ART DECO NEW YORK

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INNOVATION OF THE INTERWAR PERIOD

President's Message

Dear Deco Friends,

It gives me great pleasure and pride to share with you the 2021 issue of *Art Deco New York*, which highlights many important innovations of the interwar period that so dramatically shaped the architecture, design, and culture of the 1920s and 30s that we continue to celebrate today.

A hundred years ago, as the world emerged from a war and global pandemic, a period of dramatic technological change transformed all aspects of life—how and where people lived, worked, traveled, sought entertainment, pursued happiness, and more. A century later, we find ourselves at an all too eerie, similar point of reshaping aspects of everyday life, questioning what is important and what gives our lives meaning and pleasure.

This issue of *Art Deco New York* looks at many of the societal, technological, and artistic changes that transformed the interwar years and led to the creation of Art Deco masterpieces and the spirited Jazz Age lifestyle. As we move to emerge from the challenges of the last two years, we can hope that the promise of an equally energizing new period of inspiration and celebration awaits.

As always, the journal is the culmination of an effort that began in January, while the city was still in the darkest days of the pandemic. Our mostly volunteer team met online to decide if undertaking this effort under those circumstances was madness. We agreed it was, but we decided to do it anyway. So, as we often do, we plunged in—and we are all so glad we did!

This issue would not have been possible without the tireless dedication of ADSNY's passionate, professional volunteer team. Working remotely, under uniquely challenging circumstances, they made magic happen. I send my heartfelt thanks to all the writers who made time to share with us their scholarship and enthusiasm; to our editors Alma Kadragic, Diane Nottle, Peter Singer, and Sandra Tansky, who managed to work together while apart, to present this polished, thought-provoking volume; to Richard Berenholtz, Sawani Chaudhary, and Andrew Garn, for their striking photography of New York City's Deco gems; to Meghan Weatherby, for her beautiful design; to Board member Stephen Van Dyk for inviting so many outstanding authors to share their knowledge with us; and to ADSNY Vice-President, Anthony W. Robins for being there to lend a hand. I am very grateful to this mighty team for their generous help in making this issue a reality.

We hope you will enjoy their efforts and the variety of engaging articles in this issue. We are especially delighted that after the height of the pandemic, we can once again offer the *Art Deco New York* journal to our readers.

All our good wishes to you and your loved ones for a safe, happy and much better 2022!

Roberta Nusim, President

In This Issue

In Every Issue

Deco Radio: When Art Met Industry

By Peter Sheridan

Famous industrial designers used a new style, new materials, and mass production in the turbulent 1930s and 40s to create beautiful, colorful, streamlined tabletop radios, starting a trend that brought modern Art Deco styling into homes around the world.

The years from 1930 to 1940, wedged between the deprivations of the Great Depression and upheavals that presaged World War II, presented a pocket of opportunity for radio design. The common image of radio before its miniaturization to the transistor radio in the 1960s is that of a drab piece of wooden furniture or an unremarkable brown plastic box. But there was a period of glamor and innovation that is almost 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 and methods of marketing, better manufacturing processes, and changes in consumer buying habits, this was truly a golden age of radio and an important element in the globalization of modern style.

Radio may be seen through a number of different prisms: as an important type of mass communication; through the technical framework of radio electronics; via the evolution of radio stations; through the diverse news and entertainment content, often featuring celebrities; 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 from 1930 to 1940 is rarely appreciated for its importance in the world of industrial design and 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. As these components became integrated, radio design initially followed the style of the gramophone and in the late 1920s, aided by the availability of electricity in the home, evolved into the popular console radio.

INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS—DESIGN TIMELINE

RAYMOND LOEWY, UNITED STATES

1929 Gestetner Duplicator Revamp
1931 Westinghouse *Columnaire* Grandfather Clock Radio
1933 Colonial *New World* Radio
1933 Colonial *300* Radio
1934 Electrolux Coldspot Refrigerator for Sears & Roebuck
1936 Pennsylvania Railroad K4S Locomotive
1936 Pennsylvania Railroad GG-1 Electric Locomotive
1939 Lucky Strike Cigarette Packet
1941 Schick Electric Razor
1950 Studebaker Champion Starlight Coupe
1953 Studebaker Starliner Coupe
1954 Greyhound Scenicruiser Bus
1961 Studebaker Avanti Coupe
1961 British Petroleum Logo
1962 Shell Logo

WALTER DORWIN TEAGUE, UNITED STATES

1928 Kodak Gift Camera
1932 Marmon 16 Automobile
1934 Kodak Baby Brownie Camera
1935 Sparton *Nocturne* Radio
1936 Sparton *Bluebird* Radio
1936 Sparton *Sled* Radio
1936 Kodak Bantam Special Camera
1936 Texaco Gas Stations
1937 Kodak Bullet Camera
1938 Sparton *Cloissone* Radio
1939 Polaroid Desk Lamp
1939 Steinway Piano
1948 Polaroid Model 95 Camera
1946 Boeing Stratocruiser Airplane Interior
1940s Maxwell House Automatic Coffee Making Machine
1940s UPS Delivery Truck

HAROLD VAN DOREN, UNITED STATES

1933 Air King Radio
1933 Skippy Racer Scooter
1934 Wayne Pump Company Gasoline Pump
1934 Sno-Plane Sled
1935 American National Company Children's Bicycles, Tricycles, Scooters, and Wagons
1935 Toledo Scale
1939 Maytag Master Washer

NORMAN BEL GEDDES, UNITED STATES

1931 Philco *370 Lazyboy* Radio
1937 Majestic *651* Radio
1937 Revere Manhattan Cocktail Set
1939 New York World's Fair *Futurama* GM Pavilion
1940 Emerson *400 Patriot* Radio

JOHN VASSOS, UNITED STATES

1924 Armand Products Screw-Top Lotion Bottle
1932 Perey Turnstile Company Turnstile
1935 RCA Phonograph
1936 RCA *6K10* Radio
1936 RCA Victor *8T11* Radio
1936 RCA Victor *9K10* Radio
1937 Streamlined Kitchen Paring Knife
1938 Hohner Accordion
1939 RCA Television
1939 Hohner Harmonica
1939 Storytone Electric Piano
1939 General Electric Teardrop Record Player CJM3 Bakelite

ISAMU NOGUCHI, UNITED STATES

1929 Portrait of R. Buckminster Fuller
1937 Zenith *Radio Nurse*
1944 Noguchi IN-50 Table
1956 UNESCO *Le Jardin de la Paix, Jardin Japonais* The Garden of Peace, or Japanese Garden

CASTIGLIONI BROTHERS, ITALY

1938 Caccia Cutlery Set
1940 Phonola Radio
1956 R.E.M. Spalter Electric Vacuum Cleaner
1957 Sella Stool
1962 Flos S.p.A. Arco Floor Lamp
1962 Flos Taccia Lamp
1965 Brionvega RR126 Stereo System

WELLS COATES, UNITED KINGDOM

1930 British Broadcasting House Studio
1932 Kensington Palace Gardens
1934 Ekco *AD65* Radio
1934 Ekco *AC85* Radio
1934 Isokon Flats Building Lawn Road Flats
1935 Ekco *AD36* Radio
1935 Ekco *AD76* Radio
1935 Yeomans Row
1936 Embassy Court
1939 10 Palace Gate
1940 Ekco *AD75* Radio
1945 Ekco *A22* Radio
1949 Telekinema Cinema Building

This was a piece of wooden furniture with Victorian styling hiding the radio components, intended for the living 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 (radio, record player, and sometimes television) in the 1950s and 1960s.

Radio boasted the fastest uptake of any of the new technologies of the twentieth century, including telephone, television, 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 media of the nineteenth century, but literacy rates overall were not high. The spoken word was universal, and radio enfranchised the least educated with information they could assimilate. In addition, it was actually less expensive to provide radio waves than newspapers in remote and rural areas. By 1940, 90% of the people in the United States, Great Britain, Europe, and Australia had radios in their homes, and 75% got their news through this medium. This saturation could not have happened without the advent of the tabletop or mantel radio, which first appeared in Germany, created by the Nora Radio Company in 1929. This was a portable cabinet with simple tuning and volume controls containing all the electronics and a speaker and connected to an electrical outlet. By 1930, tabletop wooden radios appeared in Great Britain and the United States, but Nora led the way in Germany in 1930 with the first Bakelite tabletop radio, the *Sonnenblume* (German for Sunflower), which is a masterpiece of early radio technology enveloped in an Art Deco designed and mass-produced Bakelite cabinet.

Unlike the console radio, the tabletop radio had no design predecessor, and although countless numbers were subsequently made of wood and with traditional styling, there was an opportunity for new ideas in cabinet design, materials, and the target market. Its success is measured by the fact that after 1933 many more tabletop radios were sold than consoles. By 1930, radio had moved from a novelty to a necessity, and, given the number of people out of work and struggling financially during the years of the Great Depression, it is extraordinary how many radios were sold around the world from 1929 to 1935. 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 many diverse factors created a unique moment in the evolution of this medium.

The new profession of industrial design engaged people who had come from other disciplines, such as graphic design, theatrical set design, fashion illustration, and architecture. They all had little or no work during the Depression. However, the new tabletop format for radio offered an integrated, more user-friendly apparatus of a portable size, creating 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 tabletop radio effectively changed the listener from the family to the individual; it also broadened the scope of radio programming and the listening audience. Importantly, the concurrent expansion of electricity in the home underpinned the expansion of radio sales.

Added to this was the utility of the new nonflammable synthetic plastics (Bakelite, Catalin and urea formaldehyde products with brand names such as Plaskon and Beetleware.) These could be mass-produced much more cheaply per unit that wood radio cabinets which required more skill and time for production and finishing. Being nonflammable, the plastic cabinets could closely approximate the chassis and its tubes with infinite possibilities for external design. Here the artisan was replaced by the assembly line.

The new plastics offered scope to incorporate the new Style Moderne design (which today we call Art Deco or Streamlining) and create a whole

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP TO BOTTOM:
The first Bakelite tabletop radio. Nora *Sonnenblume* (Sunflower), Germany, 1929.

Design Timeline listing some of the most notable industrial designers with their early work on radios highlighted in gold.

THIS PAGE LEFT TO RIGHT:
A grouping of radios designed by some of the notable industrial designers listed in the Design Timeline.

Walter Dorwin Teague, Sparton *Nocturne*, United States, 1935.

Raymond Loewy, Colonial *New World*, United States, 1933.

Harold van Doren, *Air King*, United States, 1933.

Norman Bel Geddes, Emerson *Patriot*, United States, 1941.

J. Sampson Spencer, Automatic *Tom Thumb*, United States, 1938.

Wells Coates, Ekco *AD65*, United Kingdom, 1934.

A grouping of radios influenced by industrial designers and showing the influence of the streamline aesthetic.

TOP ROW LEFT TO RIGHT:
Artes *AR3*, Spain, 1947.

Kadette K25, *Clockette*, United States, 1937.

FADA 1000, *Bullet*, United States, 1945.

Radio-Glo, United States, 1935.

Rubis 70, Belgium, 1933.

BOTTOM ROW LEFT TO RIGHT:
Motorola 50XC, *Circle Grille*, United States, 1940.

Emerson BT245, *Tombstone*, United States, 1938.

Symphony, United States, 1939.

EGM, Mexico, 1940.

AWA *Radiolette* and Cigarette Box, Australia, 1934 and 1936.

new type of radio cabinet that reflected modernity and progress. Some radios clearly derive from other streamlined Deco objects; skyscrapers, trains, and rockets, others from the aerodynamic shape of a bullet, a sled or the grille 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 United States and Australia, a wide choice of colors encouraged advertising targeted to women to place radios in all the rooms in the home.

A number of smaller radio companies commissioned industrial designers to create radios that would offer a cost-effective home appliance to be mass-produced and mass-marketed. These designers were all early in their careers, and almost all went on to be founders of Streamlining, luminaries of industrial design, and much more famous for their subsequent commissions. These commissions for inexpensive radio designs were not for major corporations and clearly not considered prestigious, as they were generally ignored in later homages and biographies. But the larger, more complete picture confirms that this was the moment when art met industry, and it was the embedding of electronics into consumer products that gave rise to a radical shift in both design possibilities and people's relationships with objects. For the first time, a product's potential behavior and functionality was disconnected from its physical form. Radio became an object consumers chose for their homes, on the basis of not just what they would hear, but how it would look. Radio became a visual as well as aural experience. Companies manufacturing radios were forced to modify their cabinet designs each year (whether or not there were technical advances) as choice and change became synonymous with retail marketing.

The industrial designers were innovators who empowered their successors, creating a benchmark for other radio makers to aspire to quality styling. 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 10 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 British industrial designers. A true anomaly is the very rare wooden console, the *Pacific Elite*, made in New Zealand in 1934, which shows how good design can overcome the inherent limitations of material and a furniture mentality. By 1950, in the U.S. many inexpensive Deco-style radios sold in department stores were made from painted metal. A small quantity were chromed, and today these little gems are highly sought by collectors.

Overall, this small subset of designer-influenced radios from the 1930s 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 radio design around the world. It should be noted that the impact of the Depression and the upheaval leading into World War II meant that in many countries consumer radio production was halted or severely limited, and the prewar designs emerged only when production resumed in the late 1940s and even the early 1950s.

Most of these radios are rare today, and some are limited to a few remaining examples. They 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 the Netherlands. 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 Dorwin Teague as "the dean of industrial design." John Vassos was called "the quintessential modernist." All these designers are more famous for other—mainly later—creations, everything from a matchstick to a city.

In the U.K. the Ekco Company led the world in the early 1930s to produce modern style radios in the new plastics, hiring well-known architects including Wells Coates, Serge Chermayeff, J.K White, Jesse Collins, and Misha Black. Coates designed the world's first round radio and refined the use of the circle within the radio itself, a feature that spread around the world. But try as it might, Ekco, for all its beautiful designs, could not persuade the British public to buy a radio that wasn't black or brown until the late 1940s. The Castiglioni Brothers designed for Phonola in Italy and Louis Kalff in the Netherlands for the Philips Company. Walter Maria Kersting in Germany was notable for using radio design for Nazi propaganda purposes.

Catalin was first used for radios in 1936 by the Fada Company in New York and became popular in the U.S. Catalin was a cast phenolic commonly used for jewelry, with glorious translucent colors. This was perhaps the first introduction of mix-and-match elements in retail choice with the Catalin cabinet in one color matched to the grille and knobs in another. An example is Dorwin Teague's tiny Sparton *Cloisonne* of 1938, probably the most cultured and evolved of all the Art Deco radios. With a white Catalin cabinet, which fades over time to butterscotch, and Tenite (cellulose acetate) knobs, the front is enameled in one of four colors—red, blue, brown, or yellow—and decorated with chrome circles and horizontal lines. One circle 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 high point 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.

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 nineteenth century—before the advent of the gramophone—was performed by family members on their own musical instruments. The gramophone and record player, which were popular in the first two decades of the twentieth century, were overtaken by radio from the mid-1920s to the 1950s, when individual records and stereo 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 on radio was live, with bands and entertainers performing in the studio, but better 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 the senses. Looking at the colors and shapes is 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 light hum, and then the crackle of static. These aural cues speak of a time past and 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 by virtue of its aesthetics, independent of the core audio function and its many 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 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 is an internationally renowned collector and speaker on Art Deco as well as a committee member of the Art Deco & Modernism Society of Australia and an accredited professional photographer. Sheridan has authored three major photographic reference books on design and architecture including: *Radio Days: Australian Bakelite Radios* (2008), *Deco Radio: The Most Beautiful Radios Ever Made* (2014), and *Sydney Art Deco* (2019).

This article is a reference from Sheridan's 2014 publication *Deco Radio: The Most Beautiful Radios Ever Made.*

All Photos: From the collection of the author

TOP TO BOTTOM:
Pacific *Elite*, New Zealand, 1934. One of the few wooden radios in the world that exemplify the streamline aesthetic.

Walter Dorwin Teague, Sparton *Cloisonne*, United States, 1938. Blue and red models of a small, rare, and elegant expression of Art Deco styling.

A group of six chrome radio from Arvin and Temple sold in department stores in the US in the 1950s.