

New exhibition uncovers plastics' invention and history in east London



Images, clockwise from top left: Halex combs, c1910-1940, courtesy Vestry House Museum, photo Rob Harris; making ping-pong balls in the Halex factory, March 1945, courtesy Vestry House Museum; Parkesine toothbrush blanks c.1866, courtesy Harry Mernick, photo Rob Harris; Halex 'digging for victory' photo, 1939, courtesy Vestry House Museum.

Raw Materials: Plastics Exhibition 17 May – 25 August 2019

Private view Thursday 16 May 6-9pm

In Hackney Wick, 1865, Victorian inventor Alexander Parkes created Parkesine, a precursor to celluloid and one of the world's first man-made plastics. Raw Materials: Plastics traces this material's remarkable journey in east London, presenting early plastic objects and exploring the impact this invention has had on our lives and history since.

Bow Arts' on-going Raw Materials series traces the industrial history of east London's River Lea Valley one material at a time – supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and academic partner University College London (UCL). This year reveals the East End's central role in the

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invention and early development of plastics, beginning with the invention of Parkesine, designed to mimic rare and endangered natural materials such as ivory and tortoiseshell. These first plastics are surprisingly ornate, inlaid with mother of pearl and precious metals and coloured with patterns of brilliant blues and greens. An early billiard ball illustrates the game changer Parkes' invention provided in replacing ivory, which was previously used to make the game's balls. What Parkes began went on to form the originally East End-based British Xylonite Company, whose eponymous Halex brand at one time produced Europe's supply of ping-pong balls.

The story of plastic's evolution continues through the 1930s with Art Deco objects from the Halex brand, including an imitation shark-skin or 'shagreen' dressing table set and trinket boxes with iridescent surfaces mimicking semi-precious stones. Also on show will be photographs of the factory working environments, including the company's 'in-house' fire brigade – all too necessary due to the flammable nature of the materials involved. The exhibition continues with the later years of the British Xylonite Company activity in east London, including its contribution to the second world war and the 1960s celebrations of its Walthamstow base.

New commissions from resident artist makers **Peter Marigold** and **Frances Scott** accompany the historic displays. Marigold responds to the early mould-making techniques of inventor – and artist – Parkes, by making his own wooden moulds and using them to work with 'FormCard', Marigold's own brand of compostable bio-plastic. Scott exhibits a new film, 'PHX [X is for Xylonite]', which draws upon photogrammetry, as well as laser scanning techniques offered through project partner UCL, in order to develop and animate 3D images of early plastic objects. These are collaged with hand-processed 16mm film footage captured in the laboratories at UCL, and of a recent demolition on the site of the original Parkesine factory in Hackney Wick.

An extensive events programme accompanies the exhibition, including boat tours along the River Lea, plastic recycling workshops and discussions on the future and impact of plastics.

For more information and to follow the project see rawmaterials.bowarts.org

For further information and images please contact:

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Notes to editors

Raw Materials: Plastics follows Textiles (2018) and Wood (2017), both of which were previously awarded National Lottery Heritage funding. Raw Materials is a community driven project, whose research is largely carried out by a steering group made up of members of the local community. The project also worked with local schools, as well as inviting UCL students to take part. Thanks to National Lottery players, Bow Arts is proud to continue its flagship heritage project with plastics – a material whose innovation started in east London.

Together with UCL, Bow Arts would like to acknowledge contributing project partners MoDiP (Museum of Design in Plastic, Arts University Bournemouth), the Plastics Historical Society, V&A, the Science Museum, Vestry House Museum, and Barking & Dagenham, Hackney, Suffolk, Newham and Waltham Forest archives.

About Bow Arts

Bow Arts is an arts education charity that provides affordable creative workspaces for over 500 emerging artists. Alongside this, Bow Arts manages one of the country's most exciting education programmes, which takes world-class artists into 90 schools to improve the lives and learning of children and young people. Bow Arts runs the Nunnery Gallery, a public gallery that supports a diverse range of high quality exhibitions and events as well as the delivery of a public arts programme. Established in 1995, Bow Arts holds an important place in east London which is fast becoming known as London's Artist Quarter. www.bowarts.org

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