

The Elegance of Clattering Machines

A Review of 'Click! Clack! Ding! The American Typewriter' at the New Britain Museum of American Art

By SYLVIANE GOLD APRIL 26, 2014



Two 1950s models, an Underwood and a gold-plated Royal, are among the typewriters in an exhibition at the New Britain Museum of American Art. Melissa Nardiello

The labels alone make a racket: Meiselbach, Blickensderfer, Bar-Lock. No wonder the show-namers at the [New Britain Museum of American Art](#) call their fabulous little exhibition of antique typewriters “Click! Clack! Ding!”

And no wonder the sight of these mechanical marvels, which could inscribe a poem, a recipe or an invoice faster than had ever been thought possible — and more legibly, too — made my fingers itch. They wanted to hit those keys, return those carriages, bring those silent period pieces back to clattering life.

Alas, the only interactive thing in this display of unmistakably interactive machines, subtitled “The American Typewriter,” is a computer screen. But it’s probably just as well. While most of the objects bear at least a passing resemblance to the typewriters some of us know how to use, several seem to be missing their keyboards and, at first glance, don’t even register as appliances for writing.

The nickel-plated Odell No. 2, an 1890s machine made in Chicago, looks like a cross between a meat slicer and a sextant. The Lambert No. 1, a 1902 invention that retains its handsome wooden case, resembles an old-fashioned telephone and is about the same size. Even some of the typewriters featuring keyboards and more familiar designs are not what you would describe as “user-friendly”: Where exactly is the paper supposed to go? Why can’t I see the ribbon?



Clockwise from top left: The Lambert No. 1, a Bantam model, the Blickensderfer No. 6 and an 1876 Sholes & Glidden No. 1, a large and ornate cousin of the sewing machine. The Sholes & Glidden is the oldest item in the exhibition. [Greg Fudacz](#)

It turns out that the earliest typewriters were “[blindwriters](#),” like the 1876 Sholes & Glidden No. 1 that is the oldest item in “Click! Clack! Ding!” A large and ornate cousin of the sewing machine, the Sholes & Glidden did not permit the typist to see the surface of the paper, which was imprinted — uppercase only — from below. (The operator could enjoy the golden garlands and rosy blossoms delicately painted on the machine’s black casing, however.) As for the specimens without keyboards, they were the very first portables. Known as “index” typewriters, they work with a pointer-like device that selects a letter and another that presses it into the paper — a perfect machine for the two-finger typist.

These early technologies soon gave way to improvements — uppercase and lowercase in the Smith-Premier No. 1 and the Bar-Lock No. 2; “visible” typing in the Williams No. 4 and the Meiselbach Sholes Visible. “Click! Clack! Ding!” conveys some of the history and significance of the typewriters on view, selected from the nearly 300 owned by a [Connecticut collector, Greg Fudacz](#). There is another Connecticut connection as well: Hartford, the home base for Royal and Underwood, was once called “[the typewriter capital of the world](#).” Other brands came from other towns, including Bridgeport, Derby, Middletown, New Haven and Waterbury.

But the show is not about the importance of the typewriter industry to Connecticut, or for that matter to anywhere else. It’s not even strictly about the typewriter as an example of design, although “Click! Clack! Ding!” certainly makes the case for the visual appeal of these 21 artifacts, whether ornamented or pristinely functional. The spidery keyboard of [the Blickensderfer No. 6](#), manufactured in Stamford in 1911, has something of the sleek beauty of a suspension bridge; the curving elegance of the 1884 Hammond No. 1 calls to mind a miniature grand piano; and the 1888 Art Nouveau furbelows atop the Bar-Lock No. 1B have a wedding-cake exuberance. Even the plainer typewriters from the 1950s display a certain flair — a gold-plated Royal like the one Ian Fleming bought for \$174, a snappy red Underwood that might have pleased Miss Money Penny.

Yet what is most intriguing in these machines is the story they tell about the lurching, incremental way in which technology progresses. The Sholes & Glidden No. 1 was a flawed, primitive machine, but its [qwerty keyboard](#) is the one that stuck. The 1906 Chicago Model 1 looks less antique than the 1922 Noiseless Portable. And you can't help wondering what today's computers would look like if the Odell No. 2, with its circular base and saw-tooth bar of letters, had won out in the turn-of-the-century marketplace for writing machines.

Those who are not mechanically inclined will also wonder what that Odell looks and sounds like when someone is actually using it to fill out a form or write a letter. And those who are too young to have composed a book report or a term paper without benefit of a screen will no doubt wonder what dings have to do with typing. It would have been so helpful to include some video that would elucidate the subject and give "Click! Clack! Ding!" some actual clicks, clacks and dings.

Correction: May 11, 2014

A picture credit in some editions on April 27 with an article about an exhibition on typewriters at the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut misstated the surname of the photographer whose took pictures of several of the typewriters. He is Greg Fudacz, not Fudach.

"Click! Clack! Ding! The American Typewriter" is at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington Street, through June 1. Information: nbmaa.org or (860) 229-0257.

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