



Wireless Works of Art

Vintage Radios Are Also Design Classics

When he was growing up in the 1950s, the Pasadena appliance store owned by Mark Hilbert's parents was the first in town to carry the RCA transistor radio. It was Hilbert's job to unpack the radios, price them and arrange them on shelves. Beyond that, he gave them little thought.

And many years later, when Hilbert bought his first antique table radio, he didn't give that much thought, either. "I was at an antique store in Long

Beach," says Hilbert, who owns and manages apartment buildings. "I saw an old radio I had to buy. I paid \$18 and brought it home; it looked so good."

Today, he has 150 table radios and 50 transistor radios, dating from 1932 to 1965, most in working condition. Radios made by RCA, Emerson, Zenith, Fada, Philco, Trojan, Belmont, Motorola, Stewart Warner and GE, in shades befitting an Art Deco paradise: turquoise, coral, deep red, lemon yellow, blue, pistachio green, orange, chartreuse. At the Newport Coast home he shares with his wife, Jan, a professor of business applications at Santa Ana College, the radios are displayed in the living room, garage and a walk-in closet. "Closets are boring places, and they brighten it up," Hilbert says.

The streamlined, ornate design of the old pieces suggest an era in which art, technology, functionalism and style dovetailed blissfully. "The automobile and the radio were the two greatest design venues from the '30s to the '50s," he says. "In those days, companies hired the greatest industrial designers in the world to design their radios. Manufacturers knew they would sell better if they were unique and attractive."

Hilbert, who also collects California watercolors, Indian textiles and antique ceramic tile, says, "I go to swap meets when I have nothing going on. It's a hunt. Sometimes you go and don't find anything. Yet, there's always the excitement of finding something in the least expected place."

His most exciting find came about 10 years ago as he meandered through an antiques store in Idaho. And then he saw it—a classic S grille Motorola Catalin plastic radio made in 1941. It was black and red, with a gold grille cloth and red knobs. Made from cast resin, the radio was rare, stunning and in mint condition. And as Hilbert came to find out, worth a lot. "I bought it for \$78 and it turned out to be worth 100 times that, and is probably worth more now," he

says. Antique radio prices continue to rise, making Hilbert's radios pricey. The value of Catalin radios, in particular, doubles every five years. "Of all the things I collect," says Hilbert, "radios are the one thing people relate to the most. And since I have a history in the appliance business, it's a natural connection. My two sisters and I laugh about it. 'Oh, you're just like Mom and Dad,' they say." —BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT