**Telephone**

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The design history of the telephone follows that of many technologically advanced domestic products. At its

commercial introduction in 1877 telephone design adopted the “mahogany and lacquered brass” aesthetic

used for scientific equipment. This persisted for many years, continuing to be standard until the 1950s for socalled

“wall candlestick” phones (wall mounted telephones with a fixed transmitter and loose receiver) that

were commonly found in offices, railway signal boxes, and other commercial settings. The development of the

“handset” (incorporating both transmitter and receiver) and the rotary dial (which pulsed out number codes to

automatic exchanges), together with the increasing presence of telephones in middle- and upper-class homes,

encouraged a different type of design approach replacing wood with metal and ultimately plastics.

By the end of the nineteenth century some telephone makers had adopted the design language of

domestic sewing machines, cast iron lacquered black with gold transfer decoration with an overt display of

highly finished nickel plated and lacquered brass mechanical components, popularly called. The Swedish maker

Lars Ericsson was a leader in establishing this style of “desk telephone” in the 1880s. In domestic terms

Ericsson’s telephones often look more suitable for a drawing room or parlour, but domestic telephones were

usually positioned in halls and during the first years of the twentieth century the more robust “candlestick”

telephone became the dominant design form. The candlestick had a heavy base intended to discourage the

user from picking it up, the carbon microphone transmitters of the time being delicate and subject to

interference if disturbed by movement. The column of the phone was an appropriate height to allow the user

to speak directly into the receiver while seated, with one hand holding the receiver and the other free to take

notes. Candlestick phones were usually finished in plain black lacquer without any further embellishment.

The “golden age” of telephone design was from 1930 to 1960, with the introduction of heat-set

formaldehyde plastics. Telephones of this period have a substantial, heavy handset set on a body that takes

three principle forms; “cheese dish” (e.g., Henry Dreyfuss for Bell 302, 1938, and 500, 1949), “pyramid” (e.g.,

UK GPO 200 series, 1934), and “round” (e.g., Strowger AE “Monophone,” 1925), their fronts dominated by the

rotary dial. Most telephones were plain black, but it was possible to cast them in colors (brown, ivory, bright

red, and jade green), while some makers would spray them with metallic paints to special order. Colored

telephones tend to dominate the collectors’ market today, but this is an indication of quite how rare they

were.

The development of pressure-molded oil-based plastics in the 1950s ended the period of substantial

formaldehyde telephones. The new plastics could be produced in a far greater range of colors and they were

considerably lighter with greater tensile strength; telephone designers could be more daring in use of shape

such as the Ericophon (1954), which incorporated dial, receiver, and transmitter in one “organic” plastic case.

Deregulation of state telephone and liberalization within US-style private systems in the postwar era

encouraged customers to purchase and fit their own telephones. Responding to a consumer rather than

organization led market, makers proliferated design forms, and the final phase of hard-wired telephones in the

1970s and 80s saw things such as novelty telephones in the shape of cartoon characters, motor vehicles, and

so on, of which the Mickey Mouse Phone (American Telecommunication Corp, 1976) is one of the earliest and

best known.

Digital, mobile technology was to completely change the telephone into a product something akin to a

wristwatch in terms of personal identity. The telephone is now a personal rather than shared device; its design

form has become entirely controlled by the requirement for it to slip into a pocket. The touch-screen has made

the telephone an exercise in subtle styling of a slim rectilinear form, in which the iPhone series (introduced

2007) is often seen to be the leader.

**References and further reading**

Mercer, David. 2006. *The Telephone: The Life Story of a Technology*. Westport, CN: Greenwood Press.