

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors join the Tupperware party

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Where would we be, I ask you, if it hadn't been for Earl Silas Tupper? Would we still be stowing our leftovers in breakable glass containers as our great-grandparents did? Would we have nothing but lingerie to show at our suburban selling parties? Earl Tupper, the man responsible for Tupperware, saved us from all that.

Tupper was a New Hampshire tree surgeon who began working for DuPont when the Depression killed off his business. Having long had the dream of shaping plastics into functional household items, he experimented during his spare time, and then formed his own company, Tupperware Plastics Co. in Farnumville, Mass.

By 1945, he had produced his first pieces using DuPont's synthetic polymer polyethylene, which had been introduced commercially a few years earlier. This material outperformed all previous plastics, in that it was flexible, durable, opalescent, and thus usable for any number of applications.

Since raw materials were scarce during World War II, and Tupper was unable to afford refined plastic, he at first used DuPont's waste material, transforming unrefined black polyethylene slag into a clean, flexible, waterproof, translucent substance, with which he was able to make the plastic food containers that bear his name.

The first products he made were a set of unbreakable 7-ounce bathroom tumblers in a rainbow of plastic colors - "lime, crystal, raspberry, lemon, plum and orange, also ruby and amber" - followed the next year by the bowls with his trademark "burping" lids. This seal, by which a slight flexing of the bowl's snug fitting lid caused the air inside to be expelled, creating a vacuum, while external air pressure reinforced the seal, thereby keeping food fresh.

Tupperware was brought to the full attention of the public in a color feature in the October 1947 issue of "House Beautiful" magazine headlined "Fine Art for 39 cents," which gushed that it was "reminiscent of alabaster and mother of pearl, with a profile as good as a piece of sculpture and the fingering qualities of jade." Earl Tupper took full advantage of this boost, increasing production and promotion, advertising his products as "Poly-T Wonder Bowls" (avoiding the world plastic which then had a disagreeable reputation). Tupperware originally appeared in 25 translucent, frosted pastel hues in a range of kitchen container items, all having the patented airtight seal.

The great promotional gimmick, of course, was Tupper's notion, devised in 1948 with one of his first dealers, Brownie Wise, of holding Tupperware Home Parties, through which local distributors would sell merchandise to "Tupperware Hostesses," who would get free items in return for entertaining groups of friends in their home, thus eliminating retail sales completely.

Tuppermania swept the country as a social phenomenon among newly isolated postwar suburban housewives, and by its third year in business, sales were over \$25 million, growing to more than \$900 million in a few decades. The sales force increased from 200 to 9,000, 95 percent of whom were housewives. It would inevitably become an international sensation, and it is now estimated that a Tupperware demonstration starts every two seconds somewhere in the world. Earl Tupper sold the business to Rexall Drug and Chemical Co. (later Dart Industries) in 1958 for an estimated \$9 million, and retired to Costa Rica.

The minimalist aesthetic qualities of Tupperware have been acknowledged as well: in 1956 several containers were put on display at New York's Museum of Modern Art. When it comes to collecting, however, there is one obvious challenge - there has been such an endless supply produced that it's difficult to judge age or scarcity. Interest has been shown, however, in the early pastel sets and the more unusual items, and also in vintage advertising.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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