

The Early Television Museum

In November of 2001 the first museum in the United States dedicated entirely to early television equipment opened in Columbus, Ohio. It is operated by the Early Television Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the restoration and preservation of receivers and camera equipment from the 1920s through the 1950s. Our collection includes mechanical sets from 1928-32, prewar British and American electronic sets, early postwar British, American, Dutch and French sets, and early Color receivers. In addition, we have a small but growing collection of early postwar camera equipment. <picture of museum building>

History of the Museum

In 1998 I sold my cable television business, and, wanting to try something new, decided to collect early television receivers. As a teenager I had worked in a television repair shop, and often worked on early postwar sets such as the RCA 630. I began searching Ebay for sets, and within a few days a RCA TRK-12 prewar set came up. At that time I knew very little about the history of television, and assumed that the first commercial sets were made after World War Two.

The TRK-12 was in pieces. In fact, there were two partial badly damaged cabinets. The CRT was missing, as was the radio dial frame <picture of TRK-12 before restoration>. In the process of bidding on the set, I was emailed by a number of U.S. television collectors. As time went on, I got to know them, and slowly learned something about prewar technology and history.

I located a company that does historically accurate cabinet restoration, and they began the process of making one good cabinet out of the pieces I had. I began the electronic restoration, and discovered that the technology was not too different from what I remembered of the early postwar sets I had repaired as a teenager. I began a search for the missing parts, and finally found a CRT (from another collector) and the dial frame (from a RCA radio of the same era). The set now sits in the lobby of the museum <picture of TRK-12 completed>.

As I became more familiar with the history of television, I learned of the development of mechanical TV in the United States and in Britain, and of the BBC's broadcasting of electronic television three years before the TRK-12 was introduced. And, I learned of a RGD 382-RG for sale in England. This set was my introduction to British electronic receivers <picture of RGD before restoration>. It was also missing a number of parts, but the cabinet was in better condition than the TRK-12. In the process of restoring the RGD, I had to find a way to supply a 405 line signal for it. Collectors I met in England supplied me with a VCR, which could play back 405 line tapes, and I modified an American modulator to supply the RF. The RGD is now complete, and is prominently displayed in the museum's Prewar British room <picture of RGD after restoration>.

I acquired a number of early postwar sets on Ebay, from local auctions, and from radio swap meets. By 2000 I had almost 100 sets, and was running out of places to put them. While looking for sets to purchase I visited many of the collectors in the U.S., and, though they were very cooperative in showing me their collection, their sets were generally hidden away in their basements or attics. The major science museums, such as the Smithsonian Institution and the Henry Ford Museum, have a few early television sets on display, but nowhere can the general public see a comprehensive collection of receivers.

The Construction of the Museum

I then started formulating plans for a museum, and began searching for a suitable building. After considering a number of sites, I decided on an 11,000 square foot warehouse building in a suburb of Columbus. After getting the required governmental approval, renovation of a 2,000 square foot

section of the building began in the summer of 2001. In late November the museum opened to the public.

The Collection

We presently have several mechanical sets, including a Baird Televisor, Jenkins Model 100, Hollis Baird C-5, RCA 60 line, and two sets made in 1929 by a Columbus resident and his father. The Baird and RCA are working, with the video supplied by a personal computer, which converts the American 525 line video to 30 and 60 line. We also have a working 60 line flying spot scanner camera, using a photocell cabinet originally used by RCA in their 1932 field trials in New York. Visitors can watch their friends on the RCA receiver.

Our British prewar collection includes Cossor models 54 and 137T (the 137T was made in 1936, making it the earliest electronic set in our collection); HMV models 904, 905, 907 and 1800; Marconi 705; Pye 817; Ekco TA-201; Baird T18C; and the RGD 382-RG. The Cossor, Pye, Ekco and RGD are in working condition.

Our American prewar sets include the four RCA sets introduced at the 1939 World's Fair: the TT-5 vision only set and the TRK-5, 9, and 12 TV/Radio receivers. We also have the Westinghouse WRT-700 and 703, made by RCA and electrically identical to the TT-5 and TRK-12. In addition, we have four of the Andrea sets made in 1939: the 1-F-5 table top 5 inch model; the KTE-5 kit version of the same set; the 2-F-5 console model; and the 8-F-12 TV/Radio/Phonograph.

Also on display are two Dumont sets, a model 180 from 1938 (the earliest production set in the U.S), and a model 183. There is a striking resemblance between these sets and the Cossor 137T, with similar CRTs and sweep circuits. Apparently Allen Dumont visited England in 1937, brought back a Cossor, and copied the design without any licensing agreement.

We have two General Electric sets, a HM-171 5 inch vision only model, and a HM-225 9 inch. Another kit set in our collection is the Meissner 10-1153. Finally, we have a prototype Bell and Howell projection set made around 1944. It uses a 5 inch developmental CRT.

At present, the TT-5, TRK-5, TRK-12, 1-F-5, 2-F-5, HM-171, HM-225, and the Bell and Howell prototype are in working condition.

Our postwar collection includes about 50 sets from the U.S, Britain, France and Holland. We have a number of rare late 40s sets, including the Temple TV-1176, a 7 inch set with built-in magnifier; the Telejuke, a 15 inch Emerson TV set and Seeburg 78 rpm jukebox in a glass cabinet; a Telecon projection set; and a Crosley "Swing a View", with a ten inch picture tube that can be rotated toward the viewer.

Our early color collection includes the first production color set in the U.S., the Westinghouse H840CK15, made in early 1954. We also have a RCA CT-100 15 inch set and two early Motorola sets, one with a 19 inch tube and one with a 21 inch CRT; all made in 1954. Finally, we have Philco and RCA 21 inch sets made in 1955 and a Col-R-Tel attachment that converts small screen black and white sets to color using a rotating disk.

Our collection of early camera equipment is small but growing. At present we have late 40s image orthicon studio cameras from RCA and General Electric; iconoscope film chain cameras; a World War Two iconoscope camera used to direct a glide bomb to its target; and an early Dage 15 inch color monitor.

Our Future Plans

We hope to renovate another 3000 square feet of display space this year to house a collection of early CRTs that has been loaned to the museum, and to allow us to build a replica of an early

television studio. In addition, our collection keeps growing, and we need space to display the new items. Eventually we hope to have the entire building renovated. Another display in the planning stage is a re-creation of an early TV repair shop, with test equipment and tools from the late 40s.

Visit us

The museum is open Saturday from 10 to 6, Sunday from 12 to 5, and by appointment. You can learn more about the museum and the collection at our website: www.earlytelevision.org, by writing to us at 5396 Franklin Street, Hilliard, OH 43221 or by phone at 614-771-0510.