National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

RCA Victor Nipper Dog



What is a dog doing in a radio/TV museum? If the dog's name is Nipper, he belongs! This story began in 1898 when English artist Francis Barraud painted a picture of his pet dog Nipper (named for being an ankle nipper). Nipper is quizzically poking his nose into a phonograph horn because he hears Barraud's voice coming from it. Barraud, who had recorded himself, titled the work "His Master's Voice."

The original painting shown here featured an Edison cylinder type phonograph. Thinking it might be useful for advertising, Barraud tried to sell the painting to a phonograph maker. He found Emile Berliner's company interested, but only if the painting were to show a Berliner flat disc-style gramophone. Eager to sell the rights, Barraud repainted it.



Over the next few decades the image was used for advertising by a number of different phonograph companies around the world. The Victor Talking Machine Company of Camden, New Jersey, got the rights to use the image and "His Master's Voice" slogan here in the United States, and when RCA purchased the Victor Company around 1930, RCA Victor adopted a stylized trademark, and example of which can be seen on the RCA Victor "Red Seal" 78-rpm record.



RCA produced millions of promotional Nipper dogs, in sizes ranging from a few inches tall, that might have perched atop a small RCA Victor table radio in a store display, to one a couple of feet tall like the one here that might have greeted a customer entering an RCA Victor dealer's store. A huge Nipper was displayed for years on the roof of an RCA distributer in Baltimore. It now lives on the roof of the city's Maryland Historical Society.

Touching museum artifacts is generally prohibited, but we do allow children who visit our museum to gently pet the plastic Nipper that welcomes visitors to our 1930s exhibit room.

We appreciate your support of the museum so that historical artifacts like this one, and the stories that go with them, can be preserved for future generations. THANKS!