

The button : a useful fashion accessory

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Jean Muller S. A., Strengelbach.

Blouse in ULTRAFIX charmeuse ; obtainable in all fashionable shades.

A model from the charmeuse lingerie collection.



The Button : a useful fashion accessory

Daisies spread their white petals on emerald lawns, poppies flaunt their red banners in the cornfields...

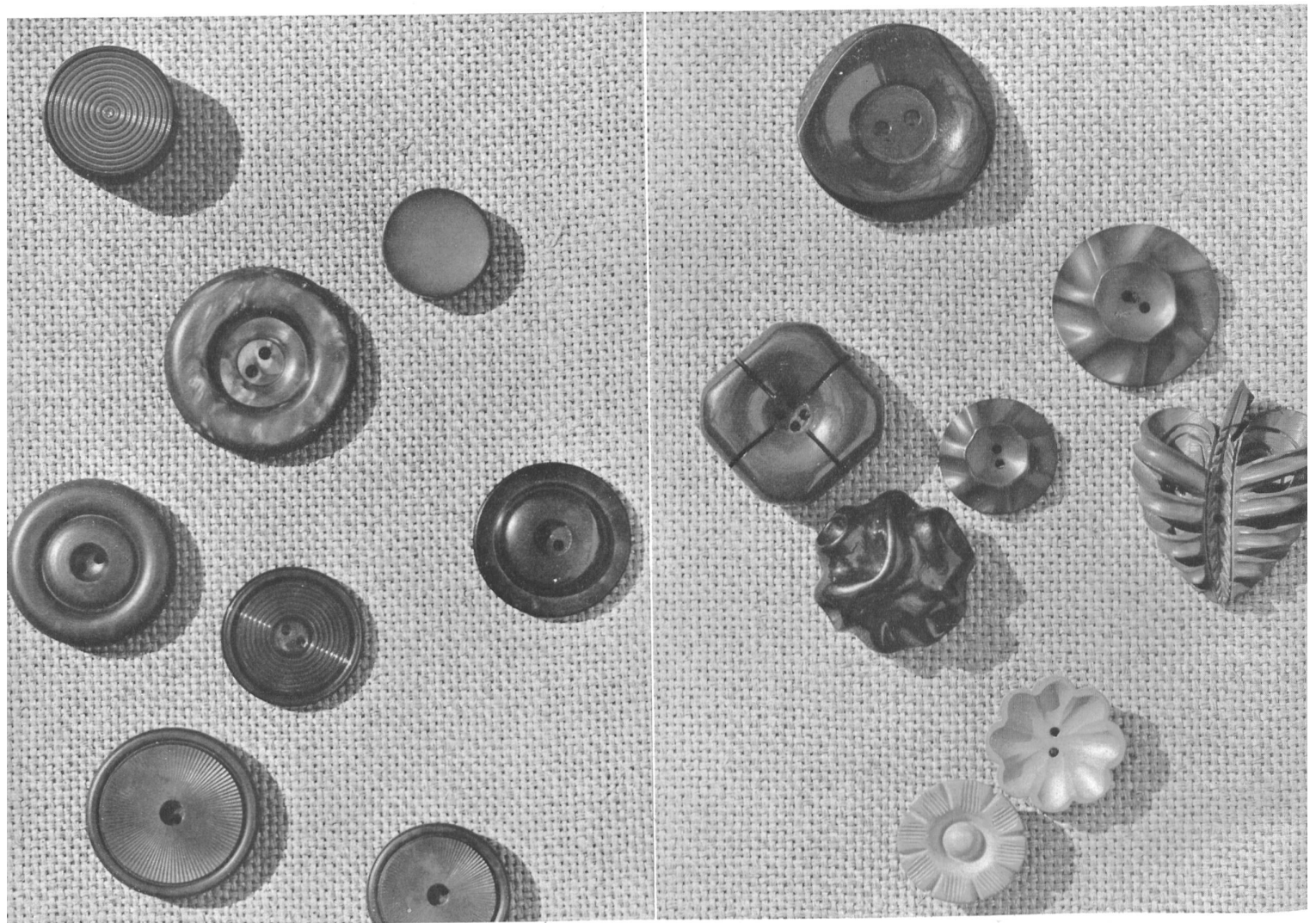
Nature, that blind and instinctive force, rivals everywhere the greatest artists in taste and delicacy of touch, and it is from Nature herself that men have drawn their most fruitful inspirations. Couturiers imitate Dame Nature in many ways and, just as she scatters her many-hued flowers over the grasslands, so fashion creators bestrew their fabrics with a fantasy of buttons of every hue and shape. The button, once a plain, simple object of mere practical utility, has become a fashion accessory subject to all the whims of capricious styles.

Until about ten years ago, Switzerland was entirely dependent on foreign imports of these articles. Nevertheless, certain economic conditions led a Swiss firm to undertake the manufacture of buttons. At that time, the embroidery industry in Eastern Switzerland, which had already then passed through innumerable vicissitudes, was traversing an extremely bleak period of depression, and many firms were obliged to restrict their activity and even, in some cases, to close down entirely. The only other alternative which lay before them was to seek new manufacturing possibilities. A certain firm of the Toggenburg district, Messrs. Grämiger Brothers Ltd. of Bazenheid (Canton of St. Gall), studied the problem thoroughly and in 1934 launched the manufacture of buttons and synthetic horn, an essential raw material for this new industry. It may seem surprising that a firm specialized in the most delicate work of the textile industry, namely embroidery, should launch out in the manufacture of a technical product appertaining to the chemical industry, together with mass-produced articles such as buttons. The choice was, however, founded on solid reasoning. Buttons are, in effect, an important fashion accessory. It was therefore perfectly natural that manufacturers so used to submitting to the vagaries of fashion as embroidery executives are, and always have been, should have considered exploiting to the full the three fundamental qualifications acquired in their old profession : namely, pliancy to the variations in public taste, qualified labour highly specialized in careful workmanship and, last but not least, a sales

organization which had already established connections with foreign fashion centres. On the other hand, button manufacture was at that time non-existent in Switzerland and the brightest prospects lay before this new undertaking, for imports were insufficient and certain economic and political currents were manifest already then.

It is interesting to note that synthetic horn, which is the raw material of button manufacture, was discovered by the Swiss chemist, Adolphe Spitteler, brother of the famous poet, Carl Spitteler. The basis of this product is casein, to which colouring matter is added in the course of manufacture ; the chemical substance is kneaded and pressed into a homogeneous mass and turned out in long strips which, in turn, are sometimes rolled out into sheets. The casein is then transformed into synthetic horn by hardening in a bath of formaldehyde solution, the process lasting several days or even months, according to the shape in which the substance has been prepared. Although the finished product is slightly hygrometric, it can be put to all kinds of uses, for it is lustrous and can be easily polished ; further, synthetic horn can be coloured either in the course of manufacture or tinted later ; it also lends itself to all kinds of processes such as stamping, turning, drilling, engraving, etc. The synthetic horn manufactured today at Bazenheid has been denominated « gremolith ».

The buttons are cut out of sheets of gremolith which have been softened in boiling water ; they are then fashioned by various processes ; the holes are drilled and the finished article is sewn on to cards by girls working in their own homes. This manufacture also includes buckles and other small articles of the same kind.



Grämiger frères S.A., Bazenheid

Photos Heiniger.

At first, the entire gremolith output was destined only to cover the requirements of the Swiss button factory, but demand for synthetic horn has grown steadily both in Switzerland and abroad, and it is now being increasingly exported.

The success of this first button factory in Switzerland has been such, that it now employs a great number of workers formerly specialized in the machine embroidery branch. The firm has furnished living proof of its power of adaptability and output capacity, and Messrs. Grämiger Brothers Ltd. can look forward to encouraging prospects for the postwar period.