

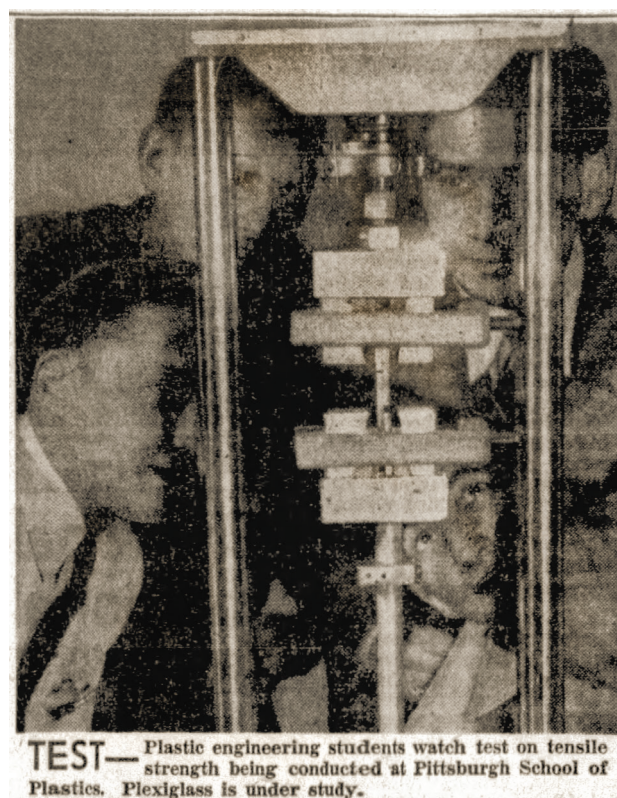
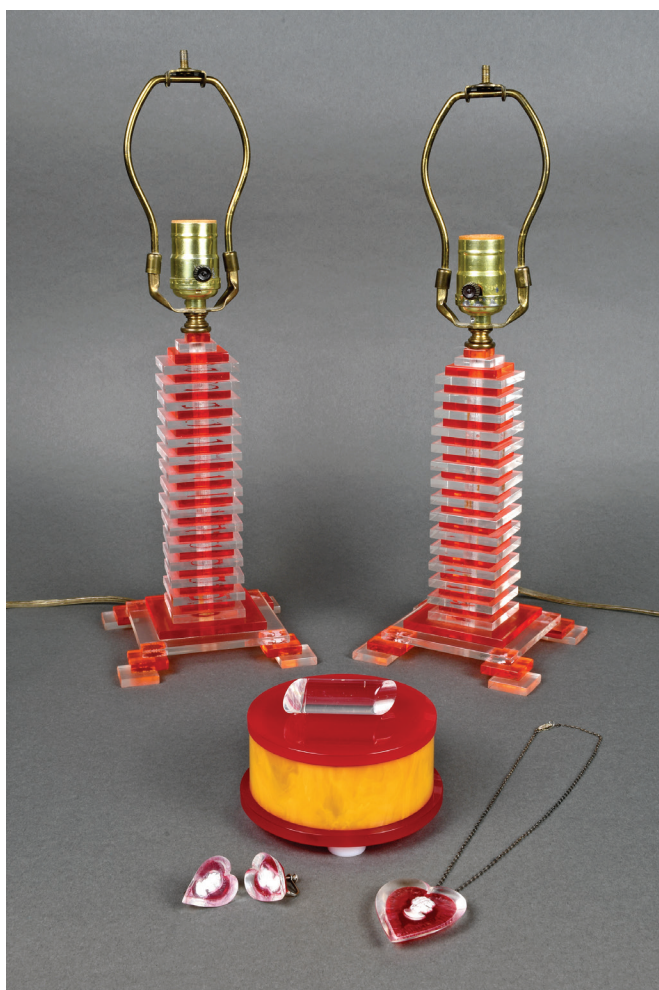
CURATOR'S CORNER

By Emily Ruby, Curator

“One word: plastics!”

Years before that famous line was uttered to Dustin Hoffman’s character in the 1967 film *The Graduate*, the Pittsburgh School of Plastics offered specialized training in “the industry that promises to revolutionize modern manufacturing,” according to a 1946 advertisement in *The Pittsburgh Press*. Plastics were seen as a solution to a more sustainable and carefree future—the postwar period was heralded as the golden age of plastics.

Pittsburgh’s plastics school existed for less than 10 years, and we may never have known about this piece of local history had one former student not saved his class projects and passed them down to his daughter. Walter Bernard Frampton attended the school on the G.I. Bill in 1948. He had graduated from Franklin High School in 1947 after serving in the Navy from 1944 through 1946. After graduation, Frampton worked for the Joy Manufacturing



Above: Plexiglass being studied.

Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph, January 22, 1947.

Left: Lucite lamps, jewelry box, and jewelry made by Walter Frampton at the Pittsburgh School of Plastics, 1948.

HHC Collections, gift of Susan Frampton in Memory of Walter B. Frampton, 2017.91.3, 4, 5, 6. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.


Company, based in Franklin, before moving to Pittsburgh in 1956 to work for Union Switch and Signal. He never did work in the plastics industry, but no doubt used some of the drafting and engineering skills he learned at the school to find plenty of work as a draftsman.

Students at the school worked with a variety of plastic materials and learned how to mold, design, and cast items using this material. The items Frampton made while attending were kept in the family and recently donated to the History Center, including a set of lamps, a jewelry box, and several sets of jewelry. His daughter Susan remembers her mother wearing the red heart necklace, which she kept in the jewelry box on her vanity. The lamps were used in their bedroom and passed down to Susan who used them in her home as well.

The Pittsburgh School of Plastics had launched in December 1942 due to the increased demand for plastics during World War II and the anticipated transition of plastics into the consumer market that would mark the "Age of Plastics." Rationing of aluminum and

other metals accelerated the study and use of plastics in weapons, airplanes, and helmets, to name a few. The school's founders foresaw a wide variety of domestic uses too, from plumbing parts to home furnishings.

The school, located downtown at 508 Third Avenue, was a subsidiary of the Commercial Institute of Pittsburgh. Evening, day, home study, and "war emergency Sunday" classes were covered by the G.I. Bill and included study of the properties of plastics, methods of fabricating, machining, and molding plastics. The school was also advertised to women. In 1947, having grown so popular that it had to relocate, the school had over 300 veterans attending its expanded campus at 2020 West Liberty Avenue. But its rise would not last: by 1951, the school was no longer advertised as part of the Commercial Institute of Pittsburgh. As demand

for graduates in the plastics industry lessened and redevelopment in the Pittsburgh area increased, the school switched its focus to the building trades to meet this new demand for trained construction workers. 

Pittsburgh School of Plastics advertisements.

*The Pittsburgh Press, April 18, 1943.
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, July 4, 1946.*

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