

Should I Polish My RCA Victor Special Model Cabinet?



It is believed that the John Vassos designed RCA Victor Special Models were produced for the 1939 World's Fair between 1938 and 1939. Very little information is available about these beautiful machines.

One of the most striking features is the modernistic aluminum cabinet, a departure from the usual wood cabinets or tweedy aircraft fabric coverings over wood popular during that era. However, no information is available about the type of aluminum used to fabricate the cabinet for the Special Models. Without this information, the correct restoration procedure can only be trial and error. There are two considerations before attempting a cabinet restoration.

First, aluminum doesn't rust, but it oxidizes. Quickly in some cases, as owners of Airstream trailers can attest. And restoration and maintenance is an ongoing process that is time-consuming and labor intensive, even on the small Special Model cabinets.

Secondly, the RCA Victor Special Models are antiques. While restoring a Special Model to electrical and mechanical operating condition is a worthwhile investment that will increase its value, there are differences of opinion on cosmetic restoration. Certainly re-gluing loose lining inside the cabinet is recommended, but exterior restoration may increase the value, or may decrease it, depending on the quality of the workmanship, the results, and a future buyers thoughts on the matter. Some collectors may actually prefer a machine with the patina of time intact.

As mentioned above, the first problem is that the type of aluminum used to fabricate the cabinet of the RCA Victor Special Models is, as of this writing, unknown. Is it a plain early 20th century commercial grade aluminum alloy, aircraft grade aluminum, or Alcad aluminum. Was the cabinet coated? Not knowing the answers to these questions will impact your decision on how to proceed with restoration.

Most likely the cabinets were fabricated of a commercial grade of aluminum alloy, or possible an aircraft grade aluminum. The use of Alcad aluminum, while possible, seems like overkill. I have seen no evidence that the cabinets had any kind of coating, such as lacquer or plasticcoat.

Exterior restoration of the Special Model cabinet is an emotional decision. Should you decide to restore the exterior of your Special Model cabinet, do some experimenting in a hidden area to see if you like the results. Also keep in mind that whatever restoration you do is not likely to last more than a few months or a year or two as the aluminum will oxidize again.

If you decide to take the plunge, I would recommend proceeding as follows, at your own risk:

1. Clean the cabinet gently using a good quality car wash detergent following the manufacturers instructions to remove any built up dirt and grime. Dry thoroughly.
2. Remove oxidation. In a hidden spot, such as the bottom of the cabinet, try an automotive or travel trailer product designed to remove oxidation from aluminum or fiberglass. Be careful choosing products designed for Airstream trailers as different types of aluminum were used depending on the era. Probably products designed for vintage Airstream trailers would be the best place to start. Follow the manufacturer's directions for the product you choose.

3. Polish. If you have been successful removing the oxidation, choosing the right polish is the next step. I would recommend starting with a good quality automotive aluminum polish, again in a hidden spot, and see if you like the results. If you do, then you can proceed to polish the entire cabinet. I would recommend only hand-polishing, following the manufacturer's instructions.

4. Maintenance. The aluminum will re-oxidize again. How quickly will depend on how well you removed the old oxidation and applied a new coat of polish. Keeping the cabinet shiny will require periodic buffing and polishing. It might be tempting to spray the cabinet with lacquer or some other coating to prevent oxidation, but this could diminish the value of your Special Model. Do so at your own risk.

For more information about the RCA Victor Special Models, visit www.edsantiqueradios.com.