

# Hide a phone

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Around 1900, the telephone was a novel and expensive technology, often seen as a luxury item. Upper-class families sometimes chose to conceal their telephones behind photo frames or in discreet pieces of furniture to maintain a certain aesthetic or to avoid flaunting their wealth. This practice reflected the social norms and values of the time, where overt displays of technological advancement or wealth were sometimes considered in poor taste or too ostentatious.

Over time, Singing Wires has occasionally had articles written around those hidden phones. Here we try to summarize and also show designs that originated outside the USA. Although most date from the period 1880-1930, we also find some from later dates. The sources consulted are listed.

This setup has nothing to do with microphones or phones used to eavesdrop on people.



*Figure 1: Antique bisque doll cover*



*Figure 2: Doll cover on Gary Goff's website*

We classify these phones into devices hidden in

- a doll
- an artwork
- a piece of furniture
- a box
- a picture frame

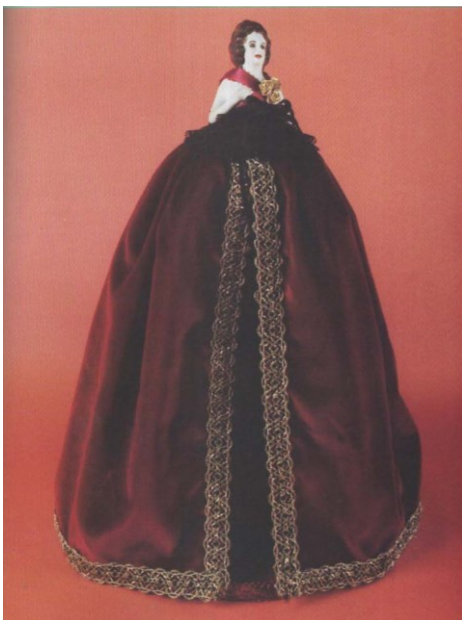
# 1 Phones hidden in a doll

**Figure 1** shows a doll (as described by Bill Elsasser) dating from the 1890s. The head is wax over composition, and the arms are bisque. The wig is mohair and the clothes are handmade, styled to the fashions of the era.

The body is made of stiff wire network and completely covered with cotton padding to protect the candlestick phone. The doll is only to be lifted off when the phone is in use and replaced again after talking.

**Figure 2** has following description on Gary Goff's website:

*"This solid wood (not plywood) doll was made prior to 1929 for the purpose of hiding or "dressing up" what were considered ugly telephones. The MP is removed, inserted through the precut hole and threaded back into the transmitter faceplate. The phone is easily used with the "doll" in place. On the reverse of this example, a note was written in pencil in 1929 by the owner who was by the nature of the writing and grammar, poorly educated. The note was written to someone or was simply a diary note to record the events of the day."*



*Figure 3: Hide-a-phone doll of collector Dan Gorden*

*Source: book Kate E. Dooner*



*Figure 4: Hide-a-phone doll*

*Source: John Cranston*

*Here's a 1930s example of one such telephone cover in a picture from the National Education Network website.*

## 2 Phones hidden in an "artwork"

### 2.1 Artwork made by Lily C Mayer

The objects below were designed by Lily C. Mayer and are made of Paper mache. Originally she worked for "Tiffany Studios" an interior design company, in Corona, New York. She left Tiffany's after 10 years to start her own studio.



Figure 5: Paper Mache design of a telephone cover with globe (1915)

Source: [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)

**Figure 5** shows a lady in antique garment, holding a cherub by the hand, dances around the globe. The symbolism is fascinating: The new media of the telephone reaches around the globe and connects people of all ages!



Figure 6: Paper Mache design of telephone cover of Euphonia (1915)

Source: [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)

Figure 6 is made of composition and presents as a molded head/neck of a woman named "Euphonia". A pair of cherubs are found behind her head whispering sweet nothings in her ears. The hinged case features a patinated surface enriched with details complimenting the design.

See also the articles by Gary Goff in *Singing Wires* (see "sources" for details).

## 2.2 Other designs by L.C. Meyer

In addition to the paper mache objects Lily Mayer designed many art objects of glass, bronze and ceramic. Examples in Figure 7.



*Figure 7: Artwork by L.C.Meyer*

*Source: article by Bill Elsasser in Singing Wires nr. 8 1987.*

Looking at Figure 7 with two screens, the one on the left is a “lazy Susan” type. It swivels around when the phone is needed and back again to hide it when through. It has a colorful arrangement of flowers painted on the screen.

A slightly different version is the one on the right, (same picture), which is a concave rigid screen without the swivel feature. These types have to be removed by hand and replaced again when the conversation is finished.

### 3 Phones hidden in furniture



*Figure 8: Beautiful ornate vanity +/- 1910*

*Owned by collector Dan Gorden*

*Source: book of Kate E. Dooner*

The ornate wooden hand-carved table and chair shown here is a real work of art. It is a beautiful piece of free standing furniture. These were all made from hard woods. When the door on the top cabinet is closed, the candlestick is completely hidden from view. The table top serves as a writing desk.

This item is very early, however since the candlestick became more popular, especially in the homes of the middle-class subscribers, the popularity of the hide-a-phones continued into the '30s. The designs became much simpler, less ornate and less expensive to make, thus more affordable to the average subscriber.



*Figure 9: Candlestick wall cabinet*

*owned by collector Gary Goff*

<https://www.telephonedecor.com/my-favorites/>

This is a candlestick wall cabinet that began its life in the Sheraton Hotel in San Francisco and then fell into the hands of a collector when the hotel was remodeled many years ago. It's a beautiful piece and surely among my favorites.



Figure 10: Hide a phone cabinet in the UK (+/- 1910-1925)

Found on the website of the reseller Malcolm Percival of "[Telephonelines](#)".

This **Candlestick Valet** is chinese lacquered on cabriolet legs. Pulling the knob on the front cantilevers the top open. The telephone directory can be placed in the compartment in the rear.



Figure 11: Hide a phone cabinet in the UK "Telephone Valet" front and rear view

Pictures obtained from Laurence Rudolf.

## 4 Phones hidden in a box

### 4.1 Hidden French phone from 1892



*Figure 12: French hidden phone by Milde (1892)*

*Source: French book*

French telephone manufacturer Milde designed “his” version of a concealed telephone in 1892.

It is a wall phone built into a box. The rotatable large faceplate completely hides the phone.

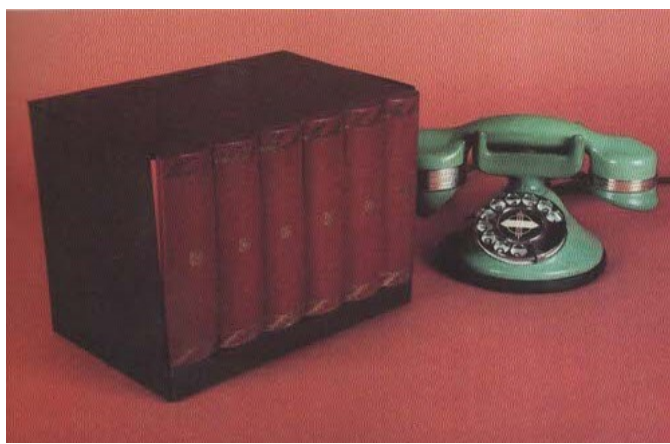
Alain Groult, chairman of the French collectors club said “As far as I know, in France we rarely hid phones, but rather displayed them, as it was a sign of success to have a phone.

*The Milde telephone in a locked box (see Figure 12) was practically never installed, and they were certainly made for specific orders. To my knowledge, this*

*type of assembly does not appear in any of the brand's catalogs”.*

### 4.2 Phones in a box after 1930

Later designs after 1930 are much simpler and also house other than candlestick phones. Some examples:



*Figure 8: Hide-a-way in the figure of a row of books.*

*Shown with a green Automatic Electric desk set. Owned by Dan Gorden*

*Source: book by Kate E. Dooner.*



Figure 8: Mid Century Modern Paul Nelson Executive Hide a Phone Telephone.

Source: [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)

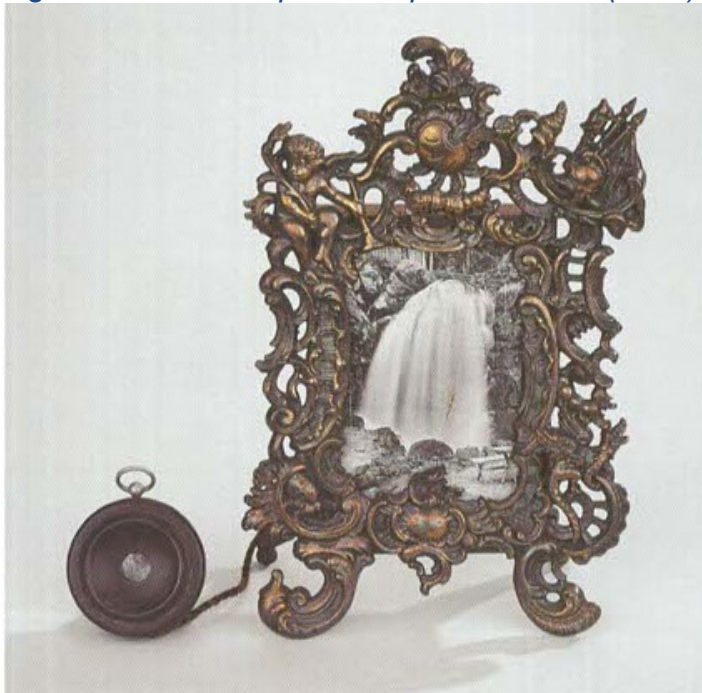


Figure 8: Vintage Western Electric Hide-A-Phone Push Button Landline Telephone

Source: [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)

## 5 Phones in picture frames

Figure 13: German phone in picture frame (1895)



*Manufacturer unknown.*

*Owned by the German museum of Communication.*

*Source: catalogue of the German museum of communication*

*A similar device is owned by the Dutch former PTT-museum in The Hague, the Netherlands.*

The telephone housing as a picture frame was cast from a copper alloy and refined with copper-colored gold leaf. However, the artisan did not reduce the shape, but instead lavishly designed the ornaments, working two coats of

arms motifs, putti and dolphin heads into the foliage, which contributes to the exuberant



impression of the decoration. The wooden membrane of the microphone box is hidden behind a photograph.

A receiver and a hook switch are attached to the back of the frame.

## 6 Sources:

- Article Hide-a-phones by Bill Elsasser,
  - Part 1: Singing Wires 6-7 1987.
  - Part 2: Singing Wires 8 1987
- Gary Goff's website: <https://www.telephonedecollector.info/specialty-items/>
- Kate E. Dooner, *"Telephones Antique to Modern A collector's Guide"*, Shiffer Publishing, 1992.
- Website [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com)
- Website <https://telephonedecollector.info>
- Article *"Euphonia, who are you?"* by Gary Goff, Singing Wires, February 2014.
- Article *"Telephone-Related Fine Art Restoration"*, by Gary Goff, Singing Wires, February 2019.
- French book: Patrice A. Carré *"Téléphones d'un temps perdu" (Phones of a lost time)*, Editions du téléphone, 1995.
- German book: Christel Jörges & Helmut Gold. *"Telefone 1863-2000 Aus den Sammlungen der Museen für Kommunikation"*, Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 2001. (*Phones 1863-2000: from the collection of the (German) museums of Communication*).

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