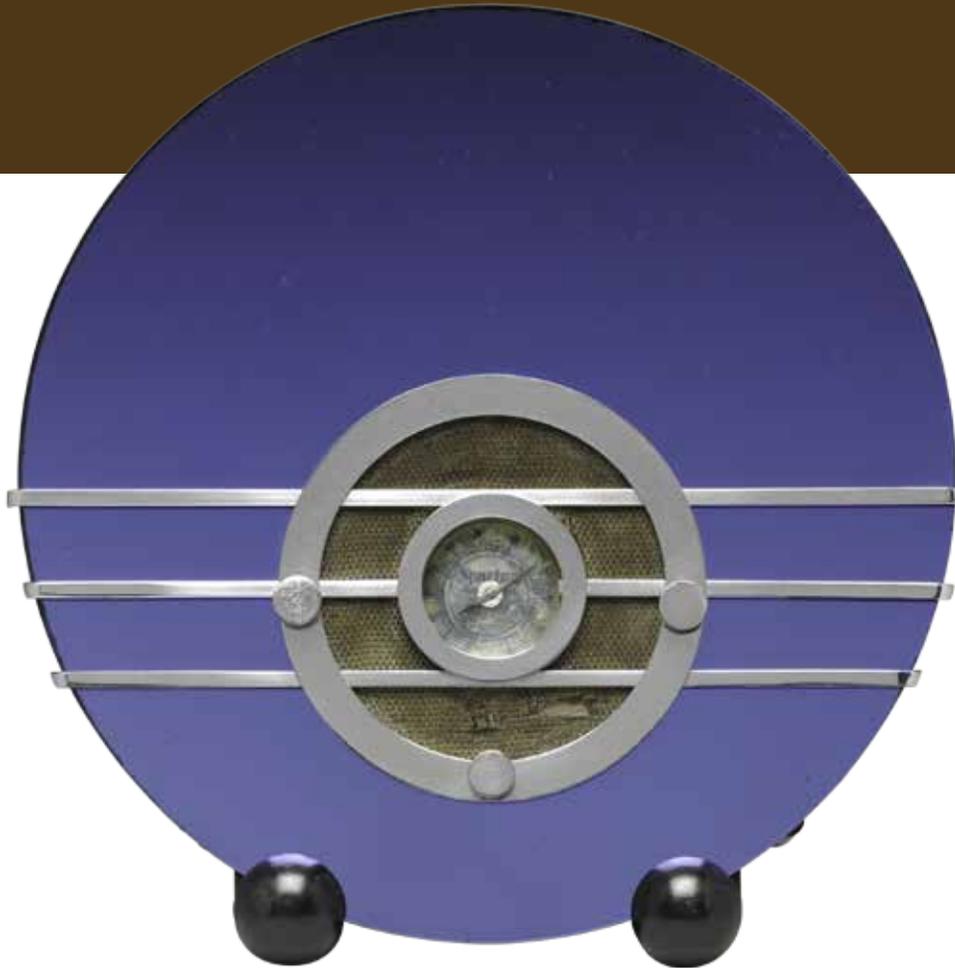


THE ART OF TECHNOLOGY

KEY TERMS

- Art Deco
- Golden Age of Radio
- Great Depression
- Product Design
- World Expositions



CLOSE LOOKING

MEASURING FOURTEEN INCHES IN DIAMETER and one-half inch thick, the “Bluebird” radio’s cobalt blue, mirrored front panel is backed with dark fabric. A circle of metal mesh surrounding the small central dial acts as a speaker grill for the AM-band radio. Three thin chromium-plated metal strips run horizontally through the larger plated circle on which the dials sit. These strips are echoed in the white lines incised on the radio’s black case. The left knob on the large circle controls power to the radio and volume, the central knob controls tuning, and the right controls tone. Its black feet are purely decorative; the radio sits on thick wooden runners.¹ Costing \$39.95 in 1936,² the “Bluebird” is recognized as a masterpiece of Art Deco design. Art

‘BLUEBIRD’ SPARTON MODEL RADIO c. 1936

Blue-mirrored glass, chromium-plated metal, wood
Designer: Walter Dorwin Teague
Born: Decatur, Indiana 1883
Died: Flemington, New Jersey 1960
Manufacturer: Sparton Corporation, Jackson, Michigan, 1900–present
Purchase with Exchange Funds from Gift of Marion Lee Brown, Gift of Mrs. Matthew Hirsch, Gift of Isabel Powell Kilmer, Gift of Saidie A. May, Gift of Eleanor P. Spencer, and Gift of Eleanor L. Turnbull, BMA 1998.106
©Walter Dorwin Teague and Associates, Inc.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

AT AGE NINETEEN, Walter Dorwin Teague left his native Indiana for New York City, where he studied art at night and drew newspaper ads during the day. An eighteen-year career in advertising ended in 1926 when Teague traveled abroad to study vanguard design currents in Western Europe. The trip was a professional epiphany, and upon return Teague founded a firm devoted exclusively to industrial design.

Through the design of beautiful yet functional objects, Teague helped define popular taste for an American mass market. He created highly successful partnerships with large businesses such as Eastman Kodak, for whom he designed iconic cameras. In 1928, with no prior knowledge of camera workings, Teague proposed the radical idea of working on-site designing cameras in collaboration with Kodak engineers. Other work included thirty-two patterns for American glass-maker Steuben Glass, office machines, airplanes, and passenger and diner cars for the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad. He was widely known for his exposition design of the Ford buildings at the 1933–34 Chicago “Century of Progress” Fair and the 1935 California Pacific International Exposition. For the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair, Teague was contracted to design nine corporate displays. He helped introduce the novel concept of “corporate identity,” in which industrial design and human environment merged. For Kodak, Teague’s work expanded to include the design of displays and retail spaces. For Texaco, he created a brand that included gas station layout, pumps, signs, cans, and trucks. Referred to as the “Dean of Industrial Design,” Teague helped establish the practice as a profession in the United States.⁵



Kodak Beau Brownie 2A Box Cameras, 1930–33

Deco, the primary American and European design style of the 1920s and 1930s, is characterized by precise geometric shapes and bold planes of color that were often tertiary—indigo, aqua, ochre, vermilion, chartreuse, and violet.

ART IN CONTEXT

ON SEPTEMBER 18, 1935, at the National Electrical and Radio Exposition in New York, the “Bluebird” radio debuted as one of four mirrored models manufactured by the Sparton company of Jackson, Michigan. Walter Dorwin Teague, one of the country’s most celebrated industrial designers, was contracted exclusively by Sparton to design the collection. His suite was hailed as “Radio’s Richest Voice Now Combined with Radio’s Smartest Styling.”²

World expositions and trade fairs, such as the 1935 New York Expo, were widely popular venues for showcasing new ideas, materials, technologies, and contributions to daily living. The great 1925 Paris Exposition International des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes was one such venue. It introduced to the public a streamlined, modern aesthetic called “Art Deco” after the shortened name of the French expo. Decorative elements in Art Deco inspired luxury goods and mass-produced consumer products that included the use of luxurious new surface finishes, such as mirror, lacquer, ebony, chrome, ivory, and Plexiglas, and clean geometric forms. Streamlined Deco objects often called to mind modern machines in motion. The forms of the Bluebird radio, for example, simulate the spinning propeller and landing gear of an aircraft.

The Golden Age of Radio began in the 1920s and continued into the early 1950s, when television replaced radio in popularity. In 1930, 39% of American households had radios; by 1940, radio ownership grew to 73%.^{3,4} During the economic downturn of the Great Depression, radio was a free medium for public entertainment and information during a time when families struggled to pay rent and buy food. Listeners could enjoy radio genres such as news, variety shows, music programs, comedies, mysteries, farm reports, weather forecasts, and quiz shows. Disseminating information quickly, the radio became a very efficient way of communicating to the masses. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s fireside chats, broadcast from 1933–44, reached millions of Americans. The president used the medium to build confidence, quell rumors, and share information with the public about topics such as the bank crisis, drought conditions, the New Deal Program, the Works Relief Program, and World War II.

**VANITY** designed 1939

East Indian rosewood, sequoia-burl veneers, ebonized plywood, vinyl-coated fabric, brass, brass-plated steel, mirrored glass, Plexiglas or Lucite

Designer: Gilbert Rohde

Born: New York, New York 1894

Died: New York, New York 1944

Manufacturer: Herman Miller, Inc., Zeeland, Michigan, 1923–present

Gift of Michael and Anis Merson, Baltimore
BMA 2000.226

RELATED ARTWORK

WHILE WALTER DORWIN TEAGUE is generally considered a designer of industrial and mass-produced objects, his contemporary, Gilbert Rohde, is known as a designer of furniture for high-end production. Inspired by his visit to the 1937 Paris Exposition, which showcased art and technology in modern life, Rohde designed the Art Deco inspired “No. 3920” bedroom furniture group, to which the BMA vanity belongs. Interestingly, bedroom vanities were raised to the status of glamorous furniture forms in the 1930s in part because of films that featured Hollywood actresses showcasing their beauty at dressing tables.⁶ Rohde designed the vanity for modern furniture maker Herman Miller Furniture Company of Zeeland, Michigan. The bedroom suite showcases Rohde’s established vocabulary of rectilinear and geometric forms, to which he added curvilinear elements and innovative materials. For the vanity pulls, Rohde introduced for the first time Plexiglas as a decorative material rather than an industrial one. He also utilized innovative PVC-impregnated cloth on the central panel of the vanity and on the cabinet rosewood imported from Asia, and sequoia burl, a tree growth that when sliced and polished is highly prized for its beauty.



REVERSIBLE COMPOSITION 1937–1938

Oil on composition board

Charles H. Walther

Born: Baltimore, Maryland 1879

Died: Baltimore, Maryland 1937

Bequest of the Artist, BMA 1938.717

After a 1906 trip to Paris to study with avant-garde artists, Baltimore-based artist Charles Walther became an early proponent of abstract art and an opponent of the academic, representational style embraced by many American artists. In the late 1920s, his “modernist tendencies” cost him his job at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where he taught painting for twenty-nine years. His dismissal was caused by his adamant embrace of nonobjective art (art that does not represent anything in the natural world) that was in direct conflict with the realist tradition of the institute’s fine arts program at the time.⁷

Much like jazz music so popular in radio programs of the time, *Reversible Composition* demonstrates riffs on repeated elements—in this case, repeated forms in various colors—to create dynamic abstraction. The work, made in the last year of his life, is even more fluid because the artist gave no indication which side of the composition was meant to be the top. The flat, simplified shapes outlined in black call to mind stained glass, a medium Walther worked in when he created windows for several churches in Baltimore. At The BMA, Walther had his first solo show in 1930 and a major memorial exhibition in 1938.

¹ <http://antiqueradio.org/spar04.htm>

² The Bluebird was a relatively inexpensive radio for its time. Using an inflation calculator, the \$39.95 Bluebird table model would cost \$674.65 in 2014. Cabinet console floor models by companies such as Zenith were much more expensive, costing well into the thousands of dollars in 1936. Expensive models such as the Zenith sold well in the 1920s but not in the midst of the Depression in the 1930s. In the 1940s, with increases in technology and production, radios became less expensive and ownership increased.

² http://tuberadioland.com/files/SpartonAd_RR09350001.jpg

³ www.census.gov/prod/99pubs/99statab/sec31.pdf

⁴ As of 2011, 98% of Americans used or owned a radio, a percentage that remained largely unchanged since the turn of the millennium. In addition, in 2011 online audio was used by 34% of Americans through streaming AM/FM stations and internet-only services, such as Spotify. <http://stateofthemediamedia.org/2012/audio-how-far-will-digital-go/audio-by-the-numbers/>

⁵ <http://idsa.org/walter-dorwin-teague>

⁶ <http://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/vanity-and-ottoman>

⁷ http://www.mica.edu/About_MICA/Facts_and_History/1905-1960_A_Fresh_Start%E2%80%9494Rise_of_Mount_Royal_Campus.html

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1:

Exploring audio technology of the past and present

Grades: K–2, 6–8

Subjects: English Language Arts, History/
Social Studies, Visual Arts

Students will brainstorm a list of the ways people communicate today, with or without technology. Students will then carefully observe and describe the *'Bluebird' Radio*, using the following questions as prompts. Teacher will record all student responses on a black/white board.

- What lines, shapes, colors, textures, space, and forms do you see in the object?
- Have you seen anything like this object before? What does it remind you of?
- This object was used for communication. How do you think it would have worked? What do you think it communicated?

Teacher will share with students the function of the *'Bluebird' Radio* and its use during the time period. In teams of two or four, students will brainstorm a list of present-day technologies that allow people to listen to audio content such as news programs, podcasts, and music. Students will then choose one of those technologies and compare it to the *'Bluebird' Radio* using a Venn Diagram and the questions below for guidance.

- How are the uses of *'Bluebird' Radio* and the present-day technology similar? How are they different?
- Compare and contrast the looks of the *'Bluebird' Radio* and the present-day technology. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Why might the appearance of a piece of technology be important to the consumer?
- What might the designer of the *'Bluebird' Radio* have been trying to express through the look of the object? What does the look of present-day technology express?

Students will then participate in a class discussion about the potential advantages and disadvantages of the technologies they compared. Teacher will record all student responses in a two-column chart.

ACTIVITY 2:

Creating and performing plays about the role of radio during the Great Depression

Grades: 6–8, 9–12

Subjects: English Language Arts, History/Social
Studies, Visual Arts

Within a unit on the United States from 1929–1945, students will examine and describe the *'Bluebird' Radio*. Forming research teams of four, students will collaboratively research the use of radio during the Great Depression, including addresses by President Franklin Roosevelt. Share the following questions to guide students in their research.

- How did President Roosevelt use the radio to communicate with the public during the period of the Great Depression?
- What other kinds of radio programs were offered during that period? How did they reflect the time and the needs of the audience?
- What role did radio play in the home at that time? Is there an equivalent technology that people use today? How is it similar to or different from the radio?
- Why might the design of the radio have been important to consumers at that time?

Student teams will then collaboratively create an imaginative 10-minute play about a family who listens to the radio during the Great Depression, creating paper props for a 2-dimensional background set (including a radio appropriate for the time), and a full script. The following questions will help them create their play.

- Who are the members of the family?
- What is happening to them during the Great Depression? How do the different family members feel about it?
- What are some items they have in their home?
- Who is on the radio? (Don't forget to cast this role!)
- What would the family listen to on the radio? Why?
- How would each of the family members react to what's on the radio? Why might they have different reactions?
- What role does the radio play in their daily lives?

Student teams will then perform their plays for the class.

Audio recordings of fireside chats and other radio addresses by President Roosevelt can be found here:
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/medialist.php?presid=32>

Transcripts of fireside chats by President Roosevelt can be found here: <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/firesi90.html>

ACTIVITY 3:

Discovering the Art Deco style

Grades: 6–8, 9–12

Subjects: English Language Arts, Visual Arts

Students will look closely at *'Bluebird' Radio*, *Vanity*, and *Reversible Composition*. Using a three circle Venn Diagram, students will compare and contrast the three artworks. Students will respond to the questions below to help guide their looking. Teacher will record all student observations on a black/white board.

- Describe the art elements—color, shape, line, texture, space, and form—that you see in each of these objects.
- Which art elements are treated in a similar manner? Which are treated differently?
- What other kinds of objects do these works resemble?
- Where else in your daily life do you see shapes like these?

Teacher will share with students images of Art Deco objects and architecture without using the term Art Deco. Referring to the art elements identified in the three artworks, students will look for similar elements in the newly introduced Art Deco images. In teams of four, students will create their own preliminary definition of the style (Art Deco) based on their exploration of the common elements in the artworks. They will then research the art historical definition of Art Deco using print and/or online resources, which students will use to compare with their definitions. They will then share the results in a discussion with the entire class about the definition of Art Deco. Teacher may share a preferred definition of Art Deco for discussion. Finally, student teams will develop a research question about Art Deco and contemporary industrial design for further exploration.

STANDARDS AND CURRICULUM

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

English Language Arts

Grade 2

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.2.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 2 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

Grade 8

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Grades 11–12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g. visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

MARYLAND STATE CURRICULUM

History/Social Studies

Grade 2

3.C.1.b. Compare ways people communicate ideas today and long ago.

4.A.3.a. Identify examples of technology used by consumers such as automobiles, cameras, telephones, microwaves, televisions, and computers.

4.A.3.b. Analyze why consumers use technology in their daily lives.

5.A.2.a. Gather and interpret information about the past from informational sources and biographies.

Grades 9–12

The United States in a Time of Crisis (1929–1945)

1.f. Describe the influence of the arts, film, and the popularity of radio in helping Americans deal with the trials of the Great Depression.

Visual Arts

Grade 2

1.1.a. Describe colors, lines, shapes, textures, forms, and space found in observed objects and the environment.

1.2.a. Describe how artists use color, line, shape, texture, form, and space to represent what people see, know, feel, and imagine.

2.1.a. Observe works of art and describe how artists express ideas about people, places, and events.

2.2.b. Communicate a variety of reasons for creating artworks, such as feelings, experiences, events, places, and ideas.

Grade 8

2.2.a. Compare historical, social, and cultural themes in selected artworks that communicate beliefs, customs, or values of a society.



"Bluebird" Sparton Model 566 Radio, c. 1936, Blue-mirrored glass, chromium-plated metal, wood
Designer: Walter Dorwin Teague
Born: Decatur, Indiana 1883, Died: Flemington, New Jersey 1960
Manufacturer: Sparton Corporation, Jackson, Michigan, 1900–present
Purchase with Exchange Funds from Gift of Marion Lee Brown, Gift of Mrs. Matthew Hirsch, Gift of Isabel Powell Kilmer, Gift of Saidie A. May, Gift of Eleanor P. Spencer, and Gift of Eleanor L. Turnbull
BMA 1998.106
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Vanity, designed 1939, East Indian rosewood, sequoia-burl veneers, ebonized plywood, vinyl-coated fabric, brass, brass-plated steel, mirrored glass, Plexiglas or Lucite
Designer: Gilbert Rohde
Born: New York, New York 1894, Died: New York, New York 1944
Manufacturer: Herman Miller, Inc., Zeeland, Michigan, 1923–present
Gift of Michael and Anis Merson, Baltimore, BMA 2000.226



Reversible Composition, 1937–1938, Oil on composition board
Charles H. Walther
Born: Baltimore, Maryland 1879, Died: Baltimore, Maryland 1937
Bequest of the Artist, BMA 1938.717