



SPRIT OF PROGRESS



THE AWA RADIOLETTE WORLD CONGRESS UPDATE
RHYS HOPKINS A QUIET REVOLUTIONARY
FLOOR COVERINGS IN THE ART DECO ERA
ART DECO MANIFICO! - THE DICTATOR'S CAR

AUSTRALIA'S LARGEST ART DECO SOCIETY—ESTABLISHED MELBOURNE 1992



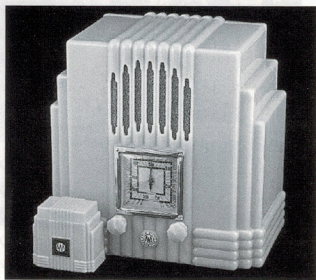
ART DECO SOCIETY

SPRIT OF PROGRESS

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IN THIS ISSUE



Our Cover:

The classic 'Empire State' AWA Radio (pictured with a matching cigarette box) is the cornerstone of any Australian Bakelite radio collection. It is the best known variant of the Radiolette series produced in Australia. Turn to page 18 for a detailed background by Peter Sheridan AM on this icon, and the AWA company that produced it.

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AUSTRALIAN BAKELITE CLASSICS

'THE AWA RADIOLETTE'

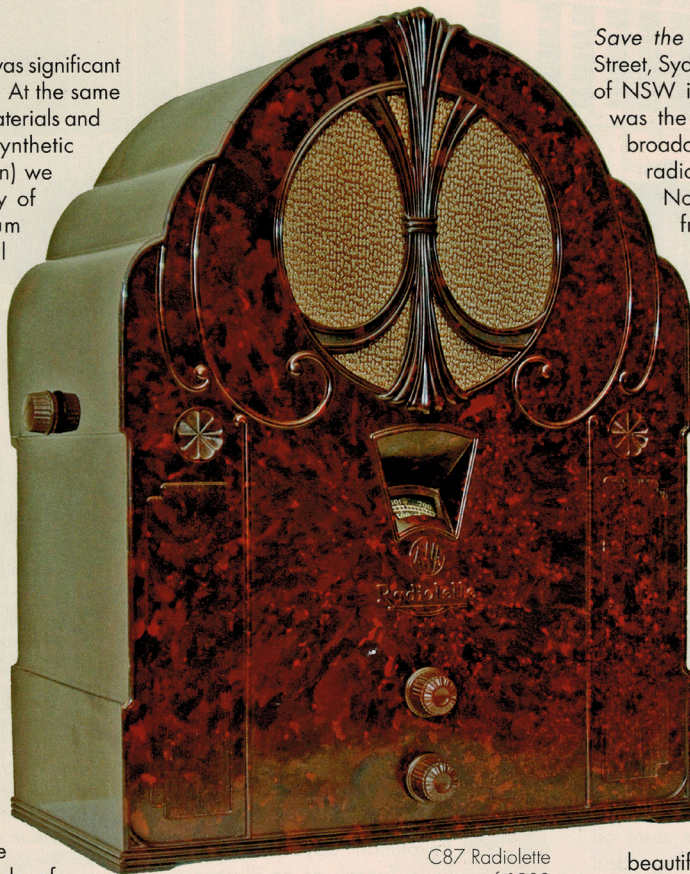
Setting the Scene

The early part of the 1930s was significant for the Art Deco movement. At the same time as the rise of modern materials and technology (in this case synthetic plastic and mass production) we see the growing popularity of a communication medium (radio) and gifted industrial designers applying their machine-age motifs to everyday household appliances.

While the era of Bakelite radios spans the 30s, 40s and early 50s, most of the innovative and timeless designs now coveted by collectors around the world were generated in the early to mid 30s. And, while America can justly claim to have led the world in radio design during this period, Australia also rates as one of the leading producers of stylish, coloured Bakelite radios. It is noteworthy, in the context of this article, that probably 95% of Bakelite radios manufactured outside of America were brown and up till the late 40s coloured radios were produced in very limited numbers.

Radio in Australia

The history of radio in Australia is intimately linked with the AWA company. In 1913 an amalgamation took place between Marconi's Wireless Telegraph Company and The Australian Wireless Company to form Amalgamated Wireless Australasia (AWA). Under the guidance of Ernest Fisk, who had trained with and was a friend of Marconi, AWA became a major player in the development of Australian communications. In 1918 the Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, conducted the first direct test radio transmission between Britain and Australia - sent from the Marconi Station at Carnarvon in Wales and received by Fisk in Wahroonga in Sydney. In 1919, on the 13th August, AWA transmitted a recording of God



C87 Radiolette of 1932



110 variant of 1932/1933

Save the King from AWA's Clarence Street, Sydney office to the Royal Society of NSW in Elizabeth Street, Sydney. It was the first public demonstration of broadcasting in Australia. Commercial radio broadcasting commenced in November 1923 with a concert from radio station 2SB (later named 2BL) in Philip Street, Sydney.

The First Synthetic Plastic

In 1907, Leo Baekeland (a Belgian born chemist) created Bakelite, which he described as "the material of a thousand uses". This was the first synthetic plastic and would not burn, boil, melt or dissolve.

One major variant of Bakelite is Catalin - thick translucent syrups without fillers, requiring no pressure to form, are poured into moulds and oven-baked to harden. This cast phenolic resin allowed for addition of pigments which could be swirled into the mix, creating unique castings. Many of the

beautiful, small, lightweight American radios of the 30s are made of Catalin.

The Bakelite Radio

By 1930 the first Bakelite valve radios with integrated speakers began to appear in Germany but within a few years the political climate in Nazi Germany stunted radio design, development and variety. German manufacturing companies (such as AEG) sought overseas markets for their Bakelite processes. In the USA, UK and Australia the capacity for mass production with large equipment saw Bakelite mantel (or table-top) radios emerge almost simultaneously in 1932. While the Australian and UK styles tended to mimic (in shape and colour) the wooden radios they were replacing, the American radios very quickly transformed into exotic shapes and varied colours.

From the 30s to the 50s, Australians had a long love-affair with the floor-standing wood console radio and during this

time mantel radios, whether in wood or Bakelite, actually constituted only a small proportion of the overall radio market. Mantel radios, advertised as accessories for rooms other than the main lounge, were thought to be particularly suited for the lady of the house, in the kitchen, where she spent most of her time. The advent of the smaller table-top and portable radio saw Bakelite utilised in countless designs and a myriad of colours up till the early 50s.

The 'Radiolette' Series

The name 'Radiolette' was used to describe a range of AWA radios - from the first wooden versions in 1929, through to the last plastic series in the late 1940s. AWA had connections with the American RCA company where the name 'Radiolette' originated. There are three, each very different, Bakelite AWA 'Radiolette' models from the 30s that stand out as truly unique and have achieved international standing among collectors of Bakelite radios. Today these radios can be truly appreciated as landmarks in design which exemplify the transition from Art Nouveau to Art Deco, from wood to plastic, from brown to colour, from drab to exciting, and from crackling sound for the few to mass entertainment for the whole community.



Above: Brown Empire State Fisk Radiolette
Left: AWA Building in Sydney

The C87 and 110 Radiolettes

The first of the AWA Bakelite Radiolettes is the imposing C87 of 1932, and its later variant the 110 of 1932/1933. These are basically the same cathedral style cabinet with the C87 having two knobs and a dramatic red/brown mottled colour, whereas the 110 had three knobs and two decorative mottled side panels. While the 110 was technically more advanced, the colour overall was a much more sombre brown than the C87 and one can only speculate as to why such a dramatic aesthetic change was made in such a short time-frame.

These radios weighed in at a solid 10 kilos, were 41cms tall and the C87 sold for 17 Guineas (the 110 for 21 Guineas). This was four to five times the Australian weekly wage and a quarter of the cost of a block of land in 1933. Such was the importance of the radio in the daily life of Australians in the early twentieth century.

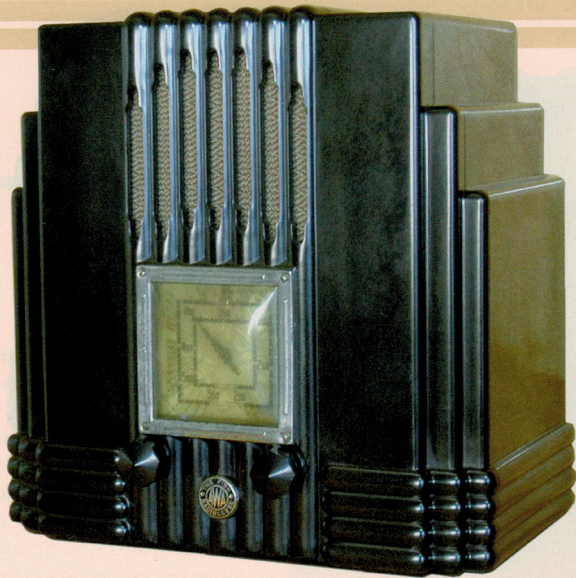
These majestic radios seem to straddle the evolutionary interface between the contoured curved lines of Art Nouveau and the simpler and squarer outlines of the subsequent Art Deco period. There is an obvious attempt to mimic not just the style of contemporary wood cathedral radios, but the patina and colour of wood as well. It is also worth noting that the C87 and 110 were not only using a new material, but also represented one of the earliest attempts to introduce 'portable' radios to the market. At this time almost all radios in the home were floor-standing wood consoles.

The 'Empire State' Radiolette

The 'Empire State' Fisk Radiolette of 1935 is the cornerstone of any Australian Bakelite radio collection. Based on an earlier AWA wooden model, it clearly owes much to the American Air King of 1933. It is regularly quoted that the



Marbled White
Empire State Radiolette



Black Empire State Fisk Radiolette of 1935



Jade Green Empire State Fisk Radiolette of 1935

architecturally inspired cabinet was designed in the shape of the AWA Building in Sydney. While there are obvious generic parallels, the AWA building was only erected in 1939 and therefore could not have influenced the design of this 1935 model. Until the 1950s the radio tower on the top of the AWA building was the tallest object on the Sydney skyline.

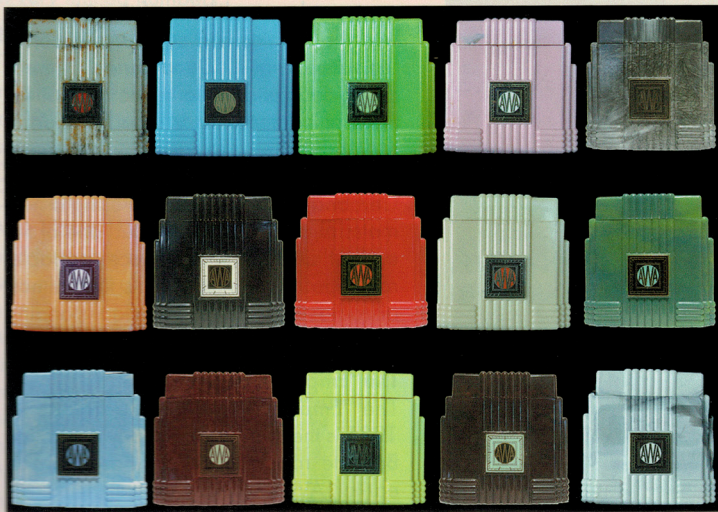
These radios were made in the AWA factory in Ashfield, Sydney. This solid, but elegant, AWA Empire State radio has stepped sides and deeply indented vertical and horizontal ridges. It comes in five colours, most commonly black and brown, followed by marbled white (originally designated by AWA as 'grained ivory'), with the rarest being the jade green of which perhaps only some 200 were made. Another rare model is the plain white version made specifically for the New Zealand market.

The Lure of Sets and Varieties

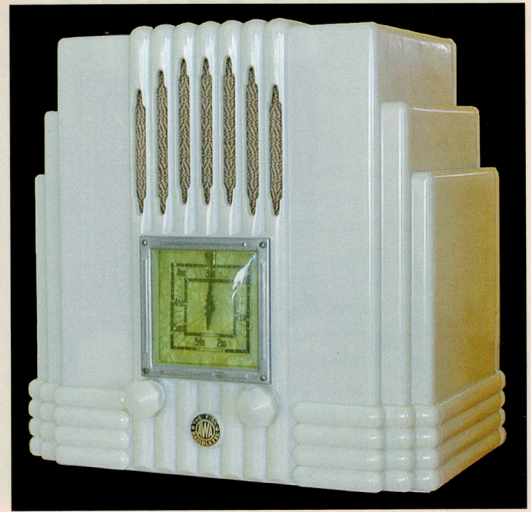
There are enduring and enticing myths about the existence of AWA Empire State radios in colours other than those already mentioned. Collectors dream of passing by an antique shop and finding a pristine AWA Empire State in red or blue. In years gone by collectors were confined to a small group of enthusiasts who met at yearly swap meets and trolled through second-hand shops. Today, with commercial intermediaries such as eBay, Bakelite radio collecting is conducted in an international forum, with many more collectors having access to a world of vendors. The apocryphal treasures are elusive and rarely surface, but one should not lose all hope. One collector in Sydney has a speckled green version of the AWA Empire State, originally found as a case, which AWA had manufactured as an experiment in the 1930s and never had a chassis inserted.

In 1936 AWA produced Bakelite cigarette boxes – miniatures in the same design as the Empire State radioettes as promotional material. These wonderful pieces of radio ephemera (H 8cm; W 8cm; D 4cm) are exactly one tenth the size of the radios and can generally be found in the same colours as those used for the radios. The inside of the lid reads 'Fisk Radiolette'. They are all extremely rare and very collectible.

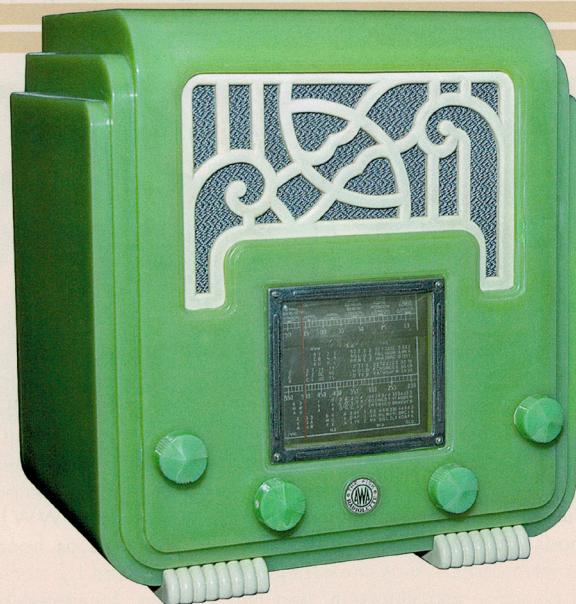
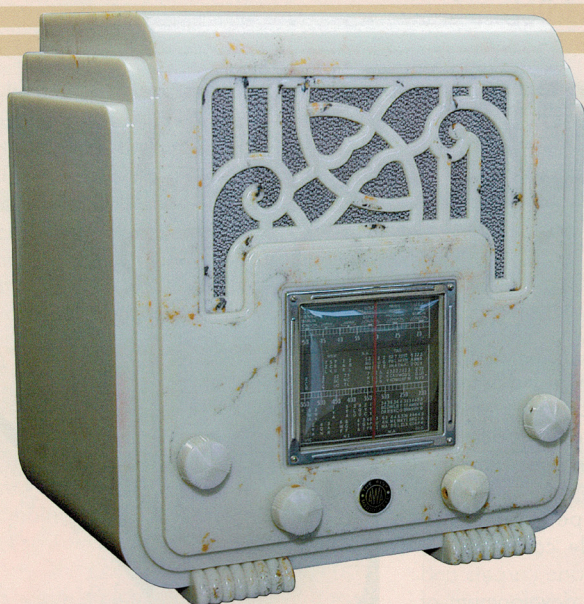
In 2004 the author acquired from one source nine more cigarette boxes in very unusual colours (red, blue, pumpkin, pink, black/grey, blue/white, yellow, green/blue and white/black) which mimic some of the colours seen in Australian radios of the 1940s (particularly the Astor Mickeys and Footballs). They are beautifully made, almost indistinguishable from the 30s originals even down to the specifically coloured enamel badges, but definitely later creations. These nine boxes have all



'Radiolette' cigarette boxes



White Empire State Fisk Radiolette of 1935



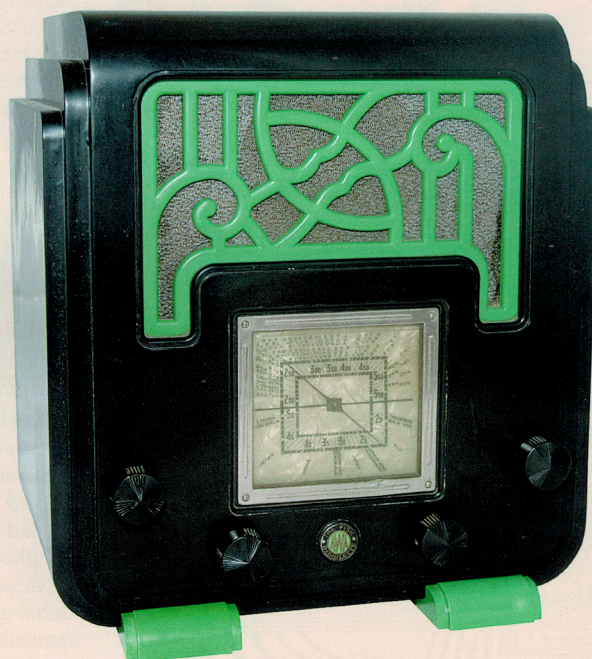
Above and Below: The 'Fret & Foot'
Fisk Radiolette of 1936

been produced from the same mould, but definitely not the one used for the original 30s series. Local experts have commented that the current cost of producing these newer boxes to such a high standard would be extraordinarily high. Whether these are modern replicas or legitimate experiments made within the AWA factory in the 40s or 50s remains to be clarified. Bakelite collectors worldwide are increasingly wary of modern 'Fakelite' copies of vintage items, which commonly occur with smaller items such as Bakelite jewellery.

The 'Fret & Foot' Radiolette

The 'Fret & Foot' Fisk Radiolette of 1936 came in three configurations: battery, AC or DC operation. It has a uniquely designed cabinet which has no international counterpart - a solid square block of Bakelite softened by curved edges and stepped ridges on the sides. The colours are identical to those of the Empire State radiolettes (brown, black, marbled white, plain white and jade green). Additionally, they have decorative Bakelite fretwork on the front of the cabinet and attached feet on the bottom, the fretwork and feet being of a different colour to the cabinet. The most dramatic of these are the green fret and feet with the black cabinet and white fret and feet with the green cabinet, the latter being the most rare model of the series.

These are large 'transportable' (hardly portable) radios weighing 10kg and with dimensions obviously only suitable for a decent table-top (H 33cm; W 30cm; D 23cm). The story goes that these radios were designed particularly for the rural market so that Australians, in the mid 1930s, could listen to the cricket tests broadcast live from the UK, New Zealand and South Africa.



In Conclusion

It is not surprising that some 70 years after manufacture, these three very different Bakelite AWA radiolettes, in all their iterations and colours, are becomingly extremely rare. The fragility of Bakelite and the lack of appreciation of old plastic radios has meant that, in the intervening years, most have been damaged or consigned to land-fill. Those obsessive souls with a passion for Bakelite radios appreciate and recognise the heritage and history they can conserve in their collections. To listen to a radio broadcast, replete with hum and static, and to run one's hand over an old Bakelite radio cabinet, evokes splendid memories of another time when these machines made pictures out of sound. The small numbers of intact and perfect specimens that remain provide a snapshot of the family and community of the 30s and 40s, the evolving medium of broadcast, and the innovative and elegant designs that make the Art Deco period so special.

Editors Note

If you think you have a unique Bakelite treasure send a picture to the author at peter@petersheridan.com

Peter Sheridan AM is a long-term member of ADS and an avid collector of radios and other Deco treasures. Peter is a prominent dentist in Sydney and in 2001 was made a Member of the Order of Australia for service to the community, particularly people with Multiple Sclerosis, their families and carers through the development of enhanced access to information resources.