

FALL 2014



CHICAGO ART DECO SOCIETY

Magazine



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DecoRadio: the most beautiful radios ever made

BY PETER SHERIDAN
SCHIFFER PUBLISHING LTD., 2014

Reviewed by Kathleen Murphy Skolnik

In their time, the radios produced between the mid-1920s and the early 1950s were simply ordinary household appliances that provided entertainment and information. But today, a select subset is admired for its streamlined styling, use of innovative synthetic materials, and wide range of colors. *DecoRadio: the most beautiful radios ever made*, the stunning new book from author, historian, and Art Deco devotee Peter Sheridan, showcases these often overlooked icons of Art Deco.

The rise of radio in the United States was meteoric. Radio was still a novelty in the mid-1920s but became commonplace by the late 1920s and ubiquitous by the mid-1930s. As Sheridan points out, in 1925 only 19% of U. S. households had a radio. This figure jumped to 60% by 1934 and to 90% by 1941.

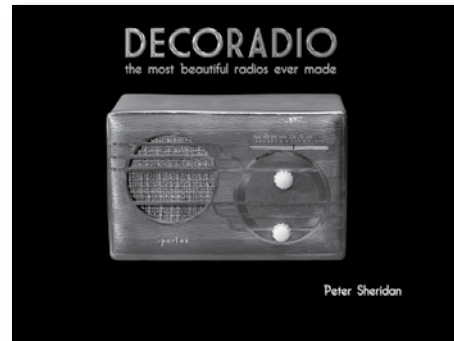
Console radio cabinets tended to be “bland and boxy,” and usually made of wood or wood-colored plastic, with little attention to style. Exceptions to this general trend include the RCA 9K10 (1936) and the Zenith 1000Z “Stratosphere” (1933) from the United States, the Pacific “Elite” from New Zealand (1934), and the French Radialva TO-56 (1936).

The introduction of mantel or tabletop models was a major contributor to the spread of radio, resulting in multiple sets for different rooms of the house and changing the listener from the family to the individual. The German Nora model K3W of 1929 appears to have been the first true tabletop radio. Its simple tombstone shape echoed that of most console radios, but it lacked the Gothic embellishments typical of its contemporaries. It also incorporated a panel made of Bakelite, the first phenol-formaldehyde resin, on the front of the cabinet just below the speaker fabric. A year later, Nora released the all-Bakelite “Sonnenblume” with its smooth, lustrous, rounded surface and sunflower-like petals on the cabinet face.

Most early tabletop radios in the United States had cathedral-shaped wooden cabinets. In contrast, the International Radio Corporation’s Kadette H “International” from 1931 had a small rectangular case made of urea- rather than phenol-formaldehyde resin, allowing color options of brown, black, blue, white, and green as well as a variegated marbled finish. But the cabinet retained the Gothic ornamentation typical of its contemporaries. The Harold van Doren-designed Air King models, introduced in 1933, were a major innovation, combining a urea-formaldehyde cabinet available in a range of colors and finishes with a



*Air King 66 with a flocked finish
and a map insert.*



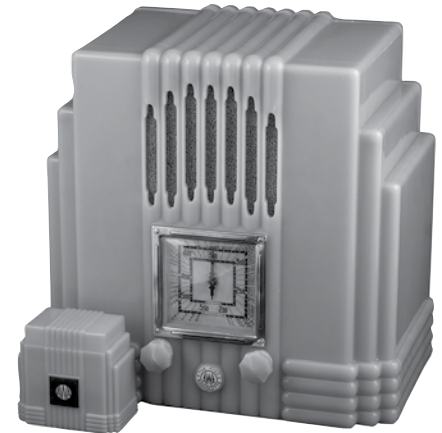
unique skyscraper shape. A cutout on the face of the cabinet could be fitted with various inserts—a map, a clock, or an Egyptian scene.

Australia’s first tabletop radios were the Bakelite Fisk Radiolette C87 of 1932 and the C104 of 1932/33 from AWA, both with rounded cathedral cabinets and decoration that combined Gothic, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco motifs. The company took a major step toward modernity with the introduction in 1934 of the architecturally-inspired Fisk Radiolette, an Australian version of the Air King. Its nickname was the “Empire State.” The urea-formaldehyde cabinet was offered in brown, black, marbled white, and green, the most sought after color.

British manufacturers also readily adopted new materials and designs. England’s Ekco used synthetic resins, both phenol- and urea-formaldehyde, for a number of models produced in the 1930s. In 1934, the company introduced the first round radio, the AD65 designed by Wells Coates with its urea-formaldehyde cabinet available in brown, black, green, and white. The radio was enthusiastically received by the British public, but only in the darker tones. The lighter shades failed to sell, and only four green and none of the white models are known to exist today. It was not until the Kolster Brandes BM20 (Dalek) of 1947 and the FB10 (Toaster) of 1950 that colored radios sold to any extent in the United Kingdom.

Bakelite, the original molded phenol-formaldehyde resin, was available only in dark tones. The development of urea-formaldehyde resins in the 1920s allowed expansion of the color palette for plastic radio cases. Catalin, a more transparent cast phenol-formaldehyde resin introduced in the 1930s, further expanded the spectrum.

Catalin was only used in the United States and was produced between 1936 and 1941 and again from 1945 through 1947. Catalin radios are among the rarest and the most sought after by collectors. The box-shaped FADA 5F60 of 1936 with a case and grill in contrasting colors is the earliest example. Others include the FADA Bullet models of the 1940s and the Sparton “Cloissone” (1939) with its enameled front and chrome accents, shown on the cover of the book.



Clockwise from left: Pacific "Elite;" Emerson BD-197 ("Mae West"); Sparton 500C "Cloisone;" AWA Fisk Radiolette (Empire State) with cigarette box; Sparton 1186 "Nocturne."

Although many noted industrial designers in the United States and overseas contributed to radio styling, their work for this industry is seldom acknowledged. Raymond Loewy, known for the Sears-Roebuck Coldspot refrigerator and the Studebaker Avanti, designed several models for Emerson, RCA, and Colonial, including the globe-shaped "New World" (1933) in three colors. Walter Dorwin Teague's "Nocturne" and "Bluebird" for Sparton, for whom he also designed the "Cloisone," are somewhat better known. A circle of blue or peach glass, 48 inches in diameter, accented with horizontal and vertical chrome strips concealed the wooden box enclosing the actual radio of the futuristic "Nocturne" (1935). The "Bluebird" (1936) was a smaller version with a 15-inch circle. Another of the more recognized models is the red, white, and blue Emerson "Patriot" 400 (1940) designed by Norman Bel Geddes and based on the American flag.

Although most of the more innovative streamlined cabinets were synthetic plastic rather than wood, exceptions do exist, including the Emerson BD-197 of 1938, designed by Alexis Sakhnoffsky and nicknamed the "Mae West." Tubular chrome banding distinguished the wood radios designed by John Vassos for RCA.

One of Sheridan's chapters is devoted to the "Volksempfänger" VE301, the people's radio designed by Walter Maria Kersting and introduced in Germany in 1933. The model number commemorated the date of Adolph Hitler's rise to power, January 30, 1933. The radios had one purpose—the dissemination of Nazi propaganda. The simple design had no ornamentation other than an eagle or swastika above the

central knob. Manufacturers were expected to devote up to 40% of their production to cheaper receivers that limited reception to German-controlled radio stations. Listening to a non-German station became a criminal act, and toward the end of the war, was punishable by death.

The book's Radio Gallery includes Sheridan's beautiful color photographs of 300 radios from fifteen countries presented chronologically by decade, from the 1920s through the 1950s. Most are from the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom, but France, Germany, Spain, and a number of other countries are also represented. Within each period, the radios are listed in sequence and by country. An index sorts the entries by country, manufacturer, model, and year.

Sheridan's personal collection includes more than 250 Art Deco radios.

He purchased his first, a green American Emerson AU190 and a white marbled Australian AWA Radiolette, from a shop in Camden Passage in London in 1998. One of his latest additions is a rare green Air King from 1933 discovered in a shop in an antique marketplace in the Copacabana area of Rio de Janeiro during the 2011 World Congress on Art Deco. He is already anticipating the treasures he may find in Shanghai when he attends the 2015 World Congress.



Ekco AD65.

DecoRadio: the most beautiful radios ever made is highly recommended for those who love Art Deco, radios, and industrial design—or just beautiful books. Its attractive design and stunning color photos make this book a collector's item in itself. ☞