

Cleaning & Restoring Buttons

Before cleaning buttons, it is essential to know what material the button is made of, as well as its construction. Also, it is best to have the proper tools or cleaning materials for the job to avoid damaging the button.

The following cleaning techniques have been suggested by a variety of collectors. I have not tested them all. So, experiment on less expensive buttons first. Be cautious. When in doubt, don't clean it. Wait until you can consult with someone who can identify the material and or construction issues.

Things to Remember—

- Do NOT over-clean or over-polish your buttons. Be gentle, a tender touch is best.
- Take special caution when cleaning buttons of several materials
- Do NOT use water on most buttons.
- Do not use any liquid when cleaning glass mounted in metal. The moisture will get under the glass.
- Japanese metalwork and tinted metal buttons should not be polished.
- Strong polishes can destroy golden age buttons and buttons with gold finish. This is true with many thin finishes (such as silver over brass or copper).
- Do NOT use olive oil or vegetable oils; they can become rancid. If an oil is recommended, it is mineral oil. Do not use baby oil as it may contain additives that have their own affect on the buttons. Best to use plain mineral oil.
- A toothbrush can be used on most materials. Be careful with buttons with paint or luster finishes.
- Exposure to sun and air will not harm most buttons. Radiation of the sun's rays will kill fungi and mildew. Allow the button to heat gradually. Do not take from cool place and put in the direct sunlight; they may crack. The exception to this rule are molded horn, celluloid and early plastics, wax and similar temperature sensitive buttons. They can melt or crack in excess heat.

Alphabetic Listing by Materials

Acrylics (also see Plastics)—

- Rub with clean polishing cloth.
- Apply a small amount of lighter fluid on a soft cloth (Cotton) cloth. Rub the acrylic to polish. (Beware: Lighter fluid will remove surface color and paint on other plastics. Also, it is flammable!)

Bone—

- Rub with clean polishing cloth.
- Cut lemon in half, dip in salt and rub over surface, wipe with damp cloth and dry.

Brass—

- Soft (cotton) polishing cloth or jewelry polishing cloth.
- Rub gently with Q-tip covered with acetic acid (vinegar or Worcestershire sauce contains acetic acid). Then wipe clean with a dry cloth.
- Polish with a good commercial jewelry polish such as “FZ Metal Polish”, “Flitz”, “Simichrome”, or similar. Put polish on soft cloth and rub onto the buttons.
- Can put polish on toothbrush and rub into small areas.
- All polishes tend to leave a residue in cracks and small areas that are difficult to wipe out. Use a clean tooth brush or fine metal brush to remove the residue; it can eat into the surface of the metal if left there.
- For extreme cleaning: If there is no paint or other finish, use an electric Dremel tool. This will remove the green powdery rust and oxidation, but not scratch the button. Be very careful to remove as little metal as possible. You could accidentally polish a hole through the button.

Celluloid—

- Wipe with soft (cotton) cloth. Be very careful if there is painting on the button.
- Although celluloid with celluloid shanks may be washed gently in water, it’s best to avoid water.
- Many celluloid buttons have metal in their construction. These should NEVER be submerged in water. It will rust from within and ruin the button.

Ceramic—

- If the ceramic has been fired, the button can be wiped with a damp cloth or glass cleaner.
- If it has been low-temperature fired (or not fired), it will be difficult to clean without removing the glaze or paint. American Indian ceramic buttons are often low-fired and very delicate. So simply wipe with a dry, soft (cotton) cloth.

Composition—

- Wipe with a soft (cotton) cloth.
- Use mineral oil or furniture polish on a soft cloth.
- Natural self-shining shoe polish will shine the button.

Copper—

- Use polishing cloth. It's okay to use a copper cleaner if the button has no other materials on/in it.

Enamels—

- Use a cloth moistened with household ammonia to wipe the button. Will remove the dust and dirt, but not the enamel. DO NOT use if button is just painted. It WILL REMOVE paint.
- Rub with damp cloth or metal polish. (Metal polish should be a match to the metal, such as copper or silver.) Dry thoroughly.
- Motawala enamels use a camera technique for decoration that is not fired; take great caution in cleaning them. DO NOT use water or a silver polish.

Fabric—

- NEVER rub or brush even if material seems strong, threads are often brittle and will break easily.
- Use a soft bristle brush such as a make-up brush to gently brush away dirt and debris.
- Use condensed air can (used for computer keyboards) to blow away dirt, etc.; or use a vacuum to suck away the dirt.
- If you must use liquid to remove a stain, use a gentle soap, such as Orvis, designed for heirloom fabrics. Only use liquid if you are confident it will dry within 1 to 2 hours. Or use a hair dryer to ensure it dries (low heat).
- For persistent stains, put a small amount of cleaning fluid into a glass jar. Put the buttons into the fluid and shake or stir for a minute or two. Remove buttons, lay on absorbent cloth, outdoors to dry. The air will help to evaporate the fluid. DO NOT use this method if there is trim that has been glued on (rather than sewed on). Another

option is to put the cleaning fluid on a cloth, then use the cloth to touch up spots on the button.

Glass—

- Be very cautious when cleaning buttons with luster and paint. It may rub off easily.
- Glass with foil under glass should be wiped with a dry cloth.
- Gently wipe with a polishing cloth or,
- Gently wipe with a cloth slightly moistened with white vinegar and water, Windex, or similar.
- Only soli glass with a self (glass) shank and no painting, and no luster and no trim can be put in warm soapy and then dried thoroughly. Diluted ammonia (in water) is also okay with these all glass buttons.
- Do NOT spray water or cleaner on glass mounted in metal. It will instantly creep under the glass and damage paint or other materials, or corrode the metal.

- In April 2003 collector, George Gauthier, mentioned there is a syndrome referred to as “sick glass buttons”. It is usually due to a miss-formulation of the original glass mixture, resulting in particles being carried to the surface. Storing the buttons in a controlled temperature environment stops the movement and prevents further degradation. Here is his suggestion for buttons with this condition: 1) gently clean the surface material (using a dry or damp cloth); 2) put the button into a dry box using a drying agent like silica gel; and 3) spray the button with a good sealer that would also restore the shine. Any clear acrylic spray will do. Note that acrylic spray will harm metal, so should not be used if the button has any metals on it. If the acrylic covering darkens over time, it can be removed with acetone; then respray the button. (Thanks to Yessy Byl for this information.)

Horn—

- Do NOT use water.
- To kill bugs: Place buttons with moth balls into a lidded glass jar. Leave for several days closed. Remove buttons and place in direct sunlight and fresh air (to get rid of moth ball fumes/smell).
- Use a soft cloth with mineral oil to “polish”. Or place buttons in a jar with mineral oil. Soak overnight. Remove excess oil from the buttons. (It will stain your mounting card.)
- (I don’t recommend:) Color can be restored with a bit of good quality shoe polish applied with a cloth; remove the excess. Some individuals recommend using Kiwi Leather Balm or any natural cream shoe polish on natural horn.

Ivory—

- Rub with soft, clean cotton cloth.
- Cut lemon in half, dip in salt and rub over surface, wipe with damp cloth and dry.
- Rub with soft cloth and mineral [oil?]. Wipe dry.
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Leather—

- Use saddle soap, Neetsfoot Oil, or neutral shoe cream.
- Mineral oil also works well.

Metals (Also see individual metal types)—

- NEVER submerge two-piece buttons into a liquid. Many of them have a cardboard disc in the center, which will absorb water and eventually destroy the button.
- Do NOT use metal polish on Japanese Damascene. The steel has been lacquered which will be damaged.
- Do NOT polish Tole buttons (lacquered again).
- Do NOT polish "Tints" — metal buttons with painted finishes.

Pearl or shell—

- Luster can often be restored by rubbing with a soft cloth moistened with mineral oil. If no trim or painting on the button, you may soak for a while.
- Shell buttons that have no finish, no paint, not metal, may be washed with soapy water and a soft brush. Then dry with cotton towel. Finish by wiping with mineral oil.
- If there is a combination of steel or other materials on the button, then use the moistened cloth with great care. (Consider using a hair dryer on low heat to ensure all water moisture is gone from the metal parts.)

Pewter—

- Use jewelers polishing cloth.
- Use the outer leaf from a head of cabbage as a polishing cloth, then buff with soft cloth.
- Brush with a high-quality metal polishing brush or Dremel tool).
- Use a chrome polish, Simichrome, Brasso, Weno!, or similar.

Plastic a.k.a. Synthetic Polymers—

- Wipe with damp cloth.
- If one-piece and no paint on button, it can be washed with mild soapy water.

- Apply a small amount of a citrus-based cleaner such as “DeSolvit” or “GooGone” (by Magic American Corp.) to a soft cloth or cotton swab. Wipe the button gently to remove direct, glue and other gunk.

Rubber—

- Wipe off with soft cotton polishing cloth; or dust with a fine soft brush such as a make up brush.
- Wipe with a small dab of furniture polish or mineral oil on a soft cloth.
- Some suggest using shoe polish to restore luster. I discourage this as it may change the color from its original.

Silver—

- Silver in its purist form does not oxidize. Sterling is often only 92.5% pure. Copper is a common additive.
- Use a good silver (or copper) polish. (To make your own polish, combine 3 parts baking soda with one-part water.) Use a soft sponge to apply polish. Can put polish on toothbrush and rub into small areas. All polishes tend to leave a residual in cracks and small areas that are difficult to wipe out. Use a clean toothbrush or fine metal brush to remove the residue. It can eat into the surface of the metal if left there. Do a final “polishing” with a clean, soft (cotton) cloth.
- Use jewelers polishing cloth.

Steel—

- If the steel has an applied tint, DO NOT attempt to clean. If other materials such as pearl are a part of the button, use extra caution not to damage that material. Be aware of what will damage that additional material. Always make sure your hands are dry when working with steel. Low quality steel (i.e. iron) rusts easily.
- Brush well with a high quality fine metal brush or Dremel Tool.
- Rub with the lead of a pencil or an ink eraser to remove rust. (Sorry, this is a temporary solution; the rust will return unless it is fully treated.)
- Soft cotton cloth or jewelers polishing cloth. “Neverdull” and “Simichrome” are commercial polishes that work on steel. (Found in your local automotive supplies store.)
- Rust can be removed with a 000-steel wool or a commercial rust remover. Consider a metal sealer of some sort after this treatment.

Tin or Zink—

- Rub with a soft eraser to remove rust.
- Wipe with a clean soft (cotton) cloth.

- Baking soda can be used, too.

Turquoise—

- Use a soft dry (cotton) cloth. DO NOT use water.

Uniform buttons—

- If metal, determine what the metal is. If it appears to be a metal plate over another metal, use extra caution to remove as little metal as possible when polishing. Use the appropriate metal polish (as listed herein).
- Soft cotton cloth or jewelers polishing cloth.
- For rubber, composition and other materials, see those listings herein.
- If the uniform button is still on the uniform, there are hinged metal tools that can be placed between the button and the fabric to protect the fabric while you polish the button. These are hard to find, however. Consider removing the button and re-sewing it after polishing or prior to polishing, place a heavy fabric such as felt or wool as a protective layer between the button and the uniform. In this case, use no water with your polish.

Vegetable Ivory—

- Do not use water.
- Rub gently with a polishing cloth.
- Polish with Kiwi Leather Balm.
- Use a soft cloth with either furniture polish or mineral oil.

White metal—

- Rub the dingy areas with a crumpled piece of aluminum foil.
- Soft cotton cloth or jewelers polishing cloth.
- Brush with high quality brass brush or Dremel Tool.
- Polish with high quality metal polish.
- Can make your own polish by making a paste of three parts baking soda and one-part water.

Wood—

- Do not use water.
- Use a soft cloth with either wood furniture polish or mineral oil.

- Be cautious with those that have other material trim. Many other trims do not take well to furniture polish.

Yellow metal—

- Soft cotton cloth or jewelry polishing cloth.
- Polish with a high-quality metal polish.
- Brush with a high-quality brass brush or Dremel Tool.
- Make your own polish with a paste of 1 tablespoon of salt, flour, and vinegar. Use a soft cloth to apply the polish.
- **BEWARE** gilt or gold leaf buttons are fragile. The metal layer is very thin and can be polished away. This is particularly true of early gilt or Golden Age buttons from the early 19th Century as well as uniform buttons.

Jeweler's Polishing Cloths (with Rouge)

<https://www.jewelry-secrets.com/Blog/jewelry-polishing-cloths/>

- Using Polishing Cloths with Rouge is a **2-step Process**. The first thing you'll want to do is to use the Rouge Layer (usually the Inner or Second Cloth) that contains the **Jeweler's Compound**.
- Gently Rub this Compound into any Surface Scratches or Dings you may have. If the Dings or Dents are too Deep, you'll need to take your Ring into a Jeweler for a **Professional Filing and Polishing**. But for Mild Scratches, Marks and Normal Wear and Tear, a **Polishing Cloth with Rouge works Great!**
- Rub and Buff the Scratches until they are Gone or Faint (You don't want to take off too much of the Metal, **so be Cautious!**) Then switch Cloths and Wipe with the Untreated Cloth (usually the Outside Layer) to Remove the Rouge and Shine the piece up.
- Sometimes Rouge (**which Turns Dark and Black**) builds up Beneath the Diamonds, Gemstones and Mounting. You may then have to put your Ring or item in an Ultrasonic Cleaner or a Jewelry Steam Cleaner to fully Remove this Compound... If not, **it may Rub off on your Skin or Clothing!**
- Rouge really can make your Jewelry look like new again. **I highly advise using it!**

STORAGE OF BUTTONS

In general, it is best to store like materials together.

- Celluloid should be stored alone. Certain forms of celluloid may degrade and give off a gas that could lead to corrosion of metal parts. This off-gassing also may contribute to degradation of other Celluloid buttons nearby. Ideally, Celluloid should be mounted on acid-free cards, which should be examined every six months for signs of degradation.

Celluloid buttons that are in the process of degrading should be isolated, and unfortunately, may have to be discarded.

- Cellulose acetate buttons are better stored together, although it is okay to store them with other materials under good conditions. Acetate may degrade if subjected to very bad storage conditions for a long time. The degradation process of cellulose acetate is much less dramatic than that of Celluloid.
- Make sure plastic buttons can “air” periodically to release the chemical fumes that build up in an enclose container. A consistent moderate temperature and humidity level is desirable. Metalized plastic should be stored alone, too. It, too, is highly corrosive if stored with other materials.