

## THE BIRTH OF PLASTICS



Leo Hendrik Baekeland (1863 - 1944) was a Belgian chemist who invented Velox photographic paper (1893) and Bakelite (1907), an inexpensive, nonflammable, versatile, and popular plastic.

Baekeland graduated with honors from the Ghent Municipal Technical School and was awarded a scholarship by the City of Ghent to study chemistry at the University of Ghent, where he acquired a PhD summa cum laude at the age of 21. He was subsequently appointed associate professor of chemistry in 1889.

He had an early keen interest in producing a photographic paper that would allow good pictures to be taken in artificial light. After two years of intensive effort he perfected the process to produce the paper, which he named Velox. In 1899 Baekeland was invited to meet George Eastman

(Kodac), who immediately offered him \$1,000,000 for his Velox process. Baekeland accepted at once.

The invention of Bakelite marks the beginning of the Age of Plastics. Bakelite was made from phenol (then known as carbolic acid) and formaldehyde. These can be mixed, heated, and then either molded or extruded. The Nobel Prize in Chemistry winning German Adolf von Baeyer had experimented with this material in 1872, but did not complete its development. Bakelite took the industry by storm after 1907.

Bakelite was the first plastic invented that held its shape after being heated. Radios, telephones and electrical insulators were made of Bakelite because of its properties of insulation and heat-resistance. Soon it penetrated nearly all branches of industry.

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