BACKGROUND BUTTONS #2: Celluloid
Second in a Series Concerning Background Buttons
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Buttons with celluloid backgrounds are not as plentiful as those with wood backgrounds, but they exhibit greater variety in appearance and construction. First, let us review the section on backgrounds from the National Button Society classification.

From the NBS Classification Guide

SECTION 1 CELLULOID
1-4 Sheet assorted
1-4.1 Background

SECTION 23 – SPECIFIC TYPES
23-1 Backgrounds assorted
23-1.1 Celluloid
23-1.2 Fabric
23-1.3 Glass
23-1.4 Metal assorted
23-1.4.1 Screen
23-1.4.2 Twinkle
23-1.5 Shell
23-1.6 Wood

Includes woven wood backgrounds as well as single piece.
(from the glossary)
23-1.7 Unlisted (galena, etc.)

Backgrounds
Refers to buttons of a composite nature that are usually, but not always, mounted in metal and have a separate contrasting material serving as an unimposing visual background for the entire design. Most backgrounds are flat, but may be contour as long as the rim of the mounting encloses the edge of the background material. When mounted in metal, the background material is the “base” material, not other material embellishment (OME). May include some designs under glass (fabric or foil behind cut-out ivory under glass, etc.). Backgrounds half obscured by the designs are acceptable. Buttons with prominent center escutcheon type designs are acceptable if other criteria are met. Buttons with a cut out design, backed by fabric or other material, are also acceptable, as are backgrounds that are sew throughs. Protrusions are not appropriate here.

Celluloid Buttons which are NOT Backgrounds

Let’s examine some buttons which do NOT qualify as background buttons:
TOP: These three buttons are protrusions. In a protrusion construction, the celluloid face is perforated and has a different material that “protrudes” up through the surface holes. Sometimes one must look very carefully to discern whether the celluloid is perforated or not. These are not considered backgrounds.

CENTER: These two buttons do not have metal or other material in front of the celluloid. They are examples of celluloid mounted in metal.

BOTTOM: The brass buckle with cut steel OME is PART of the depiction, and the rest of the belt is stenciled onto the celluloid. "Backgrounds are unimposing, not part of the subject" — the belt in this case (emphasis added).

CELLULOID BACKGROUNDS: IMITATION OF OTHER MATERIALS

Celluloid is a great imitator of other materials, and the variety of celluloid backgrounds reflects this.

IMITATING CRYSTALLIZED TIN

The scrolled designs in the brass pattern are further decorated with a silver/gray finish, and the celluloid background imitates crystallized tin.

IMITATING WOOD

Although many parties have conjectured, the editor has been unable to discover a definitive identification of this button.

IMITATING FABRIC

Celluloid sheet is textured to imitate woven fabric and brass foreground imitates fabric cording.

IMITATING PEARL

Puppy in a basket, playing with a kitten. Brass over celluloid imitating shell. Notice the pearlized finish on the celluloid.
Cherubs “Over the Wall.” This is a rather familiar button to most collectors, but the imitation tortoise shell background is very unusual.

Brass rose wreath on imitation tortoise celluloid background.

Two examples of buttons with celluloid backgrounds imitating ivory. Note the striations that give them credibility.

LEFT: Victorian celluloid: popular in the late 19th century.
RIGHT: Anchor with nine point star.

Celluloid backgrounds: Textured Surfaces

Sheet celluloid can be molded to represent many textures. These can be so profound so that they almost overwhelm the button design, or they can be so subtle that they require magnification to see.

These two buttons, depicting an armor helmet, have identical buffed celluloid backgrounds in two different colors. Buffing is a decorative finish, wherein the coloring is “buffed” to a lighter shade on the textured high points.

This texture is subtle, resembling woven fabric. The celluloid background area is the central portion of the button, with a wide openwork border. The escutcheon is a six point white metal star.

Here is a celluloid background button that is half smooth finish and half textured finish. The textured finish is paint filled for a more dramatic effect.
These three backgrounds have straight ridges that resemble a washboard. The ridges on the button to the right are so fine as to almost require magnification to see. All of these buttons are Victorian celluloids. Note the paste jewel embellishment and the openwork border on the button to the right.

**CELLULOID BACKGROUNDS: COLORS**
(Solid, mottled, marbled, & striped)

- **BLACK**
  Celluloid sheet shifts from solid black to black and white stripes about half way through the button.

- **TAN**
  Open work stylized flower with paste embellishment. Looped border. Textured tan celluloid background.

- **RED**
  Brass anchor is molded as one with the chain link border.

- **BROWN**
  Couple in gondola with light brown celluloid background.

- **LAVENDAR**
  White metal rose is molded as one with the border. Shiny white metal liner highlights the border.

- **CREAM**
  Art Nouveau stylized flower design over smooth, creamy celluloid background.

Celluloid backgrounds come in a variety of colors, including solid, blended and striped.
CREAM WITH IRRIDESCENT DECORATIVE FINISH

Celluloid sheet is iridescent. Brass has steel cut embellishment and gilt decorative finish. Conventional design with oval windows and a six point central radial design.

THESE CELLULOID BACKGROUNDS ALSO IMITATE PEARLIZED GLASS.

MOTTLED or MOTTLED

A sew-through celluloid background of mottled cream and brown. The brass front has both a floral and linear border. The brass has multiple tints.

Mottled celluloid background in marbled yellows and dark browns. Eleven point star/comet design is embellished with a center of black glass.

Mottled grey and green background. Paint decorative finish on metal foreground.

Crossed cannons in white metal over a black and grey mottled background.

Mottled or marbled backgrounds are common in Victorian celluloids. There are many different color combinations and styles of marbling.
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Winged cherub riding in what may be a chariot. Note mask of Bacchus in back of the chariot.

This antique photo provides a little historical reference for how some of our celluloid background buttons might have been worn. The well dressed woman in the photograph is wearing the button, pictured above, on her dress bodice. The bodice appears to close off-center on the left side of the dress. Three buttons are visible in this photo.