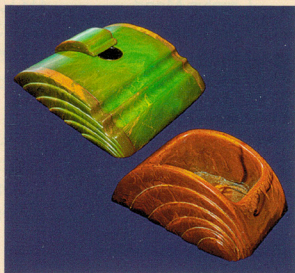


ART DECO &  
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## SPIRIT OF PROGRESS

# IN THIS ISSUE



### Our Cover:

The inkwell and stamp wetter pictured are creations by UK company Carvacraft, using a 'Bakelite' type resin. Designed before, but produced after WWII, these charming desk accessories are especially unusual since bright colours were rarely made or purchased in the UK. Turn to page 10 for Peter Sheridan's detailed background on Carvacraft.

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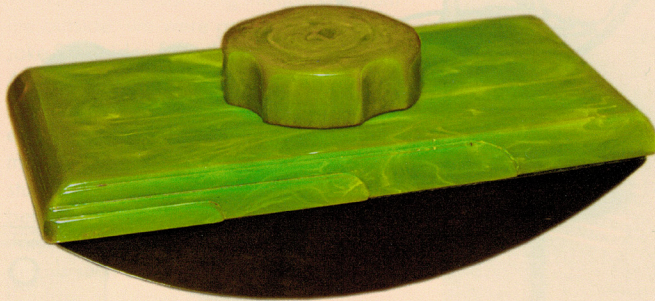
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# CARVACRAFT



Roller blotter



Stamp wetter



Lalique box

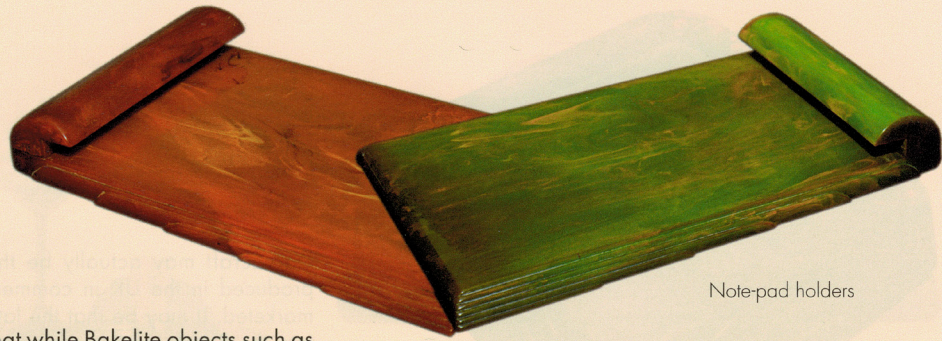
The Carvacraft series of desk and writing accessories produced in England by John Dickinson and Company are unmistakable examples of the Art Deco style. With all the hallmark features of Art Deco, each piece reveals an elegance and simplicity of design coupled with an obvious functionality. The bookends, for example, regularly feature in books on Art Deco and are regarded by many as quintessential examples of the genre.

However, the truth is that they are an odd entrant in the Deco pantheon. In fact, Carvacraft items were produced post World War 2 (1948) in a cheap material (Bakelite) to simulate expensive ones (jade, onyx) at a time when Deco was effectively past its heyday and in a country which had tended to shun colourful household and work objects during the deco period.

The John Dickinson Company had been in the paper business since the late 1800's and were not known for producing writing accessories. During World War 2 they apparently aided the war effort by producing plastics. Perhaps on the back of this experience in 1948 they brought out a range of 'Carcraft Writing Desk Equipment for the Modern Business Executive'. There are at least 20 pieces in the series in two core colours, brown and green.

There are a number of citations which indicate that the designer of Carvacraft was Charles Boyton (1885-1958) who was much better known as a silversmith and designer of silverware. As well it is conjectured and quite probable that the Carvacraft design was completed before the war and the savage interruption to all manufacturing during 1939 to 1945 curbed its development. It is not unusual for major designers to experiment in materials other than that which they are renowned for. The famous glassmaker, Rene Lalique, made one beautiful Bakelite powder box in the early 1930's.

It has always been noteworthy that while Bakelite objects



Note-pad holders

It has always been noteworthy that while Bakelite objects such as radios were popular in the UK during the 30's and 40's, brown was the only colour broadly acceptable to the British community. While entrepreneurial manufacturers such as EK Cole of the EKCO radio company employed a barrage of gifted designers (Wells Coates, Serge Chermayoff, Jesse Collins), the beautifully designed radios, available in whites and greens, were only bought in brown and occasional black. So few coloured UK radios remain from the 30's that it is possible they were only made for exhibitions and never in production runs. One might conjecture that this is a consequence of small and dark houses, mainly with wooden furniture, a lack of wealth and a general British dislike of bright and gaudy objects.

It is possible that the stimulus for the production of these objects may have been the eagerness of the government to bring the British out of the post-war malaise and overcome the inertia and difficulty that faced the country. In 1946 there was a 'BRITAIN CAN MAKE IT' exhibition which featured a number of new materials, prototypes and ideas. Plastics featured significantly and many examples of products were much more colourful than the British were used to.

The Carvacraft series is cast phenol formaldehyde synonymous with Catalin which is generally only seen in products produced in the USA. The Catalin Company of USA took over the patent for Bakelite when it expired in 1927 and produced a cast resin capable of many more colours and individual variations of mottling and swirling. The colourful and highly collectable Catalin radios and jewellery of the 30's are a recognisable feature of American Art Deco style. While there were other coloured Bakelite objects produced in the UK during the 30's and 40's, they were generally made with urea formaldehyde and the colour is nowhere near as vibrant and translucent as Catalin. The ability to add other colours to cast resin during the process means that the swirling in the Carvacraft pieces is individual to each example. Thus, rather than a standard plastic object where every piece is identical in shape and colour, each production run produced slightly different greens and browns, as well as the effect of any additional colours and individual swirling.



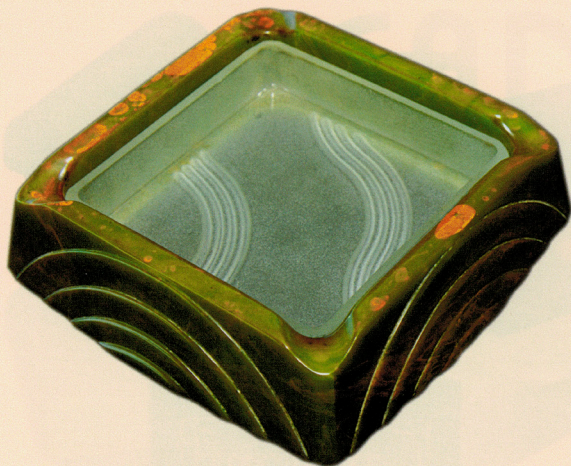
Picture holder with Carvacraft logo



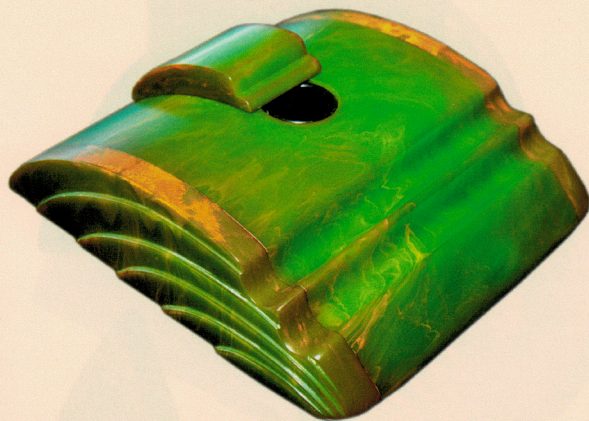
Paper holder



Multi pen holder



Large ashtray



Single inkwell



Letter opener



Bookends

Carvacraft may actually be the only cast resin product ever produced in the UK in commercial quantities and successfully marketed. It may be that the late entry of the Carvacraft range into the British retail market captured a changing appreciation for coloured domestic objects, although it should be said that, by far the more popular colour was brown. As an indication of volume produced, on eBay today one sees 30 brown Carvacraft objects to every single green one. The simulation of jade, onyx and amber was very effective and being plastic was also affordable. Carvacraft was targeted at executives and senior office workers as an indication of success and importance.

The brown series (also called amber, butterscotch, honey and faux tortoiseshell) was by far the most popular. As with Catalin radios and jewellery there is a swirled effect with lighter and darker elements adding to the patina and the simulation of a more valuable material. The much rarer green ranges from a sea green to a jade colour, again with swirling of the green but also with brown inclusions similar to shades of the brown range. A red pin and clip tray which appeared recently on eBay (2009) is probably a modern reproduction as there is no indication from the company that a red series was produced. As well, in the author's 12 years of collecting Carvacraft this is the only red piece which has surfaced.

Carvacraft is recognisable for the incorporation of a free flowing Odeon style geometric decoration. On the side of each piece there are 3-6 stepped parallel arcs which follow the outline and define its general shape. The bookends have two distinct but similar patterns, one on the base and the other in the wave-like body. Boynton's motif is a distinctive and yet understated testimony to his talent, as well as the versatility and timelessness of the Deco embellishment.

On the larger pieces there is a distinctive Carvacraft stamp on the base. The logo of a hand holding a large hammer hitting a carving implement onto a solid material seems to reflect the artisan at work. This reinforces the notion that these items are made of precious stone such as onyx and jade, rather than the mass produced plastic that they are.

The logo also proclaims 'MADE IN GT BRITAIN', which ties in with the post-war attempts to stimulate local production, productivity and national pride.



Calendar



Storage box



Double inkwell



Double inkwell

The following list includes most of the pieces produced by Dickinson in the Carvacraft range.

- |                   |                                       |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Note Pad holder   | Pin & clip tray (stamp sponge wetter) |
| Small ashtray     | Large ashtray                         |
| Single inkwell    | Double Inkwell                        |
| Double pen holder | Box                                   |
| Photo frame       | Calendar                              |
| Large calendar    | Book ends                             |
| Letter opener     | Multiple pen holder                   |
| Ink blotter       | Large desk paper holder               |

As with all collectable items, the best Carvacraft pieces are undamaged and have an intense polished surface. One needs to look out for cracks, chips, crazing, ink stains and burns, all of which devalue the piece.

The production of Carvacraft seems to have ended by 1950. Given the numbers of pieces still around it was by no means a failed economic venture. Thankfully collectors of Art Deco, Bakelite and writing accessories have recognised the intrinsic beauty in the designs and, as such, Carvacraft lives on as a deco icon, albeit with an odd pedigree.

All Images by Peter Sheridan