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Hide-a-Phone

by Jan Verhelst, Antwerp, Belgium

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.

We classify these phones into devices hidden in

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

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."

Phones hidden in an artwork

The objects below were designed by Lily C. Mayer and are made of Syroco, a composite material. 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.

Continued on page 3



Fig. 1 - Antique Bisque Doll Cover



Fig. 2 - Doll Cover on Gary Goff's Website

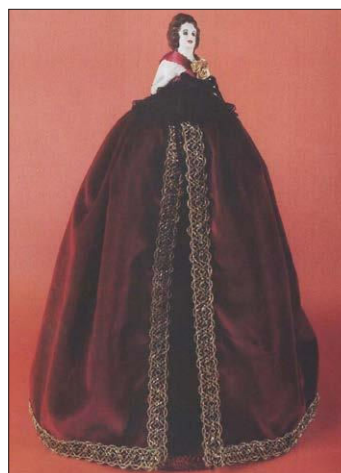


Fig. 3 - Hide-a-Phone Doll of Collector Dan Gorden
Source: Book Kate E. Dooner



Fig. 4 - Figure 4: Hide-a-Phone Doll
Source: John Cranston

Hide-a-Phone

Continued from page 1

Figure 5 shows a lady in an antique garment, holding a cherub by the hand, dancing 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 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).

Other designs by L.C. Meyer

In addition to the Syroco objects Lily Mayer designed many art ob-

jects of glass, bronze, and ceramic.

Figure 7 shows 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 screen 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.

Phones hidden in furniture

The ornate wooden hand-carved table and chair shown here (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.

These items are very early. However, because the candlestick 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.

Figure 9 shows 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 was found on the website of the reseller Malcolm Percival of Telephonelines.

This Candlestick Valet is Chinese lacquered on cabriolet legs. Pulling



Fig. 5 - Design of a Telephone Cover with Globe (1915)
Source: www.liveauctioneers.com



Fig. 6 - Design of Telephone Cover of Euphonia (1915)
Source: Gary Goff & www.liveauctioneers.com

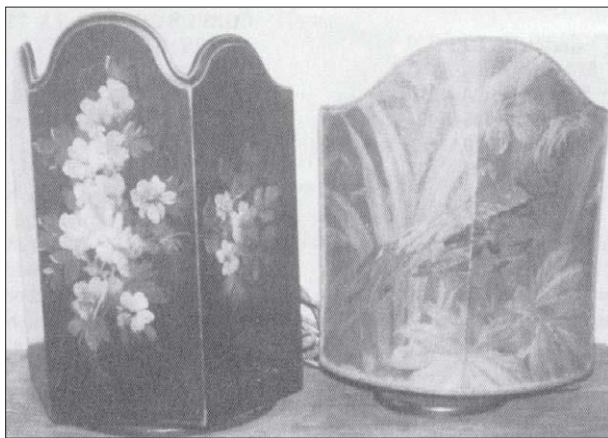


Fig. 7 - Artwork by L. C. Meyer
Source: article by Bill Elsasser in *Singing Wires* Issue 8, 1987



Fig. 8 - Beautiful Ornate Vanity ~1910
Owned by Collector Dan Gorden
Source: book of Kate E. Dooner



Fig. 9 - Candlestick Wall Cabinet
Owned by Collector Gary Goff



Fig. 10 - Hide-a-Phone Cabinet in the UK (~1910-1925)



Fig. 11 - Hide a phone cabinet in the UK "Telephone Valet" front and rear view
 Pictures obtained from Laurence Rudolf.



Fig. 12 - Hide a phone cabinet at the Victorian parlour of the Milton Keynes museum at Wolverton, UK
 Pictures obtained from Peter Cowley.

Fig. 13 - French hidden phone by Milde (1892)
 Source: French book

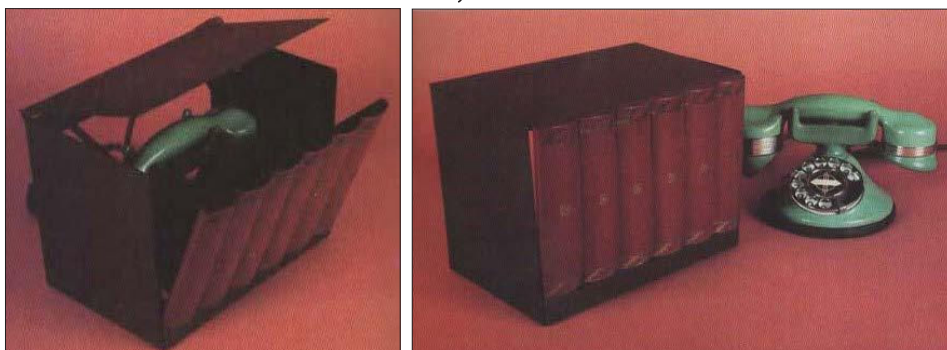


Fig. 14 - Hide-a-way in the figure of a row of books.
 Shown with a green Automatic Electric desk set. Owned by Dan Gorden
 Source: book by Kate E. Dooner.



Fig. 15 - Vintage Western Electric Stowaway (Design Line) Push Button Landline Telephone
 Source: www.liveauctioneers.com

the knob on the front cantilevers the top open. The telephone directory can be placed in the compartment in the rear.

Phones hidden in a box

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. 13) 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.

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

Phones in picture frames

Figure 16 shows a German phone in picture frame (1895) made by an unknown manufacturer.

It is 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-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.

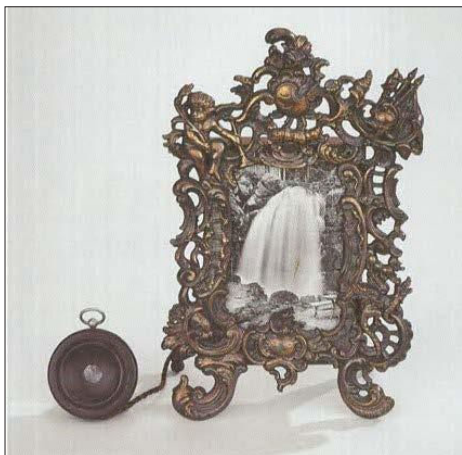


Fig. 16 - German phone in picture frame (1895)

Sources

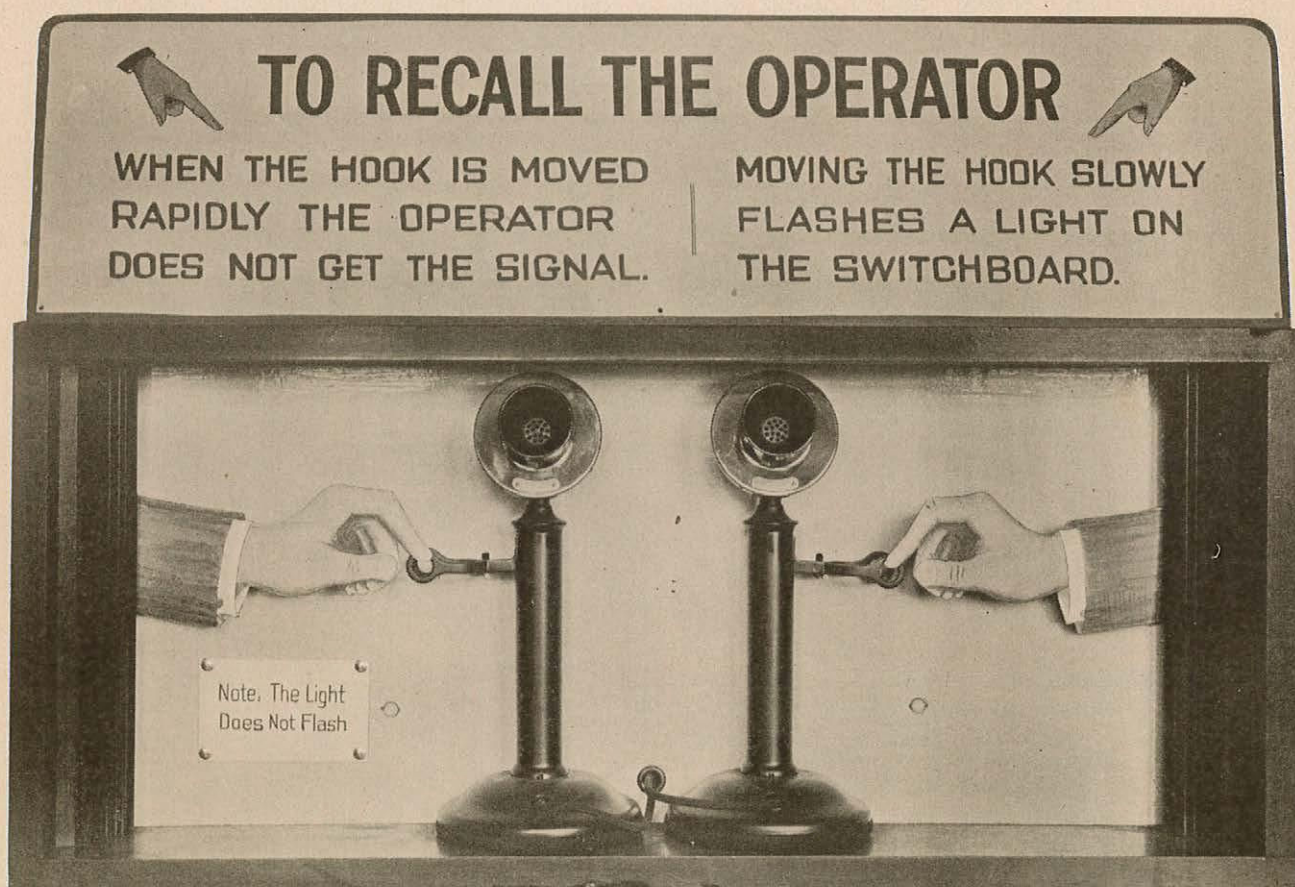
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& Helmut Gold. *Telefon 1863-2000 Aus den Sammlungen der Museen für Kommunikation*, Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 2001.

- (Phones 1863-2000: from the collection of the (German) museums of Communication).

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DEMONSTRATION APPARATUS FOR WINDOW DISPLAY, ILLUSTRATING THE CORRECT AND INCORRECT WAY TO RECALL THE OPERATOR

Education of the public as to the correct method of recalling the operator is undoubtedly of great importance and value to telephone service. The apparatus here shown is a simplified form of a device that has been in use in our territory for several years and has the advantage of being less expensive to manufacture. It was made by the Western Electric Company in accordance with suggestions from the Publicity Department.

The device is operated by a small electric motor such as is used on sewing machines. The motor drives two grooved pulleys of different sizes. On the shafts of these pulleys are cams that operate perpendicular rods that raise and lower the hook switches — one switch moving slowly, causing a make-and-break of the circuit in which is an ordinary switchboard lamp, flashing this lamp at the rate of about sixty flashes to the minute, the other hook switch moving rapidly and causing no flash of the lamp.

The circuit is fully protected by a three-ampere fuse. The speed of the mechanism is regulated by a rheostat, and this also provides for varying voltages of the electric-light circuit to which it may be connected.

Our Traffic Department has noted a very material improvement in signaling by subscribers in exchanges where the device has been exhibited. It seems also to have a natural moral effect on the operators, making them more observant of signals.

From *Telephone Topics* - Dec 1920