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Sylvania Television Award and Its Clock: From Fame to Obscurity

by Jay Pine (TX)

The Sylvania Television Award was a prestigious honor bestowed upon those who were advancing creative television techniques in the early years of the industry from 1951 to 1959. It was the precursor to the Emmy and Oscar awards that annually draw glamorous, star-studded, televised awards extravaganzas.

This article follows the conception, design, and creation of the clock itself, the outstanding feature of the award.

The Award

Don G. Mitchell, president of Sylvania Electric Products, Inc., announced in December 1950 that Sylvania had created a new award to promote better television programming. At the time the company, which was manufacturing television tubes,[1] was preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary. It planned to present the awards to writers, directors, actors, composers, musicians, comedians, and others who contributed to improving the quality of television. The award was initially called the "Sylvia" and was to be presented to the recipients "for outstanding contribution to creative television technique."[2]

The first Sylvania Television Awards presentation dinner was held in the Grand Ballroom of the Hotel Pierre in New York City on the evening of November 8, 1951.[3] It was a relatively small formal dinner for the award recipients, their guests, and a few members of the press. Mitchell presented 12 Sylvania awards and 29 certificates of merit that evening.[4] The ceremony was not televised nor was it broadcast on the radio.

The Sylvania Television Award, often compared to the Emmy and the Oscar, was immediately accepted by those in the television industry as one of the highest honors. The list of recipients is a veritable who's who of early

Figure 1. The cast and crew of the television show *Father Knows Best* received Sylvania awards and certificates for "Outstanding Family Television Program of 1954." COURTESY OF DOROTHY COOPER-FOOTE COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

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Figure 2. Deems Taylor, left, presents the Sylvania Award to Phil Silvers for *The Phil Silvers Show* on November 29, 1955. COURTESY OF DOROTHY COOPER-FOOTE COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS (2).

Figure 3. Patty McCormack holds her Sylvania Award for "Outstanding Performance by a Supporting Actress"on December 6, 1957.

television and includes Walt Disney, Bob Hope, Leonard Bernstein, Jack Paar, Rod Serling, Sid Caesar, Steve Allen, Sidney Poitier, Jane Wyatt, Fred Rogers (aka Mr. Rogers), Bob Keeshan (aka Captain Kangaroo), Laurence Olivier, Ingrid Bergman, Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, George Gobel, Mary Martin, Colleen Dewhurst, Patty McCormack, Mary Lela Grimes, and Phil Silvers (Figures 1-3).

It would be easy to suppose that in creating this award Sylvania's main objective was self-promotion. There is little doubt that was a part of the equation. After reading many private letters, telephone transcripts, and internal documents of the Committee of Judges and others involved in the development of the award, I discerned a genuine and sincere wish to steer the new medium of television toward a higher ideal. A flier prepared by Deems Taylor and the Committee of Judges in 1951, titled "What the Committee of Judges Thinks about Television," states:

> The Committee believes that television is the most intimate method of mass communication ever devised. Its impact on American life is so penetrating and vibrant that its power as a social force is incalculable. Unless the responsibility that goes with this use of the air-waves is completely understood by those who send television programs into American homes it can never become, as it must to justify its amazing technical development, a great force for creative entertainment, for cultural advancement and for lifting the standards of taste of its viewers.[5]

Individuals invited to serve on the Committee of Judges were intentionally chosen from all walks of life. They ranged from national sports and political figures to members of teachers' and parents' groups. The committee changed each year, but Taylor, a composer and music critic, always chaired it.

Designing "The Symbol"

In early February 1951 the advertising agent for Sylvania, Roy S. Durstine, requested that Norman Bel Geddes be invited to serve on the Committee of Judges for the new award.[6] Bel Geddes was an esteemed and prolific self-taught designer known for his thoughtful and forward thinking designs of industrial products, automobiles, airplanes, buildings, transportation systems, stage sets, and even entire cities. He was best known for his design of General Motors Futurama exhibition at the 1939 New York World's Fair and the General Motors 50th anniversary medal.

When Bel Geddes was contacted about serving as a judge, he was also asked if he would be interested in submitting preliminary design sketches for "the symbol"—as the award was referred to prior to its design. Once the fee and the terms were agreed upon, Bel Geddes met with Durstine to discuss the project. Derstine's original concept was for "a design that could be a plaque or a little figurine or a statuette," but he told Bel Geddes that he did not wish to restrict Bel Geddes's creative process.[7]

Bel Geddes's earliest preliminary design sketches of the symbol included various plaque designs and three-dimensional awards in many forms, but none of these early designs included a clock.[8] In mid-April 1951 a more

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developed rendering of the symbol was created by an artist at Medallic Art Co. of New York that had been chosen to produce the award. Under Bel Geddes's direction the artist's rendering included a woman holding a clock (Figure 4). Sylvania Electric Products, Inc. chose this design for its award.

As the design process progressed to the three-dimensional model stage, Bel Geddes became increasingly frustrated with the sculptor's inability to capture his vision for the award. He knew that if the design of this high-profile award was not executed with style and quality, his name and reputation as a designer were at stake. Between April 27, 1951, and May 5, 1951, several increasingly heated letters were sent by Bel Geddes to Durstine expressing his position and his dissatisfaction with the sculptor chosen by Medallic Art Co. to do the work. In the letters, he reminded Derstine that "the sculptor we discussed to execute the design at the very beginning of the job was Rene Chambellin."[9] Derstine suggested giving the original sculptor one more opportunity to correct the features Bel Geddes found unsatisfactory before bringing in Chambellin.[10]

The modified plasteline model was delivered to Bel Geddes on May 5. His dissatisfaction with the model was so great, he immediately wrote to Derstine: "I cannot possibly endorse it and must, therefore, withdraw as a mem-

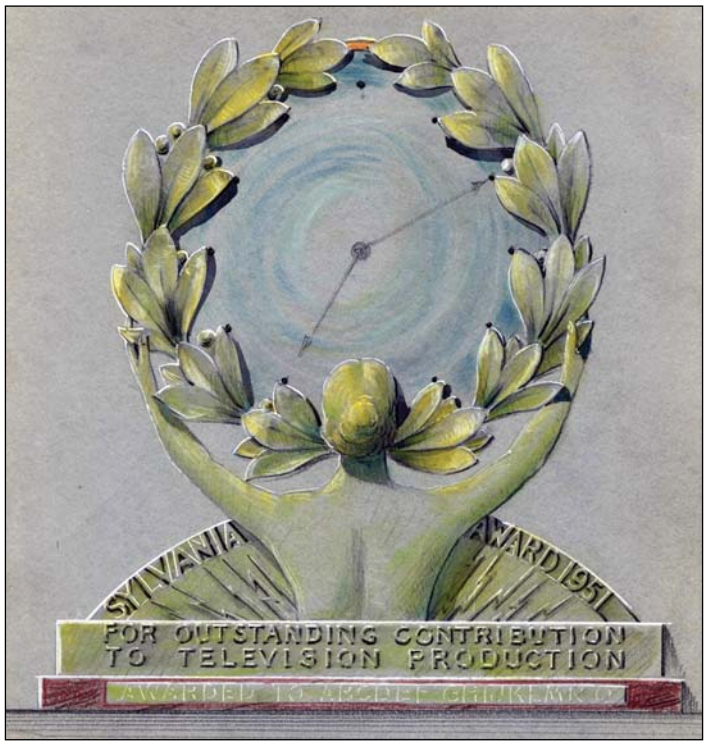

Figure 4. Early Medallic Art Co. rendering of the Sylvania Award, April 1951. COURTESY OF NORMAN BEL GEDDES COLLECTION, HARRY RANSOM CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS (3).

Figure 5, left. The 1951 Sylvania Award Committee of Judges stands with the award model. From left are Oscar Serlin, Claire Senie, George Trautman, Ruth Farbman, James Farley, Dean Kenneth Bartlett, and Norman Bel Geddes.

Figure 6. From left are sculptor Rene Chambellin, Sylvania Award Judge James Farley, and designer Norman Bel Geddes standing with the Sylvania Award model on May 14, 1951.

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ber of the Award Committee. Under no circumstance is my name to be associated with this item."[11]

Although no surviving correspondence outlines exactly how Durstine and Bel Geddes worked out their differences, Derstine eventually agreed to have the model redesigned by Chambellin. He also convinced Bel Geddes to remain a member of the Committee of Judges.

The Sylvania Award Committee of Judges Luncheon was held May 14, 1951, at the Sherry-Netherland Hotel in New York City.[12] Bel Geddes was in attendance as was Chambellin who presented his model of the Sylvania Award to the panel of judges (Figures 5 and 6). This version apparently met with Bel Geddes's approval.[13]

Among Bel Geddes's papers pertaining to his involvement in the Sylvania Award project is a typewritten slip of paper of unknown origin that explains Bel Geddes's and Chambellin's roles in the design of the award and highlights Chambellin's accomplishments up to that time. It reads as follows:

> "The execution of the symbol is being done under the direction of Norman Bel Geddes by the distinguished sculptor, Rene Chambellin, who is responsible for the bronze fountains in the promenade of Radio City, the bas-relief panels in the foyer of Radio City Music Hall and the ceilings of the Center Theater. Mr. Chambellin made the scale models for the United Nations buildings in New York and did all the sculpture for the Chicago Tribune Square and the Princeton Library, the Criminal Courts Building in New York and the Engineering Memorial in Louvain, Belgium. He has created many fine awards and medals, including Detroit's Commemorative Medal for its 250th Anniversary, the Cancer Society's Medal and the Plaque of the National Association of Manufacturers."[14]

Figure 7. Medallic Art Co. emblem on the back of the 1958 Sylvania Award. COURTESY OF SCOTT HILL, BRENHAM PORTRAIT GALLERY, BRENHAM, TX (3).

Production and Description of Sylvania Award

Medallic Art Co. of New York, also known for producing such prestigious awards as the Pulitzer Prize, the Peabody Award, and the National Medal of Science, manufactured the Sylvania Awards (Figure 7).

The design, executed in bronze with a solid walnut base,

Figure 8, left. Front view of the 1955 Sylvania Award with its clock by Etalage Reclame Corp.

Figure 9. Back view of the 1955 Sylvania Award with its clock by Etalage Reclame Corp.

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Figure 10. Inside view of the Etalage Reclame Corp. clock in the 1955 Sylvania Award. COURTESY OF SCOTT HILL, BRENHAM PORTRAIT GALLERY, BRENHAM, TX (3).

Figure 11. Inside view of the Etalage Reclame Corp. clock in the 1955 Sylvania Award.

depicts a woman wearing a flowing robe and cape. She is holding above her head a bronze and glass mystery clock flanked with laurel branches. On the base are the words "For Outstanding Contribution To Creative Television Technique." Draped across the woman's right arm and thighs is a banner with the words "Sylvania Award" along with the year the award was given.

The clocks atop the awards were made by Etalage Reclame Corp. of New York (Figures 8-11) and are similar to other clocks made by this company, but they were restyled for the Sylvania Award. The clocks include four circular pieces of glass. The front and back pieces have beveled edges and are stationary. The front piece has etched stars on the inside to indicate the hours. Each star is colored gold. The two revolving interior glass disks have lightning bolt hands etched into their backs. One disk contains the hour hand and the other, the minute hand. This clock was used on the awards from 1951 through 1955.

From 1956 through 1959 the clock portion of the award was made by Jefferson Electric Co. of Bellwood, IL (Figures 12-15). Like typical Jefferson mystery clocks, they have only one revolving glass disk with the hands mounted to the center of the disk. However, for the Sylvania Award, Jefferson changed the usual tapered metal hands to hands in the form of lightning bolts and added a stationary clear plastic ring mounted to the rear of the clock with etched gold stars

Figure 12. Front view of the 1958 Sylvania Award with a clock by Jefferson Electric Co.

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Figure 13. Back motor cover of the Jefferson Electric Co. clock in the 1958 Sylvania Award. COURTESY OF SCOTT HILL, BRENHAM PORTRAIT GALLERY, BRENHAM, TX (3).

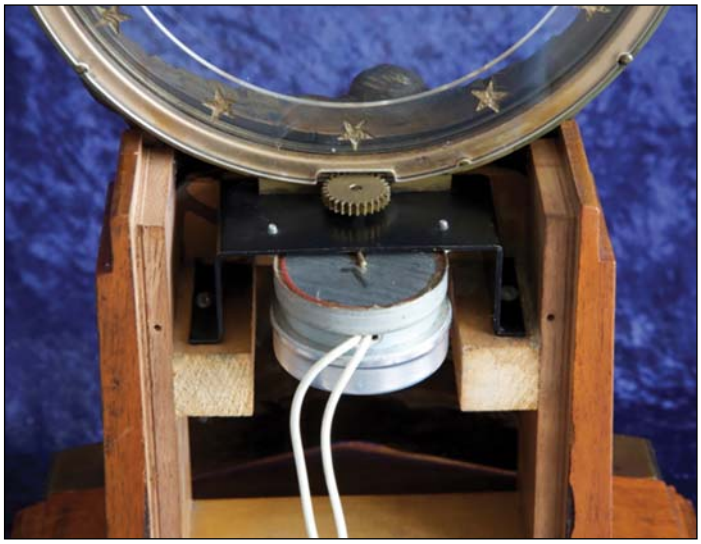

Figure 14. Inside view of the Jefferson Electric Co. clock in the 1958 Sylvania Award.

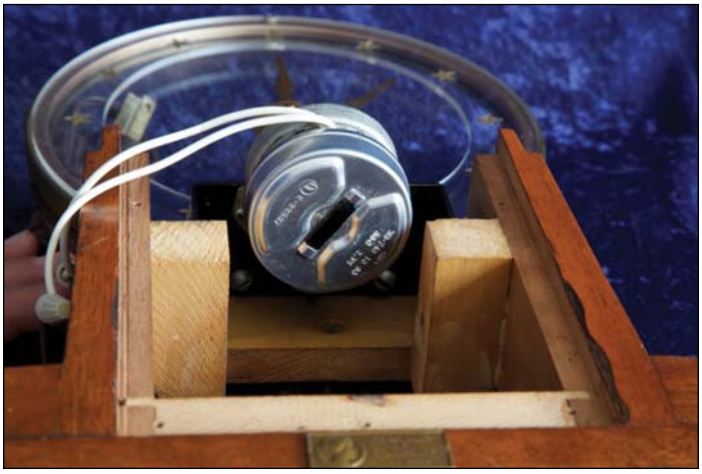

Figure 15. Inside view of the Jefferson Electric Co. clock in the 1958 Sylvania Award.

indicating the hours, similar to the Etalage clock used on the earlier awards.

Rarity and Value

According to my research, only about 214 of these clocks were made. About 93 are the earlier Etalage models and some 121 are the later Jefferson models. The value of each of these rare award clocks is based on the usual factors, such as visual appeal, rarity, and condition. However, one of the most important factors may be the importance and popularity of the person or the television show honored by the award. I have seen examples sell for a few hundred dollars and others for as much as several thousand dollars. As recently as May 2013 Bob Keeshan's 1956 Sylvania Award given for his role as Captain Kangaroo in the television show of the same name sold at auction for $6,083, in nonworking condition, including the buyer's premium.[15]

End of the Sylvania Award

In August 1960 Robert E. Lewis, the new president of Sylvania, which had been recently absorbed by General Telephone Corp., announced that the Sylvania Television Awards would be discontinued. He said: "There are now too many sets of awards for television. Too many awards . . . can dilute the effectiveness of those that have gained the widest acceptance."[16]

Since that time the Sylvania Award has fallen into semiobscurity. The number of living people who were recipients and judges, or who participated in or reported on the awards dinners grows smaller with the passage of time. Most of these awards remain in the homes of the original recipients or in the homes of their heirs. A few are in private collections. Even fewer are in public museums. As timepieces they are outstanding for the quality of their design, and as mementos of the golden era of television they are cherished and highly collectible.

References and Notes

1. "A Century of Illumination," Osram Sylvania, accessed Nov. 2, 2015, https://www.sylvania.com/en-us/about/Pages/history.aspx.

2. Robert L. Whitehead, untitled news release, December 28, 1950. This document was part of the Norman Bel Geddes Collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

3. Deems Taylor (chair of the Sylvania Television Awards Committee of Judges), in private correspondence, October 29, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

4. Citations-Sylvania Television Awards 1951, November 8, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

5. This document was part of the Norman Bel Geddes Collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

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6. C. S. Swanson, in private correspondence with Norman Bel Geddes, Feb. 8, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

7. Conversation between Roy Durstine and Norman Bel Geddes, February 19, 1951, transcript, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

8. Norman Bel Geddes, preliminary sketches, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

9. Norman Bell Geddes, in private correspondence with Roy Durstine, April 27, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

10. Roy Durstine, in private correspondence with Norman Bell Geddes, May 3, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

11. Norman Bel Geddes, in private correspondence with Roy Durstine, May 5, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

12. Robert L. Whitehead, in private correspondence with Norman Bel Geddes, May 15, 1951, Norman Bel Geddes Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas in Austin.

13. Norman Bel Geddes most likely approved of the design of the award before this luncheon. If not, it is highly unlikely that Bel Geddes would have agreed to attend.

14. The author is unknown but it was part of the Norman Bel Geddes Collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

15. "Extraordinarily Rare 1956 Sylvania Award Presented to Bob Keeshan for Captain Kangaroo—Considered the Pre-Cursor of the Emmy Awards," Nate D. Sanders, Inc., accessed Nov. 2, 2015, http://natedsanders.com/extraordinarily_rare_1956_sylvania_award_presented-lot14894.aspx.

16. Win Fanning, "A Backwards Glance, Sylvania Awards Tell TV History," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 21, 1960.

Acknowledgments

I thank my good friend Scott Hill, owner of Brenham Portrait Gallery, for his photography of the Sylvania Awards.

A huge thank-you also to my wife for patiently enduring my unexplainable and unending obsession with clocks and all things clock related for the past 20 years. For those of you who have an office like mine that looks like a cross between Geppeto's workshop and an episode of *Hoarders,* you know what she has been dealing with.

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—Vox Temporis. *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 356 (June 2005): 376.

About the Author

Jay Pine is a self-employed custom home designer in Texas. He has been collecting and researching Mastercrafters, Haddon, Kit Cat, and Jefferson clocks since buying his first Mastercrafters Swingtime clock at an estate auction in 1994.

He recently launched a small business selling hard-to-find used and reproduced parts for these clocks at SecondHandClockParts.com.

He has been a member of the NAWCC since 1997 and is also a proud (but distant) member of Chapter 133 Western Electrics of California as well as Chapter 15 of Austin, TX. This is his first article in the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*.

Pine would be interested in hearing from readers who have photographs taken of any Sylvania Award presentations. He would also like to begin a registry of existing Sylvania Awards. If you are fortunate enough to own one of these rare and beautiful timepieces, please contact him to register the original recipient, the year, and condition at jay@jaypinedesigns.com.

Saved by 13

Thirteen is usually thought to be an unlucky number, but there is an instance on record in which it saved a man's life. In the reign of William and Mary, a soldier, John Hatfield by name, was accused of having fallen asleep at midnight, while on guard. This the man positively denied, saying, as evidence that he had been awake at the time, that he had heard the clock at St. Paul's Cathedral strike thirteen, instead of twelve. The court decided that he could not have heard it strike at that great distance, and Hatfield was condemned to death. However, before his execution, several persons gave their affidavit that the clock actually did strike thirteen that night; so his Majesty pardoned him, and he lived to the good old age of one hundred and five. His narrow escape has been commemorated in the following lines:

"The terras walk we with surprise behold,
Of which the guides have oft the story told;
Hatfield, accused of sleeping on his post,
Heard Paul's bell sounding, or his life had lost."

The Watch Dial Vol. 3 (December 1887): 22. From the archives of the NAWCC Library and Research Center.