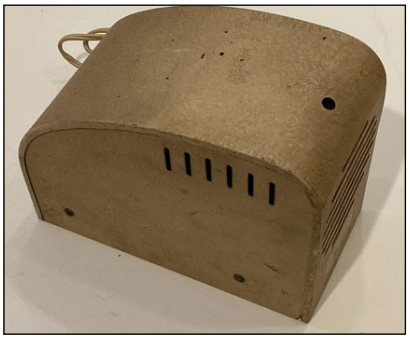
National Capital Radio & Television Museum

Artifact Showcase:

Zenith "Radio Nurse" Baby Monitor





After Charles Lindbergh's 20-month-old son was kidnapped from his home nursery and killed in 1932, Eugene McDonald, Zenith's CEO, worried that *his* baby daughter could be a kidnap victim. He began thinking about how electronic technology might reduce the risk. He conceived of what today we would call a "baby monitor" and directed his engineers to come up with one.

In 1937-38 Zenith introduced the world's first electronic baby monitor. It consisted of two parts: A microphone and transmitter unit called "The Guardian Ear" (top photo) and a receiver unit called "The Radio Nurse" (bottom). Today most people refer to both units as The Radio Nurse. The transmitter unit, in a gold-colored enameled steel case with a line cord, picks up the sounds from the nursery, amplitude modulates a 300-kHz signal, and couples it onto the home's power line wiring. The Radio Nurse receiver unit in the parents' room picks up the signal and plays it through its speaker.

The system sold for $29.95 (about $600 today). It was noted designer Isamu Naguchi's first commission. Considered a milestone in industrial design today, his Radio Nurse is exhibited at major art museums (including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art). He said the receiver unit was intended to resemble a nurse's cap.

The Mid-Atlantic Antique Radio Club gifted the Guardian Ear unit in the picture to the Museum. You may see it in our Recent Acquisitions Corner. The picture of the Radio Nurse is from the Internet. Let's hope that someday someone donates a Radio Nurse unit to complete the set!

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!