

Hide a Phone

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Over time, *TCI journal*, *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

Introduction

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.

We classify these phones into devices hidden in

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

I 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."



Fig. 1: Antique bisque doll cover



Fig. 2: Doll cover [Gary Goff]

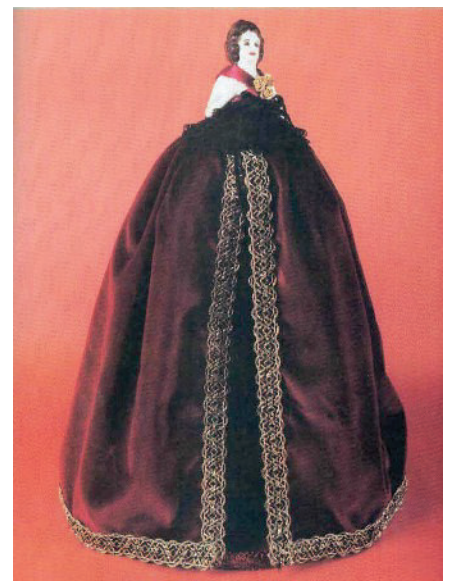


Fig.: Hide-a-phone doll [Dan Gorden]



Fig. 4: Hide-a-phone doll [John Cranston]

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 papier mâché. 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 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 is made of composition and presents as a moulded head/ neck of a woman named “Euphoria”. 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* .

2.2 Other designs by L.C. Meyer

In addition to the papier mâché objects Lily Mayer designed many art objects of glass, bronze and ceramic. Figure 7: Artwork by L.C.Mayer
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 colourful 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.



Fig. 5 Papier mâché design of a telephone cover with globe (1915)



Fig. 6: Papier mâché design of telephone cover of Euphoria (1915)



Fig. 7: Artwork by L.C.Mayer

3 Phones hidden in furniture

The ornate wooden hand-carved table and chair shown in Fig. 8 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 candle-stick became more popular, especially in the homes of the middle-class subscribers, the popularity of the hide-a-phones continued into the 1930s. The designs became much simpler, less ornate and less expensive to make, thus more affordable to the average subscriber.

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 remodelled many years ago. It's a beautiful piece and surely among my favourites.

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.



Fig. 8: Beautiful ornate vanity circa 1910. [Dan Gorden/ Kate E. Dooner]



Fig. 9: Candlestick wall cabinet [Gary Goff]



Fig. 10: Hide a phone cabinet in the UK (circa 1910-1925) [Malcolm Percival]



Fig. 11: Hide a phone cabinet in the UK "Telephone Valet" front and rear view. [Laurence Rudolf.]

4 Phones hidden in a box

4.1 Hidden French phone from 1892

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 (Fig. 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 catalogues”.

4.2 Phones in a box after 1930

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



Fig. 12: French hidden phone by Milde (1892). Source: French book

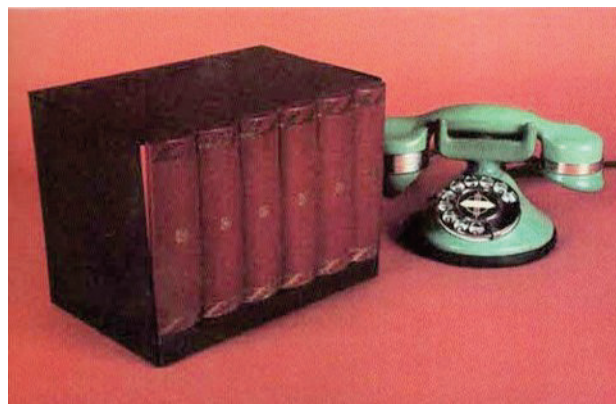
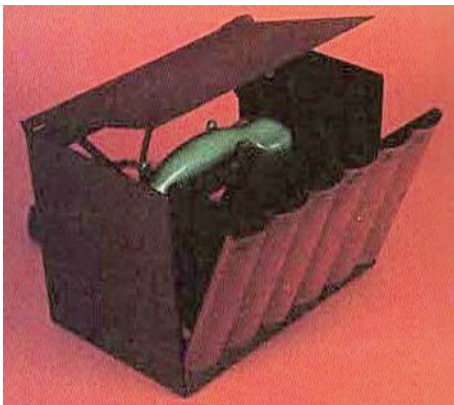


Fig. 13: Hide away in the figure of a row of books. Shown with a green AEI desk set. [Dan Gorden/Kate E. Dooner]



Fig. 14 a&b: Mid-century Modern Paul Nelson Executive Hide a Phone Telephone



Fig. 15: Vintage Western Electric Push-Button Landline Telephone



5 Phones in picture frames

Fig. 13 - Manufacturer unknown, owned by 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-coloured 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.

Thanks

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Fig 13.: German phone in picture frame (1895)

Museum visit to Europe.

It is planned to arrange a museum trip to Belgium, Holland and Germany next September. The visit will include some very fine private museums as well as public ones. There will be many interesting switching systems and telephones to see. It will be necessary for any participants

to arrange their own transport to Brussels, and it is proposed to use public transport and the assistance of our Belgian colleagues to access the various museums. Accommodation will be recommended. At this time there is no fixed date or itinerary as I will need

to see what the response is before any further plans are made. If you are interested in making the trip please let me know as soon as possible.

John Mulrane, Vice Chairman THG.

BT's £105 million deal for scrap copper

In September the Guardian reported that BT had secured advance payment of £105m for copper recovered from its old network as a result of the change to fibre-optic cabling.

It was stated that an estimated 3,300 tonnes has already been

extracted from an estimated total of 200,00 tonnes. This is the first deal of its kind.

BT Chief Executive, Alison Kirkby, announced that BT has already reached over 15 million premises with full-fibre broadband and plans to

extend that to 25 million by the end of 2026.

Openreach chief, Clive Selley said, "I am confident BT can reach 30 million premises by the end of 2030 given the right regulatory and investment environment."

Press Brief