National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact of the Week:

RCA Model CT-100 Color TV



This 1954 Model CT-100 is RCA's first "mass-produced" color TV. Actually, not that many were sold because its price was so high (approximately $1000 initially, or almost $10,000 in today's dollars). Even when RCA began to drop the price, sales remained sluggish. Another problem was that most TV broadcasting in 1954 was still black and white. Only a few special events such as the Rose Bowl Parade were broadcast in color. It was not until the 1960s, when more and more color programming became available and set prices began to fall due to real mass production that large numbers of people began to trade in their old black and white sets for new color models. Unsurprisingly, it took a while for small town TV stations to spend the considerable sums needed to upgrade to color broadcasting.

There was controversy about color television standards in the late 1940s and early '50s. The Federal Communications Commission initially approved a crude system involving a mechanical spinning disc of color filters proposed by CBS-Columbia. It was incompatible with existing black and white sets. CBS-Columbia sets displayed good color, but with production limited by Korean War-imposed shortages of critical materials, the company sold only a handful. Most television engineers felt that the CBS-Columbia approach was flawed, and so RCA's laboratory continued to work day and night to improve its color TV system, which, *was* compatible with existing black and white television. Soon, the FCC realized its mistake, reversed its decision, and adopted basically RCA's compatible approach. RCA held key patents on color TV technology but was happy to offer patent licenses to competitors.

These early RCA color sets had good color, but required careful setup. After delivery to a home, the technician had to tweak the color adjustments. The sets were so sensitive to magnetic fields, including that of the earth, that rotating the set by 90 degrees and moving it to another wall in the same room might require another service technician visit to touch up the color adjustments. With today's TVs, we just plug them in, hook up the cable connection, and we get a perfect high-definition picture. Things have changed!

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!