

Nocturne Radio, c. 1937, mirrored glass with satin-finished chrome work and silver-finished wood, designed by Walter Dorwin Teague, manufactured by Sparton Corp., Jackson, MI, 98.276.205, G378



Questions:

1. How does the design of this radio appear to you?
2. How would it be to use this as a radio?
3. What do you think of this as an art object in a museum?
4. Why would you think this radio is called “Nocturne?”

Modernism: The Machine Age

The 1930’s, between WW I and WW II, heralded the machine age. This was a time period of developments in science and industry, including fast communications and new products. Machines were omnipresent and challenged perceptions of the self and the world; they became a symbol of Modernism. Different styles of Modernism evolved, but styles tended to be based on machine imagery. It represented a break with the past, history becoming irrelevant. As the artist Sheeler stated: “Our factories are our substitutes for religious expression.”

The age of modernism witnessed new man-made materials, including bakelite, chrome, formica, aluminum, and stainless steel – as well as new processes such as mass production and “Fordism.” This also was the era of the building of skyscrapers in American cities. Even humans were viewed as machines with the development of the field of scientific management and the time-motion studies of Frederick Taylor (Taylorism, the forerunner of the current emphasis productivity and quality measurement in our work today). Homes across the American countryside saw electrification. Whereas in 1917, 24% of homes had electricity this percentage jumped to 90% in 1940. Telephones similarly proliferated: in 1900 there were 1 million, in 1920 7.5 million and in 1930 20 million.

The first radio station was founded in 1920. With radio networks listeners became linked to the culture of mass entertainment and advertising (augmented so tremendously in our internet age). The centerpiece of Rockefeller Center became Radio City Music Hall. The radio and telephone were viewed as substituting an illusion of immediacy for real encounters (an editorial: computers, other new technologies, and the internet have only compounded this view in our age of the

21st century). World War I was the first full-scale all mechanized conflict in our history. Indicative of the importance of the machine to Modernism, in 1934 the Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition titled *Machine Art*.”

Industrial Design and Walter Dorwin Teague (1883 – 1960)

With the age of modernism, the industrial designer was viewed as the new artist-hero of the machine age. Walter Dorwin Teague became the elder statesman of industrial design, the “Dean of Industrial Design.” The industrial designer attempted to modernize consumer goods to boost sales, pursuing a new style that evolved from the preceding jazz age Art Deco style of the 1920’s. After the Wall Street crash of 1929 the streamlined form, as a new image, was used to unify industry and propel it out of economic stagnation. This form, based on aerodynamic principles, came to symbolize industrial progress. The age of movement, thus, adopted a form of movement as its symbol. The industrial designer restyled practically everything so that existing models would appear outdated.

Born in Indiana in 1883, Teague moved to New York City in 1903 to study at the Art Students League where he concentrated on typography and lithography. He then moved into the world of advertising developing highly decorative borders for printed ads, and in 1911 opened an office on Madison Avenue. In 1925 he visited the Paris Exhibition of Decorative Arts and saw buildings designed by LeCorbusier. These experiences led him to abandon traditional styles, instead designing consumer goods that reflected the requirements of the machine age. Teague worked on both decorative and industrial objects, unlike many in the field of industrial design. In addition, he presented himself more as a businessman than an artist. He worked with clients, architects, engineer draftsmen, marketing research, made models, and presented concepts.

Among other consumer and industrial products, he designed the Box Brownie Camera (he worked with Kodak for 30 years), Pullman Coaches for the New Haven Railroad Company, and the Boeing 707/747 airplanes. He also designed the Texaco service stations nationwide. As part of his activities, Teague helped create corporate identities, including shop interiors and exhibition stands.

Teague’s influence in the profession grew with his position as Chairman of the Board of Design for the New York World’s Fair of 1939. His building for the Ford Motor Company at the fair displayed his mature design style and his vision of a clean and modern environment.

Nocturne Radio:

Teague worked with Sparton Corporation designing radios between 1933 and 1936. The “Nocturne radio” was the ultimate icon of modernity and a classic art deco style. In 1936 it sold for \$350...the cost of a new Ford car. This radio was intended for posh hotel foyers, has a more mellow sound than today, and was designed to appeal to men through the future shock form and space age technology. The radio has a twelve tube receiver and 12 inch electrodynamic speakers. It also features a turning eye *Viso-globe* tube, push-pull audio output, 1RF and 2RF stages, and an adjustable IF bandwidth control. The design surrounding the radio itself is a circular sheath of cobalt blue and mirrored glass. The “Nocturne” radio represents the design epitome of the clean, linear, and geometric characteristics of Art Deco in the 1930’s, including the prevalent use of cobalt blue and mirrored glass.

By the 1940’s streamlining was seen as the expression of a false optimism. The style had become institutionalized, several industrial designers were commissioned from 1941 to design war-related projects, and the movement lost continuity and momentum. After World War II Americans saw the obverse side of the machine—its’ potential for destruction.

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