

PRODUCED BY THE CARTER SISTERS - ANTIQUE PUBLISHERS YOU CAN TRUST

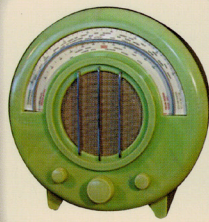
ANTIQUES

AND COLLECTABLES

for pleasure & profit

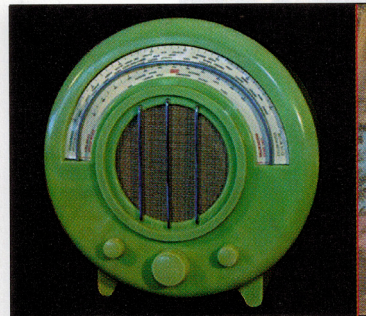
Issue 37
\$8.95

WINTER 2010
NZ\$10.90 PP 255003/06895



The History of QUILTS
FOLK ART in Vogue
Doulton Lambeth POTTERY Part 2
GEORGIAN Living
The Glory of OLIVEWOOD
PLAQUES of Porcelain
All About KITSCH
CHRISTENING Robes
Australian MOORCROFT
TREASURES of Queen Victoria
Dinosaur DEALERS
COLLECTING Art Deco Radios
The Jewellery CASKET
ERIC KNOWLES in Scotland

Antiques & Collectables
Published Quarterly - Spring,



32

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

Author and Deco radio specialist Peter Sheridan invites you into the world of the Bakelite radio, found in the kitchens, bedrooms, sheds and verandahs of most Australian homes in the 1930s. Imagine the family gathered around the jaunty-looking wireless, listening to the crackling voice of the outside world...

ISSN 1449-1567



02

9 771449 156009

Curios, Snippets, Bargain Hunter, Movers and Sh...
Auction Challenge, News and Previews, Ask the...
On the Up, Books in Review, Paraphernalia, Fina



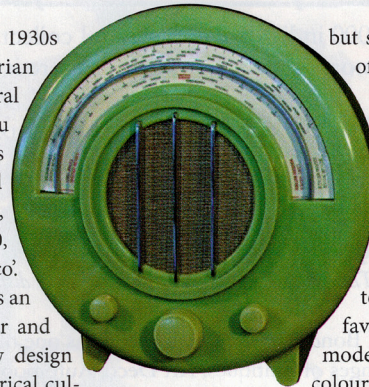
Thank you for listening...

When Melbourne auctioneers Leonard Joel held their Classic Radio Auction at the end of March, there was one person at least who was unsurprised by the level of pre-sale interest. Renowned radio collector, author and sale co-curator Peter Sheridan was well aware of the allure of the Deco wireless and its story in Australia...

In the mid-1920s and early 1930s the strangled Victorian fussiness and flowing floral influence of Art Nouveau was swept away by styles which were variously called machine-age, jazz, moderne, streamline and which, since 1960, we collectively describe as 'Art Deco'. As a response to, as well as perhaps an escape from, the First World War and the Great Depression, these new design motifs were borrowed from historical cultures (e.g. Egyptian, South American) and took advantage of new materials such as Bakelite and better methods of mass-production.

Art Deco developed differently in many countries, but was predominantly influenced by France and the USA. The French retained a more restrained artisan-led approach, as seen in the beautiful unique furniture of Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann. In America the futuristic style was a feature of all facets of life, as seen, for example, in the designs of Raymond Loewy for cars, trains buildings, cameras and radios. The features of Art Deco are varied, but regularly we see stepped forms, sweeping curves, geometric shapes, aerodynamic and streamlined effects. It is often lavish and opulent, yet in essence it fulfils the 'form follows function' philosophy.

Although Art Deco had an impact in Australia, the Victorian and Edwardian forms and the effects of the Depression seemed to persist throughout the 1930s. Deco style was seen mainly in architecture, with Sydney and Melbourne boasting some archetypal grand commercial buildings and hotels. Deco is seen to a much lesser extent in houses in the suburbs,



but seemed to be a feature of many of the pubs around Sydney and Melbourne. However limited the uptake of Deco styling was in Australian life, the locally manufactured Bakelite radio seems to have been a favourite, and with its modern styling and array of colours it found a place in the kitchens, bedrooms, sheds and verandahs of most Australian houses.

In the 1930s radio blossomed as an information, communication and entertainment medium, moving from a novelty to a necessity in the home. Notwithstanding the Great Depression, there was the advent of new materials, new styles and designs, new manufacturing processes, targeted marketing and modern consumerism, all of which are exemplified in the success of the Bakelite radio. This domestic appliance was the first major piece of plastic in the home; the advertising addressed women; being portable, the Bakelite radio was targeted for rooms other than the lounge; bright colours were offered as an alternative to the common brown version; and the designs of the cabinets reflected the popular machine-age/streamline style that emanated from the USA.

Radios in Australia developed along two distinct themes in the 1930s and '40s. Large wooden consoles remained the main feature of the lounge room, eventually morphing into the radiogram of the '50s. In the early 1930s (at the same time as in Germany, USA and the UK), AWA introduced large portable radios with Bakelite cabinets, and by 1935 had launched coloured varieties. In the USA the small Bakelite or catalin radio was an enormous success, and the variety of styles, colours etc. indicates the millions of radios sold in the 1930s and 1940s. Although wood radios remained popular, there was inventive use of chrome,



This page, clockwise from top left: Nora 'Sonnenblume' (Germany) 1930; Ekco AD65 (UK) 1935; Astor 'Baby' (Football) 1948; Astor Mickey 1939-49.



George Fisk of AWA was behind the first radio 'broadcast' in Australia on 19 August 1919. He arranged for the National Anthem to be broadcast from one building to another at the end of a lecture he'd given to the Royal Society of NSW on the new medium of radio.



This page, above: Emerson 'Aristocrat' (USA) 1940; and Fada 52 (USA) 1938. **Right:** AWA Radiola (Egg Crate) 1939. **Below:** Colonial New World Globe (USA) 1934.



enamel and mirrors, and in particular the use of new synthetic plastics such as Bakelite and catalin allowed manufacturers to mass-produce radio cabinets in an amazing variety of shapes and colours.

The Australian government introduced protection in the early 1930s, which allowed for a very successful radio manufacturing industry to flourish for some 20 years. Australia ranks probably second to the USA in the number of models and range of colours of Bakelite radios produced during this time.

America had the advantage of the input of important industrial designers into radio design. Raymond Loewy, Harold van Doren, Walter Dorwin Teague and Norman Bel Geddes all created beautiful Bakelite and catalin radio cabinets. In England, although coloured radios were not popular, designers in the early to mid-1930s such as Wells Coates, Jesse Collins and Serge Chermayoff stepped away from traditional radio design. It seems as though these USA and UK examples set a benchmark of quality design worldwide, and although Australia had no recognised designers, firms such as AWA, Astor, Airzone and Mullard quickly created cabinets that shared many features with the American and British radios but that are recognisably Australian.

One must appreciate that Bakelite as the first synthetic plastic was the first material to allow art to meet industry. It gave full reign to new designs, yet was able to be cheaply mass-produced. The range of colours and effects could, in its versatility, mimic the mottling and colouring of wood, but also imitate more precious materials such as jade and ivory. In the USA the more popular variant was Catalin (a cast phenolic) which was more translucent and allowed for the incorporation of a myriad of vibrant colours. The UK, Europe and Australia generally used a thermoset phenolic that was mostly produced in brown, but particularly in Australia was modified to produce many colours – although more opaque than the American catalins.

Today there is an increasing recognition for the significance of the stylish plastic radios of the '30s and '40s. They inform us of the history of industrial design, provide a snapshot of the social and cultural changes in America, Australia, the UK and Europe, show women as the target of marketing and consumerism, and allow a domestic appliance to be seen as an iconic representation of modern functional design.

Over the years in Australia most radio enthusiasts were interested in the technical aspects of valve receivers and restoring audio equipment. It is only in the last 15 years that a group of collectors have targeted the Bakelite

cabinets, being more concerned with shape, style and colour. Today, one of the few stable and growing areas of collecting worldwide are Bakelite and catalin radios of the '30s and '40s. The trend from lowly collectable to valued collectable is reflected in the fact that major auction houses are featuring radio collections in their own right. The Woolley collection (Bonhams, New York, 2007), Salmon Collection (Bonhams, London 2009) and the Szental Collection (Joels Melbourne 2010) were all very successful and engendered much media publicity and spirited bidding from buyers all over the world for the better items.

One special feature of these radios is the Deco styling, and this has now been recognised not just by collectors, but also at the academic and gallery/museum level. In 2007, the Victoria & Albert Deco Exhibition in London featured a Bakelite radio as one of its major advertising motifs. A year later in 2008, as well as using the

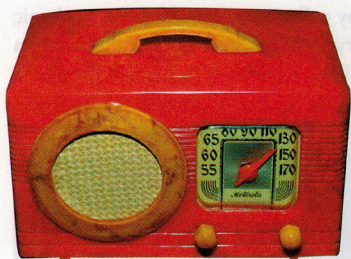


green AWA Empire State Radiolette as one of the major advertising images, two Australian Bakelite radios were featured in the Victoria & Albert/National Gallery of Victoria Deco Exhibition in Melbourne. Over 300,000 visitors saw a jade green and white AWA Fret and Foot (1935) accorded a special cabinet at the entrance to the exhibit and designated as one of seven items exemplifying the Art Deco movement.

Bakelite radios are limited to a period from 1930 to the early 1950s, and subsequent modern plastic radios do not have the same worth and desirability. Sadly, the wooden radios of the 1920s to 1950s, which often have beautiful wood veneers and finishes, can cost more to restore than they bring at auction. Within Bakelite radios, one must also distinguish the valuable from the ordinary. Brown was the most common colour, and probably over 90% of production was in brown to mimic wood finishes and match the general decor of most houses. It is generally the coloured varieties that are keenly sought, both because they are rarer and because they have an aesthetic quality which showcases the design features.

Compared to the USA, our production in Australia was very small, and in some cases very few are left of the special coloured radios (greens, reds, blues, variegated). In fact in

Thank you for listening...



Top: Tasma/Skyraider c.1939-49.
Above: Motorola 50XC (Circle Grille, USA) 1940.

The kookaburra's laugh at the beginning of Radio Australia transmissions was first aired in 1927, when AWA conducted a series of transmissions to the UK.

Radio Days there are some 30 radios that are considered unique, either being the only one remaining of a small production run or having only been produced as an example for display purposes. This accounts for the extraordinarily high prices paid for some special Australian Bakelite radios (up to \$40,000), whereas in the USA there are few one-offs and prices reflect the fact that one can expect to find multiple examples of even the most unusual coloured US radios.

Collectors should ensure that any prospective purchase is original Bakelite, preferably with an undamaged cabinet. There are few competent repairers of Bakelite in Australia, and painting over repairs, while very effective, is regarded as questionable. One should check the inside of a cabinet up to the light, which will often show the fracture lines of a repaired case. The chassis and valves are less critical as they can be restored to working order quite economically. Glass dials and even knobs can be duplicated, and if done well would not seriously devalue a radio. Speaker cloths which perish are often replaced with modern equivalents. Those with little experience should try to find a serious collector to use as a mentor...most love to share

Footnote: The Art Deco and Modernism Society has in the last few years featured lectures and articles on Bakelite radios, and has been enormously supportive in promoting recognition of these domestic appliances as quintessential deco items. In 2008, *Radio Days – Australian Bakelite Radios*, the first comprehensive high quality photographic reference book on Australian Bakelite radios was published, bringing together the best 400 radios from private collections and in many ways defining and underpinning the potency of this collecting field. The book has not only been popular with radio collectors, but also with those who like Art Deco, Australiana, industrial design, nostalgia and retro chic.

About the author: Peter Sheridan AM. Prominent Sydney dentist Peter Sheridan loves Art Deco and particularly the Bakelite radios of the '30s and '40s. His wonderful collection prompted him to publish the first reference book on Australian Bakelite radios - *Radio Days – Australian Bakelite Radios* - bringing the design and colours of these once underrated domestic appliances to a wider audience. Although the rarest are now considered valuable antiques, Bakelite radios are still affordable and working models sitting on the mantelpiece add a wonderful sense of fun and history to modern living.

their knowledge and will assist in locating quality examples. The Historical Radio Society of Australia (HRSA) is one good source.

Radios are not necessarily expensive, and good examples can be bought for \$100 on eBay, at auction or in antique markets. The radio that is derived from a synthesis of Bakelite and Deco design brings with it a sense of exuberance and fun. A collector can be serious or casual, have one or hundreds, common varieties or exceptional examples.

The recent Joel's Auction in Melbourne saw half of a 400-strong international Bakelite and catalin radio collection achieve some \$400,000, with the other half to be auctioned later in the year. Media interest was high, both on TV and in print. With some 200 people in the room and vigorous bidding, both the Australian and the US radios achieved consistently high prices. Interestingly, some of the radios have already been on-sold at a premium to under-bidders and absent collectors. All of this reinforces the sense that Australian Bakelite radios of the 1930s and 1940s are now recognisable antiques, and a coherent mirror of an emerging Art Deco movement of the time. Many of them are now considered icons of style and elegance. They are clearly increasing in value, and will endure as a popular collecting field for both radio enthusiasts and lovers of fine design.



Yande Meannjin ANTIQUES

Slan Prickett
Approved Government Valuer - Member of QADA

Specialist in Ceramics, Glass,
Australian Pottery, Silver and Small
Collectables. Always a large range in stock.

Shop 13, Paddington Antique Centre,
167 Latrobe Terrace,
Paddington, Qld. 4064
(P.O. Box 10, Narangba, Qld. 4504)
Tel/Fax: (07) 3886 6037
Mob: 0419 704 714
Email: yande@inet.net.au
www.yande.com.au

