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Historical Notes

Sheet Music *Is* Advertising
 The Art Deco Radio
 The Harmonica: A Musical Phenom
 Amy Beach: A Composer of Musical Firsts





INDUSTRIAL DESIGN AND THE RADIO — WHEN ART MET INDUSTRY

BY PETER SHERIDAN

When it comes to radio design, the years from 1930 to 1940 presented a pocket of opportunity wedged between the deprivations of the Great Depression and the upheavals that presaged the advent of World War 2. The common image of the radio before its miniaturization in the 1960s is of a drab piece of wooden furniture or an unremarkable brown plastic box. But there was a period of innovation and glamour that seems forgotten except by a small group of collectors who hold the last specimens of this important lineage. Fueled by the genius of industrial designers, the advent of new materials, better manufacturing processes plus marketing and consumer changes, this was truly a golden age of radio.

Radio can be seen through a number of different prisms: The technical framework of radio electronics; the evolution of radio stations; the diverse content of entertainment and news as well as the people involved; and through the aesthetics of its presentation as a cost-effective, visually appealing domestic appliance. The focus here is on design, with radio as a leading player in the evolution of a new style movement, animated by the genius of the most famous industrial designers in the world. This flowering of radio between 1930 and 1940 has never been appreciated for its importance in the world of Industrial Design and its relevance to the beginnings of Art Deco styling in the home.

The first consumer radios in the 1920s were a complex mix of separate elements consisting of a receiver with multiple controls, a battery, and a speaker (or headphones). Radio initially followed the style of the gramophone and in the late 1920s, aided by the availability of electricity in the home, evolved into popular console radio. This was a piece of wooden furniture with Victorian styling housing and hiding



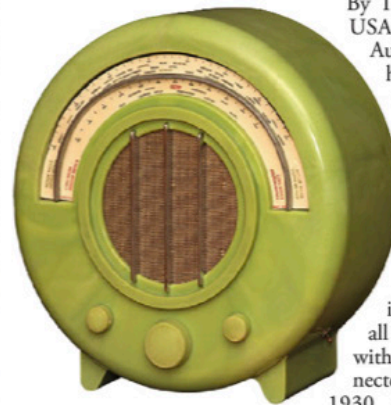
The first bakelite table-top radio in the world made in Germany by the Nora Radio Company and called "Sonnenblume" (Sunflower), 1929

the radio components intended for the lounge room and usually controlled by the man of the house. The wooden console always remained popular but, even with Art Deco styling in the 1940s, rarely strayed from its box-like form and eventually morphed into the radiogram in the 1950s and 60s.

Radio as Communication

The radio boasts the fastest uptake of any of the new technologies of the 20th century including telephone, TV, and the Internet. Radio brought about a third wave of the democratization of information (the advent of speech and the printed word being first and second). Newspapers, magazines, and books were the predominant communication pathway of the 19th century, but literacy rates universally were not high. Understanding the spoken word was universal and radio enfranchised the least educated with the information they could assimilate important information into their own lives. Also, it was

actually cheaper to provide radio waves than newspapers in remote and rural areas.



Wells Coates (UK) Ekco AD65, 1934

By 1940, 90% of people in the USA, Britain, Europe, and Australia had a radio in their homes and some 75% got their news through this medium. This saturation could not have happened without the advent of the tabletop or mantle radio which first appeared in Germany created by the Nora Radio Company in 1929. This was a portable integrated cabinet containing all the electronics and a speaker, with simple controls and connected to an electrical outlet. By 1930 table-top wooden radios appeared in England, the U.S., and England, but again Nora led the way in Germany with the first bakelite table-top radio, the "Sonnenblume" (Sunflower) shown above.

The table-top radio had no design predecessor, and although countless numbers were subsequently made in wood and with traditional styling, there was an opportunity here for new ideas in terms of the cabinet design, the materials used, and the target market. By 1930 radio had moved from a novelty to a necessity and, given the number of



Woman using a crystal radio in the 1920s



people out of work and struggling financially during the Depression years, it is extraordinary how many radios were sold between 1929 and 1935. Its success is measured by the fact that after 1933 there were many more table-top radios sold than consoles. This was a burgeoning market in an otherwise commercially depressed era. Hundreds of radio manufacturers looked for opportunities to expand their markets and the confluence of several diverse factors created a unique moment in the evolution of this medium.

Industrial Design

The new profession of Industrial Design contained people who had come from other areas such as graphic design, theatre sets, fashion illustration, and architecture. They all had little or no work during the Depression. However, the new table-top format radio offered an integrated, more user-friendly apparatus of an appropriate portable size creating the potential for multiple units in the home and workplace. In stepping away from the constraints of the large wooden console radio in the living room, the table-top radio effectively changed the listener from the family to the individual and broadened the scope of radio programs for the listening audience. Importantly, the concurrent spread of domestic electrification also underpinned the expansion of radio sales and usage.

Added to this was the utility of the new non-flammable synthetic plastics (bakelite, urea-formaldehyde [plaskon, beetleware], and Catalin) which could be mass-produced much more cheaply per unit than wood radio cabinets, the latter requiring more skill and time for production and finishing. Here we see the artisan replaced by the assembly line.

The new plastics offered a broader scope in which to incorporate the new modern style of design (which today we call Art Deco or Streamlining) and created a whole new type of radio cabinet that reflected modernity and progress. Some radios clearly derived their look from other streamlined deco objects; skyscrapers, trains, and rockets while others from the aerodynamic shape of a bullet, a sled, or the grill of a car. Reduction in the size of radio tubes in the mid-1930s allowed for small cabinets to be produced and, almost exclusively in the USA and Australia, a wide choice of colors allowed for targeted marketing directed at women to place radios in all rooms of a house.

Design Becomes Essential

Many smaller radio companies commissioned industrial designers to create radios that would allow a cost-effective home appliance to be mass-produced and mass-marketed. These designers were all early in their careers and almost all of them went on to be founders of Streamlining,



AWA "Radiolette" with Cigarette Box, Australia, 1934 & 1936



Pacific "Elite," New Zealand, 1934

just based on what they would hear but how it would look. Radio became a visual as well as an aural experience. Every company manufacturing radios was forced to modify their cabinet designs each year (whether or not there were internal technical advances) as choice and change became synonymous with retail marketing.

The industrial designers were innovators and enablers, creating a benchmark for other radio makers to aspire to and an

incentive for quality styling to be used in radio design. They used a wide range of materials (mainly plastics, but also glass, metal, and wood) but their coherent bond was the shedding of fussiness in favor of streamlined design. The collateral effect over the next ten years was significant in the U.S. and all around the world.

Australia is a good example of a country with no known radio designers yet the style of locally made radios in the mid-1930s clearly was influenced by the radios created by American and English Industrial Designers. A true anomaly is the very rare wooden console Pacific 'Elite' made in New Zealand in 1934 which shows how good design can overcome the inherent limitations of the material and a furniture mentality. By 1950 in the U.S., many cheap deco-style radios sold through department stores were made from metal and painted. A small portion were chromed and today these little gems are highly sought by collectors.



Kadette K25 "Clockette," U.S., 1937



Raymond Loewy, U.S., Colonial New World Radio, 1933

Collecting Radios by Country and Designers

This small, sub-set of radios from the 1930s only represented a minuscule proportion of global radio production and sales, but by virtue of their aesthetic attributes and clever incorporation of radio components they influenced all radio cabinetry to some extent. Their influence was global, reinforcing the spread of the Art Deco aesthetic in radios all around the world. It should be noted that the impact of the Depression and then the upheaval leading into World War 2 meant that in many countries' consumer radio production was halted or severely limited, and the pre-war designs only emerged when production resumed in the late 1940s and even early 1950s. Most of these radios are rare today and some are limited to a few remaining examples. They



Sparton "Cloisone"
by Walter Dorwin Teague,
U.S., 1939

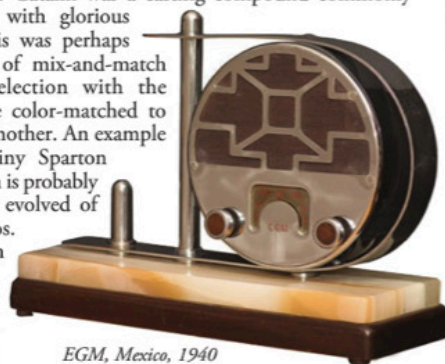
are highly collectible and valuable, not so much for their design lineage, but for their genuine beauty and visual appeal.

Some 37 designers have been identified who created Art Deco radios, with most coming from the U.S. and UK, but with a representative each from Germany, Italy, and Holland. Of the Americans, Harold van Doren and Raymond Loewy started the ball rolling in 1933. Van Doren became the "president of the Society of Industrial Design;" Loewy was later known as the "father of streamlining," "the father of industrial design," and "the man who shaped America." Norman Bel Geddes is known as the "man who designed America," and Walter Dorwin Teague "the dean of industrial design." John Vassos was called the "the quintessential modernist." All of these men are more famous for other (mainly later) creations ... everything from a matchstick to a city.

In the UK the Ekco Company led the world in the early 1930s using well-known architects such as Wells Coates, Serge Chermayeff, J. K. White, Arthur Collins, and Misha Black to produce modern style radios in the new plastics. Coates designed the first round radio in the world and refined the use of the circle within the radio itself ... a feature which spread throughout the world. But try as they might, Ekco, for all their beautiful designs, could not get the British public to buy a colored radio until the late 1940s. In Italy, we have the Castiglioni Brothers and Louis Kalff in the Netherlands for the Philips Company. Walter Maria Kersting in Germany from 1933 was notable for utilizing radio design for Nazi political and propaganda purposes.

Materials that Mattered

1936 saw the first use of Catalin (almost exclusively used in the U.S.) by the Fada Company. Catalin was a casting compound commonly used for jewelry and with glorious translucent colors. This was perhaps the first introduction of mix-and-match elements for retail selection with the Catalin cabinet in one color-matched to the grill and knobs in another. An example is Dorwin Teague's tiny Sparton Cloisone of 1938 which is probably the most cultured and evolved of all the Art Deco radios. With a white Catalin cabinet (which fades over time to butter-scotch) and tenite (a brand of cellulosic thermoplastic material)



EGM, Mexico, 1940

knobs, the front is enameled in one of four colors (red, blue, brown, and yellow) and decorated with chrome circles and horizontal lines.

One of the circles contains the textured speaker cloth. It is the only radio with such a variety of materials and yet the effect is a seamless and subtle unity. It is perhaps a highpoint of the integration of form, color, and texture in the evolution of radio cabinetry, these criteria also forming the mantra of the industrial designer and underpinning much of Art Deco styling.

The Heritage of the Radio

Radio brought the world into the home, opening channels to all sorts of news and entertainment, breaking down isolation and privacy, exposing people to an expanding world of listening opportunities. For example, music in the home in the 19th century before the advent of the gramophone was at an amateur level affected by family members on their musical instruments. The gramophone and record player were popular in the first two decades of the 20th century but were overtaken by the radio from the mid-1920s to the 1950s when individual recordings and the invention of stereo sound became

desirable. Radio dramatically increased the number of individuals listening to music and expanded the audience for music to all ages and all social classes. Initially, all music was live on radio with bands and entertainers performing in the studio, but improved recording methods in the 1930s allowed for programming flexibility and with the networking of radio stations hugely expanded the listener base.

A beautiful radio can satisfy all the senses. Looking at the colors and shapes is just a visual delight. Run your hand over the surface of a Catalin or bakelite radio and the smoothness and fluid curves are almost sensual. When you turn on an old valve radio there is first nothing, then a hum, and then the crackle of static. These aural cues speak of a time past and of another social milieu.

The streamlined radio cabinet was a new style of modern object in home décor. It represented and was symbolic of, the new machine-age future and this was by virtue of its aesthetics, independent of the core audio function and its benefits.

Today, radio is part of a blended barrage of modern digital broadcasting and future generations will most likely not recognize a radio as a discrete device. Radio still serves as an entertainment and information medium and, in a more modern iteration, an arbiter of social exchange. But as it dissolves into the cocktail of modern digital mass media, it is important to articulate the evolution of its social, technical, and design history. There was a time when radios were beautiful and after a hundred years it would be a shame if they were forgotten.

Peter Sheridan, AM, BDS, MDS, FICD, is a respected historian, lecturer, author, and collector. He has written a number of monographs on Art Deco and lectured at the Art Deco World Congresses in 2007 and 2013. Peter is a committee member of the Art Deco & Modernism Society and a guest lecturer on design history at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales. As a photographer, Peter is a leading authority on clinical photography.



Deco Radios - The Most Beautiful Radios Ever Made, written by Peter Sheridan, explores the untold story of famous industrial designers who used a new style, new materials, and mass production in the turbulent times of the 1930s and 40s to create beautiful, colored, streamlined table-top radios, starting a trend that brought modern Art Deco styling into homes all around the world. To order this book you can visit his website at www.petersheridan.com, or buy it directly from Schiffer Publishing at www.schifferbooks.com

