A hybrid injection molding machine that has the capability to draw a decorative or other sheet into a mold cavity prior to injection into the mold has opposing male and female mold parts. One of the mold parts has an insert formed from a porous metal so that a vacuum may be drawn through the insert in order to draw a decorative sheet into all aspects of the insert cavity. The decorative sheet is held in place with a retention mechanism that is selectively attachable to either of the two mold blocks.
FIG. 1

PREPARE POROUS MOLD CAVITY

OPEN MOLDING MACHINE AND SET UP MACHINE

REGISTER FILM WITH MOLD CAVITY

LOCK FILM IN PLACE IN REGISTRATION WITH MOLD CAVITY

SOFTEN FILM BY HEATING OR OTHER SUITABLE MEANS

DRAW FILM INTO INITIAL CONTACT WITH MOLD CAVITY UNDER VACUUM

CLOSE MOLDING MACHINE BY ADVANCING MOLD CORE TO MOLD CAVITY

INJECT MOLDING MATERIAL INTO MOLDING MACHINE

EJECT FINISHED PART

DECORATE FILM FOR USE WITH MOLDED PART
METHOD OF MANUFACTURING FILM INSERT MOLDING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates generally to molding processes and articles molded thereby and, more particularly to an improved molding process in which decorative films are formed with the forming of the article to enhance the cosmetic appearance thereof.

[0002] Injection molding is used widely to produce numerous articles. These articles range from articles with simple configuration such as plates, light switches and the like to more complex molded shapes, such as wireless telephone housings. These molded articles often need to be decorated to enhance their visual appeal and their saleability. Some such articles may be decorated in the simplest sense of the term, by either adding pigments to the pellets of plastic used in the injection molding process or by using colored pellets to mold the article. Although these two methods are effective for coloring the molded article, they result in solid coloring of the article and are ineffective in forming any complex decorative appearance to the molded article.

[0003] Some other processes are known in the injection molding art for decorating molded products. One such process involves the use of stamping or otherwise applying a foil layer to the exterior of the molded product. In this process, the foil is applied to the molded article after the article is molded and ejected from the molding machine. This metal foil is thin and is prone to breakage on sharp corners and complex curves of the molded article. Registration problems are also encountered with this process.

[0004] Another process for decorating molded articles involves the use of "pad" printing in which colors or designs are applied to the molded article after molding, by way of one or some more printing pads. These pads are formed of foam rubber or other pliable material and have one or more inks deposited on their exterior surfaces, which are subsequently applied to the molded article. Problems exist in that the pad may not contact all the intended surfaces of the article and thus may not accurately apply the ink(s) to all surfaces, especially complex surfaces of the molded article. Similarly, the exterior surface of a molded article may serve to frustrate the use of screen printing the molded article. Hydrographies, the use of floating a decal in water and then applying it to the molded article, has its own limitations in that the decals are prone to tearing and there exist great difficulties in accurately registering the decals in place on a complex molded article.

[0005] In-mold decorating is yet another process that has been used to decorate injection molded articles. This process involves introducing a decorative film into the mold cavity. However, the film is delicate and fragile. It also has registration problems with complex molded articles inasmuch as the film inserted into the mold cavity is die cut. The walls and surfaces of the mold cavity are used for registration of the film in the mold cavity, and the mold cavity may not be modified to create any registration means. As such, this process is effectively limited to application to flat surfaces in the mold and on the final molded article, such as label recesses. It also cannot provide any details along the z-axis of the mold cavity or along the sides of the finished molded article.

[0006] A still further process involves the use of a decorative "preform", where an outer, decorative shell is formed complying to the configuration of the final molded article and it is inserted into the mold cavity prior to the injection of liquid plastic or other molding material into the mold cavity. The shape of this preform must conform accurately to the final configuration of the molded article. Where openings are molded into the article during the molding process, registration between the preform and the mold cavity must be critically maintained. Thin wall portions of the preform may result in leakage of the injected melt and problems with the finished article, leading to high rejection rates.

[0007] A need therefore exists for an improved molding process for decorating the surfaces of a molded article that complements the usual operational parameters of the molding process and which overcomes the aforementioned disadvantages of the prior art.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The present invention is therefore directed to a molding process in which a decorative film is applied to the exterior surface of a molded article.

[0009] Accordingly, it is a general object of the present invention to provide an improved molding process in which a decorative film is formed onto the exterior surface of a molded article during the actual molding thereof.

[0010] Another object of the present invention is to provide a hybrid injection molding process in which a decorative film is first prepared and subsequently intimately attached to a molded article by drawing the decorative film into the mold cavity, injecting a liquid melt into the mold cavity so that an intimate attachment results between the molded article and its associated decorative film.

[0011] Still another object of the present invention is to provide an improved molding process in which a film sheet is decorated with a preselected decorative pattern is applied in registration with a mold cavity, the film sheet is heated and drawn into the mold cavity by negative air pressure so that

[0012] the film sheet is in contact with substantially all of the mold cavity interior surfaces, and a liquid melt, typically a liquid plastic, is injected into the mold cavity so that it entirely fills the mold cavity and contacts the film sheet so that when the liquid melt is cooled and the article is ejected from the mold cavity, the film sheet is intimately attached to the molded article.

[0013] Yet another object of the present invention is to provide a molding process for forming decorative molded articles that includes the following steps: modifying a mold cavity, preferably the core side, to include registration means for maintaining a decorative film sheet in registration with the mold core cavity; applying the decorative film sheet to the mold core cavity; softening the decorative film sheet; applying negative air pressure to at least a portion of the mold core cavity to draw the decorative film into the mold core cavity and at least into partial contact with the surfaces of the mold core cavity; bringing an opposing mold detail member into engagement with the mold core to form a final mold cavity; and, injecting a liquid molding compound into
the mold cavity under pressure to form a molded article, the decorative film sheet being bonded to the molded article along substantially all of the exterior surfaces of the molded article.

[0014] A still further object of the present invention is to provide a molding machine for performing a hybrid molding process in which a decorative film sheet is drawn into one of two coating mold blocks in order to contact the interior surface of the one mold block, and a heated molding compound is injected under pressure into the mold cavity so that the decorative film sheet becomes bonded to the molded article, the molding machine having means for holding the film in place over one of the two mold blocks and in registration with the mold cavity of the one mold block, the machine further having means for drawing the decorative film sheet into the one mold block through the cavity of the one mold block and means for maintaining the film sheet in place during injection of molding material into the mold cavity.

[0015] A yet still further object of the present invention is to provide a unique molded article having a body portion and an exterior decorative portion, the two portions of the molded article being intimately attached to each other.

[0016] Yet another object of the present invention is to provide a decorative sheet for insertion into a mold cavity and subsequent attachment thereof to a molded article during the molding of the article, the sheet having a decorative area defined thereon that includes a decorative pattern for attachment to the molded article, the decorative area being printed, painted or otherwise formed, the decorative area having a surface area that is generally no smaller than a corresponding surface area of the mold cavity, the decorative sheet including means for registering the sheet and the decorative area in alignment with the mold cavity, the decorative sheet registration means engaging a complementary registration means formed on one of the mold blocks of the molding machine, preferably the mold cavity or core block, and the decorative sheet further having a flat profile so that it can be easily interposed and held in place between the two molding blocks of the molding machine during the molding process.

[0017] Another object of the present invention is to provide an injection molding machine that is adapted for hybrid molding in which a film is inserted into the mold cavity, as part of the injection molding process, the molding machine having at least two opposing mold blocks, one of the two mold blocks including a mold core portion and the other of the two mold blocks including a mold detail portion, the molding machine further including a member that is selectively interposed between the two mold blocks to, in essence, “capture” a film sheet therebetween, the captive member and at least one of the two mold blocks having cooperating means for registering the film sheet with the one mold block, one of the two mold blocks including a porous insert that forms a portion of the mold cavity, the porosity of the insert enabling negative air pressure to be applied thereto so that a portion of the film sheet may be drawn into the mold cavity.

[0018] These and other objects of the invention are enabled by the unique steps set out in the methods of the present invention and by the novel structure of certain aspects of the equipment used in methods of the invention.

[0019] As exemplified by one embodiment of the invention, a molding machine that has two mold coating mold blocks, one mold block providing a mold core and the other mold block providing a mold core detail, is modified to accept a decorative film sheet in place over one of the mold blocks, preferably that providing the mold core. The mold core block has means for registering the decorative film sheet in a preselected position between the two mold blocks, such as a plurality of raised pins extending axially outwardly from the outer surface of the mold core block. These registration pins are disposed outside the perimeter of the mold core so that a placement mechanism may be used to apply the film sheet to the mold core block.

[0020] The placement mechanism preferably takes the form of a robotic placement arm that is movable in three different spatial axes, such as conventional x-axis, y-axis and z-axis so that proper placement of the decorative film sheet may be assured. The placement mechanism may include a film gripping means such as vacuum-driven cups that selectively contact predetermined portions of the film sheet and can release it on demand. The placement arm may have hollow portions associated therewith that serve to mate with the raised registration pins of the mold core block.

[0021] The molding machine also incorporates a retention mechanism that holds the film in place, and captures it in a position on the mold core block and between the mold core and detail blocks. This utilizes a novel retention plate that is held in place over the film sheet and over the mold core block by an electromagnetic system that is capable of selective energization, that when energized, clamps the film sheet in place across the parting line of the mold core block. This retention plate may utilize its electromagnetic attachment aspect to attach itself to either of the two mold blocks of the machine so that it may be initially attached to the mold core block and then attached to the mold core detail block when the two mold blocks are opened. A heat source that is selectively movable in and out of heating contact with the film sheet is also provided and is utilized to soften the film sheet so that it may be more easily drawn into the mold cavity. This heating contact occurs by means of an opening formed in the retention plate.

[0022] The mold core block preferably includes a mold core insert disposed therein that is formed from a porous metal insert. A vacuum is drawn on the mold core cavity by way of these pores when negative air pressure is applied to the mold core cavity, thereby negating the need for modifying either the mold core or the mold detail with vacuum passages that may weaken the overall strength of the mold core and its cavity. By using this porous insert, the vacuum is drawn evenly through the mold core cavity and the decorative film is uniformly drawn into the mold core cavity. Once the film is drawn into the mold core cavity, the mold detail is moved into the mold core cavity and a liquid molding material is injected into the resultant cavity. The injected molding material attaches itself to the film sheet that overlies the mold core cavity and assists in moving the film sheet to the outer reaches of the mold core cavity, to the extent that the vacuum drawing step has not accomplished this. The porosity of the entire or selected portion of the mold core cavity, permits complex geometric shapes to be molded with an outer and sometimes decorative skin integrally attached to the final molded article.
[0023] After the decorative film is drawn into the mold cavity, the two mold blocks are brought together to close and seal the mold cavity. An injection nozzle is brought into contact with the mold blocks and, in the preferred embodiment of the invention, is brought in from the mold core side of the mold cavity. Its initial injection of molding material pieces through the film sheet drawn into the mold. Molten molding material then fills the cavity against the film sheet and becomes bonded to it. The injection pressure of the molding material also serves to force any remaining portions of the film sheet into contact with the mold core cavity.

[0024] In accordance with a second embodiment of the invention, when the liquid molding material is injected, and typically the injected material will be a heated and liquefied plastic, a homogenous one-piece plastic part is formed with an integral "skin" applied to the exterior surface thereof. The film sheet may be applied to either to exterior or to the interior surfaces of the final molded part by simply attaching the decorative film sheet to either the mold core or detail mold block. The film may have any one of a number of different designs disposed thereon and by different means such as screen printing, photolithography for example.

[0025] These and other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will be clearly understood through consideration of the following detailed description.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0026] In the course of the following description of the detailed description, reference will be made to the attached drawings wherein like reference numerals identify like parts and wherein:

[0027] FIG. 1 is a simplified flowchart illustrating the steps of a combined insert-injection molding operation according to the principles of the present invention;

[0028] FIGS. 2-7 are schematic diagrams that cooperatively illustrate one molding cycle in accordance with the principles of the present invention, wherein FIG. 2 is an exploded schematic view illustrating the major components used in the molding processes of the present invention;

[0029] FIG. 3 is a schematic perspective view of the placement arm assembly placing a sheet of decorative film onto a mold cavity block;

[0030] FIG. 4 is a schematic perspective view illustrating the step of removing the robotic placement arm after the decorative film has been placed in registration with the mold cavity block;

[0031] FIG. 5 is a schematic view illustrating the step of locking the decorative film into place on the mold cavity block and bringing a heating means in proximity to it to heat the plastic sheet;

[0032] FIG. 6 is a schematic view illustrating the step of bringing the mold core block toward the mold cavity block to hold the locking plate and decorative film in place within the overall mold head so that injection may take place;

[0033] FIG. 7 is a schematic view illustrating the step of separating the mold cavity and core blocks apart after plastic or other molding material has been injected into the resultant mold cavity so that the molded part and decorative film assembly may be removed from the mold;

[0034] FIG. 8 is a plan view of a decorative film sheet used in the process of the present invention as shown in FIGS. 2-7 above;

[0035] FIG. 9 is a top plan view of a conventional molded article formed by injection molding;

[0036] FIG. 10 is a top plan view of a molded assembly formed with the processes of the present invention in which a decorative film is intimately molded to the molded article, illustrated as a wireless telephone housing half, the assembly being shown as it is removed from the mold;

[0037] FIG. 11 is a bottom plan view of the molded assembly of FIG. 10 illustrating the detail side of the molded assembly;

[0038] FIG. 12 is a perspective view of the article formed in the molded assembly of FIGS. 10 and 11, but with the excess portion of the decorative sheet removed therefrom to form a finished wireless telephone housing component;

[0039] FIG. 13 is a cross-sectional view of the molded article of FIG. 12 illustrating the intimacy of the molded bonding between the decorative film and the injection molded article;

[0040] FIG. 14 is a perspective view of the cavity side of an injection molding machine illustrating a mold cavity formed in accordance with the principles of the present invention, and illustrated in an open, ready position on the injection molding machine;

[0041] FIG. 15 is a perspective view, taken from below, of a robotic placement arm and film carrier used to place a decorative film in registration on the mold cavity block;

[0042] FIG. 16 is a perspective view of the robotic placement arm of FIG. 15 but taken from a different angle and illustrating the decorative film in place on the placement arm;

[0043] FIG. 17 is a perspective view of the injection molding machine of FIG. 14 illustrating the placement arm in registration with the mold cavity block and placing the decorative film in place thereon;

[0044] FIG. 18 is the same view as FIG. 17, but illustrating the placement arm withdrawn and a film retention plate thereover holding the film in place;

[0045] FIG. 19 is the same view as FIG. 18, but illustrating a heat source brought into proximity with the opening on the locking plate in opposition to the decorative film and the mold cavity.

[0046] FIG. 20 is a perspective isolated view, taken from above, of the major components of the molding machine of the present invention, illustrating the film retention plate in place over the mold detail block and spaced apart from the mold core block;

[0047] FIG. 21 is an obverse view of FIG. 20 with the film retention plate illustrated in place on the mold core block;

[0048] FIG. 22 is a perspective view of the components of FIGS. 20 and 21 joined together during an injection cycle;

[0049] FIG. 23 is a cross-sectional view of the mold components of FIG. 22 taken along lines 23-23 thereof;
FIG. 24 is a cross-sectional view similar to FIG. 23, but taken along lines 24-24 thereof;

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present invention is directed to a unique hybrid molding process in which a decorative sheet is drawn into a mold cavity into contact with a surface thereof so that a molding material subsequently injected into the mold cavity joins to the sheet. This process is referred to as "hybrid" herein because it involves two different media: a material sheet and an injectable molding material.

The Molded Article

Turning first to FIG. 9, a molded article 70 is shown as a wireless telephone housing 71. The article 70 has a plurality of openings formed wherein which range from small openings 72 used for the earphone and microphone to large openings 73 that receive bottoms and displays. The article 70 also has curved side surfaces, or contours 74 and these curved surfaces continue from the sidewalls 75 of the article to the front surface 76.

As shown best in FIG. 13, the article 70 includes a hollow body portion defined by a series of sidewalls 75 and a front, or top wall 76. These walls 75, 76 enclose and define an internal hollow cavity portion 78 which accommodates the internal circuitry and components of the telephone (not shown). In this regard, the article 70 has certain details formed with it in its cavity portion 78. Such details may include standoff members 79 that may support a circuit board, hollow bosses 80 that receive screws to hold the housing 71 to rear housing part (also not shown), and a hollow microphone recess 81 that receives a microphone element therein. It will be understood that although this detailed description will follow in terms of the telephone housing 71 illustrated, that the benefits and advantages of the present invention are not limited solely to such an article and that it may be equally used in the production of other molded articles.

As mentioned above, it is often desirable to decorate the exterior surfaces of the walls 75, 76 of the article. This may be done by molding the article in a single color or mixing different color molding materials together, such as plastic pellets. With such aspects one is limited to either a single color article or a variegated appearance with the mixed plastic. The present invention contemplates the application of a decorative film 85 to a selected surface of the molded article 70, in this case the exterior surface(s) of the article.

The Decorative Film Sheet

Such an application is shown in FIG. 12, where a decorative pattern 86 has been applied to the exterior of the telephone housing. The decorative pattern 86 has previously been applied to a planar sheet 89 of film, preferably a plastic film. Examples of materials suitable for use as the film sheet 89 that exhibit desirable drawing qualities and thermal characteristics are ABS, polyester, polycarbonate, polyethylene and TPR. The film sheet 89 is preferably planar, as shown best in FIG. 10 in order to facilitate the decorating thereof such as, for example, by screen printing, photolithography, spray printing. Other methods may also be used.

A decorative pattern 86 is deposited on the film sheet 89 in a predetermined decoration area 90 that lies within the edges 91 of the film sheet 89. As explained in greater detail below, the decoration area 90 is preferably spaced apart from the edges 91 to define a series of marginal borders 92 that are present on all four sides of the decoration area 90. The decorative pattern 86 may include a series of detailed design elements as shown or it may include patches of color, letters, logos, etc. A sealing layer may be applied to the film sheet 89 over the pattern 86 thereon (and extend past the borders of the pattern 86) in order to give it a luster or glass or other desired finish and/or appearance characteristics as well as to, if desired, seal the pattern 86 to the film sheet 89. The decorative pattern 86 may be deposited on the film sheet 85 for eventual registration with a portion or portions of the finished molded article 20.

In this regard, means for registering the film sheet 85 with the details are part of the mold cavity, are preferably provided and are shown in FIGS. 8 and 10-11 as openings 94, illustrated as circular holes disposed within the marginal borders 92 of the film sheet 85 and between the decoration area 90 and the film sheet edges 91. Four such openings 94 are shown.

Once the decorative film sheet 85 is drawn into part of the mold cavity, a suitable molding material, such as a plastic, is injected in a molten state into the mold cavity. In most injection molding applications, particularly thermoplastic applications, the injected material will be in a high-temperature molten state, but it is contemplated that the present invention may also be used in non-thermoplastic applications where the molding material is not necessarily injected at an elevated temperature, but is injected under pressure. The resultant molded article 70 is illustrated in FIG. 13 and has the decorative film 85 intimately attached thereto and in effect, forming an exterior “skin” on the article 70. The decorative pattern 86 remains on the film sheet 85 and is thus applied to the exterior surface of the molded article 70.

The Hybrid Molding Process

Referring now to FIGS. 2-7, the method steps of the present invention are shown in somewhat a schematic fashion. In FIG. 2, all of the process components are shown. An injection molding machine that has a pair of co-acting mold parts, or blocks 100, 101. One such block 100 is commonly referred to as a mold core block 100 or a female part because it has a cavity portion 102 disposed therein, with the cavity portion 102 being shown in place within an insert 103. This mold core block 100, within its interior cavity portion 102 will provide the exterior configuration to the molded article, i.e., the details and configuration shown in FIG. 9. The other mold block 101 is one that is referred to in the art as a male part or mold block 101 because it has detail portions that extend out therefrom and which are received in the cavity portion 102 when the two mold blocks 100, 101 are brought together. The detail and cavity portion cooperatively define, when brought together, the mold cavity of the molding machine into which a molding material is injected. This male part 101 is responsible for defining and forming the interior hollow cavity portion 28 of the molded article 70 (FIG. 13) and its associated internal details such as the standoffs 79, bosses 80, bases 81, etc. Hence, the term
This aspect of the injection molding machine is described in greater detail to follow and is shown in FIGS. 22 and 23.

[0063] A placement arm 105, preferably a robotic placement arm, may be provided as a means for moving and positioning a film sheet 85 in place within the injection molding process components. The placement arm 105 is preferably capable of selective movement in all directions, such as along conventional spatial x-axes, y-axes and z-axes, such as those illustrated in FIG. 3. This three axis movement ensures accurate placement of the film sheet 89 onto one of the two mold blocks 100, 101. The placement arm 105 illustrated has a support surface 106 with a configuration that matches the configuration of both the film sheet 89 and the female mold block 100. Although this support surface 106 is illustrated as a planar surface, it will be understood that any other complimentary configurations may be used.

[0064] This support surface 106 is depicted as a flat platens 107 supported at the end of the placement arm 105 and which may have, as illustrated in FIGS. 2-4, a series of openings 108 formed therein, primarily to decrease the weight of the overall placement arm assembly. The placement arm 105 further has a means to hold or grip the film sheet 89 in place thereon, such as a vacuum-assisted mechanism, utilizing for example, individual suction cups 110 that have negative air pressure supplied thereto by way of associated tubing 111 (FIG. 17) that is connected to a source of negative air pressure or by means of a series of internal vacuum channels or passages that may be formed as part of the support surface and which communicate with the support surface 106 thereof.

[0065] The placement arm 105 is preferably controlled by a suitable control that is capable of selectively moving the placement arm 105 and its platens 107 as desired for placement of the film sheet 89 on one of the mold blocks 100, 101. Controllers such as computer-numeric controllers (CNCs) and programmable logic controllers (PLCs) are examples of suitable controllers to control the movement of the placement arm 105 in all directions defined by the three axes set forth earlier. The ability to place the film sheet 89 in a direction along the z-axis represents an improvement over the prior art decorating systems that merely use a sheet of film fed from a roll over a mold cavity. In order to assist in the placement and registration of the film sheet 89 onto the mold block 100, registration means may be provided that are associated with one of the two mold blocks.

[0066] One such means is illustrated as registration members in the form of pins 114 that are disposed upon one of the two mold blocks 100, 101, and are illustrated as disposed on and projecting from the female mold block 100. A minimum of two such registration pins 114 are needed to properly locate the film sheet 89, while three to four such pins are desirable. The film sheet has corresponding registration openings 94 formed in its associated marginal borders 92 that mate with and receive the registration pins 114. As shown best in FIGS. 3 & 4, for example, the registration pins 114 may take the form of tapered members, such as cones, which have tapered surfaces 115 that increase in diameter from the tip down to the base of the registration pins 114. These tapering surfaces 115 will engage and facilitate the guiding of the film sheet 89 into place on the mold block 100. The larger diameter of the registration pins 114 at their base portions preferably matches that of the film sheet openings 94 so that they will secure the film sheet in place over the mold core cavity 102. As such, when the vacuum or other gripping means of the placement arm 105 is released and the placement arm 105 is withdrawn from its interposed position, the film sheet 89 remains in place upon the mold block 100. In order to facilitate the effort of the placement arm 105 in placing the film sheet 89, the female mold block 100 is usually maintained in a stationary position during the molding process and the molded article is freed from the cavity portion 102 by rearward movement of the male mold block 101.

[0067] A retention mechanism is also employed in the process of the present invention in order to hold the film sheet 89 in place during injection molding. As shown schematically in FIG. 5, this mechanism preferably takes the form of a large retention plate 120 with an associated opening 121 formed therein that approximates the cavity portion 102 of the mold block 100. This opening 121 serves at least two distinct purposes. Firstly, it exposes a portion of the film sheet 89 so that a suitable heating means, such as a lamp, a heater or otherwise to be positioned in opposition to the film sheet 89. One such heater 130 is illustrated in FIG. 5. Secondly, the opening 121 permits the entry of the core detail head 160 of the other mold block 101, along with its associated male core detail tooling, into the mold core cavity 102. After the heating source 130 has softened the exposed portion of the film sheet 89 exposed through the retention plate opening 121 to a sufficiently flexible state to permit it to bend and deform, negative air pressure is applied to the mold core cavity 102 and because of the structure of the mold core cavity as explained in greater detail below, the film sheet 89 is drawn completely into the mold cavity 102.

[0068] Once the film sheet 89 is drawn into the mold core cavity 102, the other mold block 101 (i.e., the male part of the mold as illustrated in the drawings) is brought into engagement with the retention plate 120 and the other mold block 100 to form the assembly shown in FIG. 6. A liquid molding material is subsequently injected into the mold cavity now formed between the two mold blocks 100, 101. This molding material may be a thermoplastic resin or other material that is injected under pressure and elevated temperatures, or it may be a molding material that is injected only under pressure. When the molding material has set, the two mold blocks 100, 101 are disengaged and one of the two mold blocks 101 is drawn apart from the other mold block 100 as illustrated in FIG. 7, thereby pulling the film sheet 89 out from the cavity portion 102.

[0069] At this stage of the process, the film sheet has the form illustrated in FIGS. 10 and 11, where a molded article 70, such as the telephone housing 71, is integrally molded to the film sheet 89. The pattern on what is considered the front face of the film sheet 89, as shown in FIG. 10, conforms to the exterior surfaces 74, 76 of the article 70 in what is believed to be an intimate and integral attachment. In this regard, the film sheet 89 may be considered as a “skin” of the molded article 70. The internal details 79-81 of the article 70 are present and accessible from the rear of the film sheet 89 as illustrated in FIG. 11. The article 70 is then trimmed from the film sheet 89 in a conventional manner to form a decorated molded article as shown in FIG. 12.
The Hybrid Injection Molding Machine

The processes of the present invention can be easily accomplished with a conventional injection molding machine that has been modified slightly. Turning now to Fig. 14, one portion of an injection molding machine that has been modified in accordance with the principles of the present invention is illustrated generally at 200. One half of the machine is illustrated, namely the female mold block 100 having a cavity portion 102 formed within an insert portion 103. The female mold block 100 has a series of electromagnets 150 associated therewith and the male mold block has a series of electromagnets 150' associated therewith. These electromagnets 150 are controlled by a machine controller, or other control means (not shown) and may be selectively energized for the purpose of holding a retention plate 120 in place over the mold block 100.

In a unique aspect of the invention and as indicated above, the electromagnets may be selectively energized so that they may adhere to either side of the retention plate 120. This aspect permits the electromagnets 150 to retain the retention plate 120 in place upon the female mold block 100 in the pre-injection and injection phases of the process (Figs. 3, 4, and 21) but retain the retention plate 120 (by way of electromagnets 150') in place on the male mold block 101 during the ejection phase of the process (Figs. 7 and 20). This is most effectively accomplished by first energizing the first electromagnets 150 and subsequently de-energizing the first electromagnets 150, while energizing the second electromagnets 150'.

The mold block 100 is interposed between a series of rails 15, that extend the length of the machine and provide a means for the components of the machine to slide into and out of engagement of with each other. Associated with the mold block 100 are position indicators 152 that may be positioned alongside the mold block 100. These indicators may be linked to pneumatic, or other operators (not shown) and will depress upon contact of an opposing block or sensor disposed on the other mold block 101 to thereby signal their positions to the controller.

As mentioned above, a placement arm 105 is associated with the machine 200. This placement arm is shown in Figs. 15-17 and is supported on a dive assembly 202 shown as having a belt 203 driven by gears 204 and enclosed within a housing 205. This drive assembly 202 moves the placement arm 105 in the Z-axis direction. The placement arm 105 is movable in the vertical direction (along the Y-axis) by a push rod or power cylinder mechanism 208. A similar mechanism 209 on the assembly will control movement in the X-axis.

The placement arm 105 has a support surface 106 disposed on a flat member, such as a platen or frame 107. The framework 107 has a series of openings 108 decrease the weight of the overall frame member 107. In order for the frame member 107 to hold or grip the film sheet 89 effectively, a gripping means is provided. In the preferred embodiment illustrated, this gripping means utilizes a vacuum gripping system. Negative air pressure is supplied by way of pneumatic tubing 111 that extends to either vacuum caps 110 or channels that are formed in the body of the frame member 107. This type of gripping mechanism holds the film sheet 89 flat on the support surface 106. The frame member 107 also has a series of openings 211 that are coincident with the registration openings 94 formed in the film sheet 89. The frame member openings 211 will receive the registration pins 114 of the mold block 100.

The placement arm 105, as mentioned above, is utilized to deposit the film sheet 89 in place on the mold block 100. In this step, the film sheet registration openings 94 are aligned with and placed over the registration pins 114 of the mold block 100. The diameter of the base of these registration pins 114 should closely match that of the film sheet openings 94 so as to hold the film sheet 89 in place initially. A retention mechanism 119 is provided to retain the film sheet 89 in place on the mold block 100. This includes a retention member in the form of a plat 120. As illustrated in Fig. 18, this plate 120 includes a flat portion 215 that includes four blocks 216 with openings 217 that are received on the machine rails 151. These blocks 216 are slidably on the rails 151 along the z-axis of the machine 200.

The retention plate 120 has a preselected thickness and having an opening 121 disposed therein. The opening 121 is disposed in the retention plate 120 in alignment with both of the core cavity or the core detail portions of the female and male mold blocks 100, 101. The retention plate 120 is metal in the preferred embodiment so that it may be held in place by the electromagnets 150 on either side of the retention plate 120. In this regard, the retention plate 120 has preselected side portions 219 that extend outwardly so that they contact the electromagnets 150 on either side of the mold assembly parting line P-P.

The opening 121 in the retention plate 120 is aligned with and preferably slightly larger than the mold core cavity portion 102 (Fig. 21) or the mold core detail portion 160 with its projecting tooling 161. This opening 121 permits the two mold blocks 100, 101 to be brought together to from a final interval mold cavity 225. This is shown in Figs. 23 and 24 with Fig. 23 illustrating a transverse cross-section and Fig. 24 illustrating a longitudinal cross-section.

As shown in these two figures, the core detail head portion 160 projects slightly past the face 163 of the male mold block 101. The core detail tooling portion has tapered shoulder portions 164. These tapered, or chamfered, shoulder portions 164 preferably extend all around the core detail head portion 160, and are complementary in configuration to the interior perimeter 127 of the retention plate opening 121 to provide a sound engagement therebetween. This only requires the base portion 163 of the core detail tooling 161 to be extended and therefore it occurs in the relatively longer base section 163 of the core detail tooling portion 160 to eliminate any detrimental stresses from developing in the more finely structured tooling details 161.

It can be seen that the combination of these two surfaces permits all three components: the female and male mold blocks 101, 100 and the retention plate 120, to interfit together without providing any further openings in the associated mold blocks 100, 101 where leakage may occur. By tapering these surfaces, the film sheet 89 may be maintained on the original parting line P-P of the mold assembly.

In an important aspect of the present invention, the mold core insert 103, and specifically the mold core cavity portion 102 thereof is formed from a porous metal material, such as that which is sold in the trade under the trade name
“PORCERAX” sold by International Mold Steel, Inc. Of Japan. This material has a porosity such that approximately 40% of the total volume of the metal is made up of minute air passages. The pores of this type of metal are such that they are small enough to prevent the passage of plastic or resin particles therethrough, but are large enough to permit the passage of air and gas molecules, so as to permit the venting of gases from the mold. In this regard, we have discovered that an even vacuum may be effectively drawn through the porous material.

[0082] In the application of the present invention, the porous material forms the mold core cavity and one or more vacuum lines 180 that lead to areas within the insert 103. (FIG. 24.) Negative air pressure is applied to these lines and a vacuum is drawn on the core cavity 102. This vacuum is drawn somewhat evenly for it is drawn through all areas of the core cavity 102 that are formed from the porous material. This is usually effective in drawing the entire film sheet exposed area into the mold core cavity 102 with almost full drawing occurring.

[0083] In some instances, complete drawdown of the film sheet 89 will not occur, and in order to facilitate entry of the film sheet 89 into the mold core cavity 102, either the entire core detail head portion 160 or selected portions thereof may also be formed from a similarly porous material. This porous material will permit positive air pressure to be applied through the core detail head portion 160 in opposition to the film sheet 89 by way of pneumatic passages 166 that are preferably formed in the male mold block 101 and in the core detail head portion 160. In instances where the film sheet 89 is not completely drawn into the cavity, the application of positive air pressure through the core detail head portion 160, will serve to force the film sheet 89 into all crevices, corners, etc. of the core cavity to an extent such that the film sheet 89 and the core detail head portion 160 cooperatively define a molding cavity into which the molding material may be injected.

[0084] In one aspect of the present invention, the injection molding head 188 is associated with the female mold block 100 and is thus “gated” therethrough into the mold cavity 25, meaning that the molding material is injected into the cavity portion 102 through the film sheet 89. The molding head 188 may include a heated nozzle 189 having a central passage that is heated by conventional heating means 190 disposed in proximity to the nozzle 189. The molding head 188 may have an engagement base 191 that is engaged by an extruder (not shown) in a conventional manner in order to provide a supply of molding material to the injection head 188, where it is heated and passed into the final mold cavity 225. Both molding blocks 100, 101 are mounted in a manner so that they may be selectively brought together and drawn apart. As mentioned previously, the female mold block 100 may be maintained stationary and the male mold block 101 moved in and out of contact therewith.

[0085] A conventional locking means for locking the two mold blocks 100, 101 together may be provided. One or more shock absorbers, such as snubbers 192 may be provided in association with one of the two mold blocks, shown as the male mold block in FIG. 22 to absorb some of the massive forces that are encountered due to closing of the mold block assembly and/or due to injection pressure.

[0086] The injection nozzle 189 has a tip end portion 195 that is gated to the mold core cavity 102. In the mold assembly illustrated, this gate 195 is located in an area that is normally trimmed away from the final product, such as in the display window 73. The heat of the molten molding material and the injection pressure combine to develop a force sufficient to pierce the film sheet 89 at its gated location 73. Once the film sheet is pierced, the molding material impinges against the male mold block 101 so that any portion of the core detail head portion 160 that opposes the injection nozzle thereby serves as a reaction surface to direct the injected molding material into all parts of the mold cavity 225. The injection pressure of this material may further assist in extending the plastic film sheet into contact with all surfaces of the mold core cavity 102.

[0087] The resultant molded film sheet-article assembly has the film sheet 89 integrally attached to it as shown in FIGS. 10 & 11. The film sheet 89 acts as a “skin” to the molded article, as referred to above. This film sheet-article assembly is then ejected from the mold by any suitable means such as ejection pins and the like. The excess marginal area of the film sheet 89 is then trimmed from the article by any conventional means. The process is repeated again to mold another article.

[0088] Significantly, the film may be placed robotically in virtually exact registration on the designated mold block. Although the female mold block 100 has been used in this description as supporting the film sheet 89, the other, male mold block may be used to support the film, provided that it has a flat surface surrounding its core detail portion that will support the film sheet 89 in a flat orientation and that the detail tooling 163 does not interfere with the film sheet. The ability of the placement arm 105 to move in three different directions enables the placement arm 105 to deposit the film sheet 89 in an exact position on the mold block time after time.

[0089] While the preferred embodiment of the invention have been shown and described, it will be apparent to those skilled in the art that changes and modifications may be made therein without departing from the spirit of the invention, the scope of which is defined by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A hybrid injection molding machine for forming an injection-molded article with an outer skin attached to a surface of the article, comprising:

   a mold assembly having first and second mold blocks, the first mold block having a cavity portion disposed thereon;

   the second mold block having a core detail portion disposed thereon, the first and second mold blocks being engageable with each other such that the core detail portion is received within said cavity portion when said first and second mold blocks are brought together, said detail and cavity portions cooperatively defining a mold cavity of a mold assembly said molding machine;

   means for placing a sheet of deformable film on one of said first and second mold blocks, said one mold block including means for registering said film sheet in position thereon;
means associated with said one mold block for drawing said film sheet into said cavity portion formed therein;
and,
means for retaining said film sheet in a preselected position between said first and second mold blocks.
2. The molding machine of claim 1, further including means for softening said film sheet until it becomes flexible enough to be drawn into said cavity portion.
3. The molding machine of claim 2, wherein said film sheet softening means includes a heater for heating said film sheet.
4. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said film sheet drawing means includes a source of negative air pressure communicating with said cavity portion.
5. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said film sheet registration means includes at least two registration members disposed on one of said first and second mold blocks along a parting line of said mold assembly, the registration members extending outwardly from said one mold block, said registration members being adapted to engage corresponding openings formed in said film sheet when said film sheet is placed upon said one mold block, said registration members maintaining said film sheet in a preselected position with respect to said cavity portion.
6. The molding machine of claim 5, wherein said film sheet registration means includes four registration members.
7. The molding machine of claim 6, wherein said film sheet registration members include having tapered body portions.
8. The molding machine of claim 5, wherein said registration members include tapered pins.
9. The molding machine of claim 4, wherein said first mold block includes a porous metal insert communicating with and forming part of said cavity portion, said insert having an internal structure that permits the passage of air through said insert but does not permit the passage of molding material through said insert.
10. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said film sheet retaining means includes a retention plate interposed between said first and second mold blocks, the retention plate having an opening aligned with said cavity portion and a marginal extent that surrounds said opening, said marginal extent extending over a portion of said decorative film sheet.
11. The molding machine of claim 10, wherein said film sheet has a decorative central portion that is sized to extend at least slightly over said cavity portion, said film sheet further including a marginal portion extending around said decorative central portion, said marginal portion including a plurality of openings for receiving a plurality of registration members disposed on one of said first and second mold blocks.
12. The molding machine of claim 10, wherein said retention plate opening is large enough to receive said detail portion therethrough when said first and second mold blocks are engaged together.
13. The molding machine of claim 10, wherein said wherein said film sheet registration means includes at least two registration members disposed on one of said first and second mold blocks along a parting line of said mold assembly, the registration members extending outwardly from said one mold block, said registration members being adapted to engage corresponding openings formed in said film sheet when said film sheet is placed upon said one mold block, said registration members maintaining said film sheet in a preselected position with respect to said cavity portion.
14. The molding machine of claim 10, wherein said retention plate is a metal plate and said film sheet retaining means includes a first electromagnet operatively associated with said first mold block and disposed proximate to said surface of said first mold block that defines a parting line of said mold assembly, said first electromagnet being selectively energizable to retain said retention plate in position over said film sheet.
15. The molding machine of claim 13, wherein said retention plate includes a plurality of openings formed therein corresponding in number to the number of registration members, said retention plate openings receiving said registration members therein when said first and second mold blocks are brought together.
16. The molding machine of claim 14, further including a second electromagnet operatively associated with said second mold block, said first electromagnet being disposed on one side of said parting line and said second electromagnet being disposed on an opposite side of said parting line, said second electromagnet also being selectively energizable to withdraw said retention plate from said position over said film sheet when said mold assembly is opened.
17. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said first mold block includes a molding material passage formed therein for conveying molding material from a source to said cavity portion, the passage having a gate disposed therein.
18. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said second mold block includes an air passage communicating with said detail portion for conveying positive air pressure to said film sheet.
19. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said film sheet placement means includes a placement arm moveable into and out of contact with said one mold block, said placement arm being moveable along three distinct axes.
20. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said placement arm includes means for releasably holding said film sheet upon said placement arm.
21. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said film sheet releasable holding means includes a plurality of vacuum ports disposed thereon through which a vacuum may be drawn in order to hold said film sheet on said placement arm.
22. The molding machine of claim 1, further including a plurality of elongated rails extending lengthwise of said molding machine, one of said first and second mold blocks being moveable along said rails into and out of contact with the other of said first and second mold blocks.
23. The molding machine of claim 22, wherein said first mold block is fixed in place on said machine and said second mold block is moveable along said rails.
24. The molding machine of claim 23, wherein said retention plate is moveable along said rails.
25. The molding machine of claim 4, wherein said first mold block includes a porous metal insert having a porosity sufficient to permit the passage of gases therethrough, but not to permit the passage of molding material therethrough, the porous insert communicating with said cavity portion, said film drawing means further including at least one air passage formed in said first mold block and communicating with said porous insert, said first mold block air passage being connected to said negative air pressure source.
26. The molding machine of claim 1, wherein said first mold block includes a porous metal insert having a porosity sufficient to permit the passage of gases therethrough, but not to permit the passage of molding material therethrough, the porous insert defining at least a portion of said cavity portion.

27. A decorative film sheet for applying to a surface of a molded article while the molded article is being molded, comprising: a sheet of plastic film, the film sheet having a decorative application area disposed thereon in generally a center portion of said film sheet, the application area being surrounded by an outer marginal portion, said application area including a decorative image applied thereto, said film sheet further including means for registering said film sheet with a cavity portion of a mold block, the registration means including at least two distinct and spaced apart openings disposed in said marginal portion thereof, said registration openings being adapted to engage corresponding registration members associated with a mold block.

28. The decorative film sheet of claim 27, wherein said film sheet is a planar film sheet.

29. The decorative film sheet of claim 27, wherein said decorative image is a printed image and said film sheet includes a sealing layer applied to said printed image to seal said decorative image to said film sheet.

30. The decorative film sheet of claim 27, wherein said film sheet is formed from a material chosen from the group of polyester, polyethylene, ABS, thermoplastic resins and mixtures thereof.

31. An apparatus for injection molding an article with a body portion and an outer film disposed on a preselected surface of said body, the body being molded from a thermoplastic and the film being applied thereto during the molding process of said body, the apparatus comprising:

a mold including a female and a male mold blocks, the two mold blocks being selectively engageable with each other, the female mold block having a cavity portion disposed thereon and the male mold block having a detail portion disposed thereon, the detail portion of said male mold block being received within the cavity portion of said female mold block when said first and second mold blocks are engaged together, said detail and cavity portions cooperatively defining an interior cavity of said mold, when said female and male mold blocks are engaged together;

said female mold block further including means for registering placing a sheet of film thereon in alignment and covering said female mold block cavity portion, said female mold block further including a porous portion communicating with said cavity portion, said porous portion having a porosity that permits passage therethrough of gases but restricts passage of molding material therethrough, a source of negative air pressure in communication with said female mold block porous portion and means for selectively applying said negative air pressure to said female mold block porous portion so as to draw a portion of a film sheet placed on said female mold block into said female mold block cavity portion; and,

means for retaining said film sheet placed upon said female mold block in place between said female and male mold blocks as said female and male mold blocks are engaged together.

32. The apparatus of claim 31, wherein said film sheet retention means includes a retention plate interposed between said female and male mold blocks, said apparatus further including means for selectively maintaining said retention plate in contact with either of said female and male mold blocks.

33. The apparatus of claim 32, wherein said retention plate is a metal plate and said retention plate contact means includes a first electromagnet associated with said female mold block and a second electromagnet associated with said male mold block, said first and second electromagnets being selectively energizable so that said retention plate may be selectively held, in contact, against either of said female and male mold blocks.

34. A process for forming a molded article having an injection molded body portion with first and second opposing surfaces and a film applied to one of said first and second surfaces, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a mold assembly having first and second mold blocks, the first mold block having a cavity portion disposed thereon and the second mold block having a detail portion disposed thereon, said first and second mold blocks being interengageable with each other such that cavity and detail portions cooperatively define an interior cavity of said mold assembly;

providing a sheet of film for application to said molded article;

placing the film sheet upon one of said first and second mold blocks in alignment with one of said cavity and detail portions;

drawing a portion of said film sheet into said cavity portion and into at least partial contact with said cavity portion;

engaging said first and second mold blocks together to form said mold assembly interior cavity after drawing said film sheet portion into said cavity portion; and, injecting a molding material into said interior mold cavity to form the molded article, said molded article being bonded to said molded article along substantially all of said first or second surface of said molded article.

35. The method of claim 34, further including the step of softening said film sheet to render said film sheet flexible, prior to drawing said film sheet into said cavity portion.

36. The method of claim 34, wherein said step of placing said film sheet includes the steps of providing a retention plate interposed between said first and second mold blocks, and moving said retention plate into contact with said film sheet to hold said film sheet against said first mold block over said cavity portion thereof.

37. The method of claim 34, wherein said first mold block include a porous metal insert that defines at least a portion of said cavity portion, the porous insert having a porosity great enough to permit passage of gases through said porous insert, but low enough so as to preclude passage of molding material through said porous insert.

38. The method of claim 37, wherein said step of drawing a portion of said film sheet into said cavity portion includes the steps of applying negative air pressure to said porous insert to thereby create a vacuum in said cavity portion and draw said film sheet portion into said cavity portion.

39. The method of claim 36, further including the steps of providing a first electromagnet associated with said first
mold block and energizing said first electromagnet to hold said retention plate in place over said film sheet and against said first mold block prior to injecting said molding material into said interior cavity and deenergizing said first electromagnet to release said retention plate from its position against said first mold block.

40. The method of claim 39, further including the steps of providing a second electromagnet associated with said second mold block and in opposition to said first electromagnet, and energizing said second electromagnet to hold said retention plate against said second mold block after injecting said molding material into said interior cavity, and withdrawing said second mold block from engagement with said first mold block.

41. A process for the forming of molded articles in which the articles have a molded body portion and a film applied to an exterior surface of said molded article, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a mold assembly having female and male mold blocks, the female mold block having a cavity portion disposed therein defining part of a shape of an article to be molded, and the male mold block having a detail portion disposed thereon defining the remaining part of said molded article, said female and male mold blocks being interengageable with each other such that cavity and detail portions cooperatively define an interior cavity of said mold assembly, said female mold block including a porous metal insert that forms at least a portion of said cavity portion, the porous insert having a porosity great enough to permit passage of gases through said porous insert, but low enough so as to preclude passage of molding material through said porous insert;

providing a sheet of film for application to said molded article;

placing the film sheet upon one of said first and second mold blocks in alignment with one of said cavity and detail portions;

drawing a portion of said film sheet into said cavity portion by applying negative air pressure to said cavity portion through said porous insert, thereby creating at least a partial vacuum in said cavity portion sufficient to draw a portion of said film sheet into at least partial contact with said cavity portion;

engaging said first and second mold blocks together to form said mold assembly interior cavity after drawing said film sheet portion into said cavity portion; and,

injecting a molding material into said interior mold cavity to form the molded article, said molded article being bonded to said molded article along substantially all of said first or second surface of said molded article.

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