A Collector's Odyssey

I have always been a collector. Various collecting fields have captured my attention since I was a small boy growing up in suburban Boston.

During the 1980s I assembled an important collection of Japanese wood block prints of the Meiji period, all of which were ultimately donated to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. By 1990, my collecting interests had moved into what was then a virtually unexplored field—collecting and researching original design drawings executed by architects for presentation to prospective clients. This collection grew rapidly. I limited my acquisitions to the time period 1890-1960.

I became fascinated by the fact that architects' presentation artwork always set the proposed building into a scene which included fashionably-dressed people and the latest stylish automobiles. Identifying the automobiles was often a useful way to date the drawing, and to appreciate the context of the proposed building. Thus I began to familiarize myself with the history of auto design.

In the fall of 2001 I started to acquire original car design renderings. It seemed to me that there was a unique opportunity inherent in this material—an unexplored niche of the art world where real works of art existed but were totally unappreciated. Ironically, the auto companies for whom the art was created assigned no value to these drawings, and generally destroyed them almost as soon as they were created. Yet somehow a limited quantity of original material survived, usually within the families of the artists.

As my collection expanded, a strategy emerged. I decided to concentrate on the designers of American cars of the era following World War II. I acquired drawings from their student years, and work done in car company studios. I wanted to be able to tell the whole story—the evolution of the career of a designer, from talented student to creator of iconic American automobiles. My collection now includes drawings of concept cars and production cars; exterior ornamentation and interior layouts; and I have devoted equal attention to acquiring original advertising artwork.

This exhibition spotlights the neglected artistic production of those involved in the American auto industry and gives them their proper place in the history of art and design.

- Frederic A. Sharf

Designing the American Dream

American Car Styling in the Middle of the 20th Century

The twin fields of automobile and industrial design emerged in America in the 1920s. Manufacturers began to attach prominence to the appearance of an object, in addition to the obvious importance of its utility. In 1927, General Motors established a separate department devoted entirely to design, styling, and color, under the leadership of their legendary designer, Harley Earl. By 1935 Ford and Chrysler were forced to take similar steps in order to be competitive with General Motors.

In 1945, as World War II was coming to an end, American auto manufacturers tentatively resumed production of passenger cars. There was enormous pent-up demand, combined with a feeling of economic optimism. The “American Dream” in those post-war years focused on ownership of a house and a car.

Since the design cycle in the auto industry normally required three years from the inception of a design idea to the production of a completed car, the first truly new American car models did not begin to appear until 1948 and for many brands the new models were not introduced until 1949 or even 1950. While some of the major car companies had talented designers on their staffs, there was a clear need for a new generation of trained auto designers.

Designing cars in the years prior to the computer was the work of artists who reported each day to studios located adjacent to the production facilities of each car manufacturer. Their job was simply to draw—entire cars, parts of cars, and cars which did not yet exist. These artists did not simply appear out of the blue. A well-organized training system existed which was primarily run by well-known industrial art schools. The foremost of those that specialized in auto design at that time were Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York and the Art Center School in Los Angeles, California. Both received support from the auto manufacturers.

Car design always began with preliminary drawings, which were often produced in hundreds and usually discarded after review by the senior staff. Only the most promising designs would be posted in the studio for further review. Ultimately a selection of the best designs would be worked up into presentation art.

Presentation drawings required attention to detail, as well as creation of a setting into which the proposed car was inserted. Such art would be shown to senior executives of the company, who would make the final decisions on the appearance of a proposed model. Auto companies needed large numbers of designers. Some of them concentrated on “dreaming” about cars which might never exist; some worked on the numerous details which made up a production car. Illustrations of the production car were needed to aid the marketing effort. The artwork needed to produce advertisements, catalogues, and brochures was usually outsourced to specialized art studios, which worked closely with the advertising agencies employed by the manufacturers.

This exhibition seeks to explore all aspects of car design and car marketing in the decades during which American car production dominated the world market.

Training the Designers

The existence of a new employment opportunity at the auto companies naturally led to the creation of programs where students could be trained for these jobs. In 1930, Edward A. Adams opened a school in Los Angeles specifically aimed at training designers; the Art Center School taught art with the sole objective of turning out practical designers, capable of learning a living from their skills. In 1936 the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York established an industrial design curriculum, to which automotive design was added in 1938.

The auto manufacturers supported these schools by offering scholarship funds to deserving students and also by hiring their graduates. When demand for cars exploded after 1945 the auto companies needed many more trained designers, and they developed closer association with the art schools. This was especially true of the close ties established by Ford and GM with the Art Center School. The school expanded in 1946 by moving to larger premises. They were now able to offer a wide selection of courses: included were basic art; advertising and illustration art; photography; product design; and a unique transportation course taught by Strother MacMinn, who had worked at GM under Harley Earl. Eight semesters were required to graduate, but most students finished in less than three years by taking courses over the summers.

In addition to scholarships, the car companies suggested projects for the students, and sent top-level executives to review the completed student work. They sent staff members to Los Angeles several times a year to look at student portfolios, which helped them select graduates for hiring. George Anderson, who is well represented in this exhibition, recalls attending Art Center with financial assistance provided by Ford; however after graduation he went to work for General Motors, and spent his entire career there.

During the 1950s some Japanese designers came to the Art Center to study. The earliest such men were sent by auto companies such as Toyota and Nissan. Their objective was not only to learn design directly from American teachers, but also to learn American tastes so they they could help Japanese manufacturers to create products which would appeal to American consumers. Those who came to the Art Center School during these years always returned to Japan to make use of the skills they had learned.

Concept Cars

American car manufacturers in the years after World War II attached enormous importance to the studios in which select designers worked only on concept cars, also known as "dream cars." They were told to imagine designs and technical features which did not then exist. Many of these designs got no further than the artist's rendering; others would be assigned to a larger team—including draftsmen, engineers, clay modelers—so that prototype cars could be built. In general, these prototypes were not meant for production but rather for exhibition, to test the reactions of the public.

Americans had become fascinated by trying to imagine what the "world of tomorrow" would look like. This was the theme of the 1939 New York World's Fair. The most popular exhibition at the Fair was the "Futurama" exhibit; it was sponsored by General Motors and showed cities, highways, houses, and cars in an enormous panoramic setting. Images of advanced cars, airplanes, rocket ships, and cities in space became part of the popular vocabulary during the war years, disseminated by the very popular comic book and science fiction publications.

When car production resumed in 1945-1946, the auto companies sought to capture this enthusiasm for futuristic vehicles by encouraging their designers to make creative drawings, which initially resembled images from comic books, cartoons, and pulp fiction. By 1950 this creativity was directed into drawings of designs which could be turned into concept cars.

Many of the production features associated with cars of the 1950s began on the drawing boards of designers of concept cars. The inspiration for these images came from the rockets, bombs, and planes which had dominated popular culture in the 1940s. Fins on cars of the 1950s were derived from the twin tail of the Lockheed P-38 Lightning airplane. Bomb-like forms were introduced as bumpers in the early 1950s. Rocket ships inspired some of the most popular cars in the GM Motorama show.

New inventions which had proved their usefulness during the war, such as helicopters, inspired designers to imagine peacetime applications. Emerging technologies prompted designers to imagine a car which used these innovations. For example, in 1956 designers at Ford began work on a car which they called "Gyron," in which a gyroscope kept the car upright; one such car was finally built in response to the popularity of GM's "Firebird" show cars, and was exhibited in the spring of 1961.

Exterior Design

Exterior design was originally left to the engineers and production staff, but by 1930 car companies began to recognize that overall appearance was important. Exterior designers were then allowed to influence the colors of both exterior and interiors of the cars. By the end of the decade, exterior designers dictated the entire exterior appearance, and their jobs were the glamorous ones in the car manufacturing industry.

An explosive growth in personnel took place in the 1950s with the creation of an elaborate studio system. The most glamorous studios created the exterior look of the various car brands. In general, each studio contained a design team of 12 people: a chief designer, assistant chief designer, four designers, two draftsmen, one engineer, and three modelers. Design was very much a team effort, and no single person was ever given credit for a production car.

Some of the studios worked entirely on styling, producing hundreds of drawings that showed minor and major variations in appearance. These drawings were done from three important angles—a full side view, front view, and rear view. Sometimes a 3/4 view was done so that the side and either front or rear could be shown in the same drawing. Designers would arrive at 8:30 AM and depart at 5:00 PM. Those working on a presentation to management, or on a deadline associated with a production car, would of course be asked to work overtime.

A designer could turn out 15 to 20 quick sketches in a day. A watercolor presentation drawing might take a full day, and a gouache presentation piece, often done on illustration board, might take two or three days. The presentation drawing was always a more dramatic view of the proposed production car. Artwork produced was regarded as irrelevant once a model went into production; designers could keep selected pieces in the flat files located behind their work station but were not allowed to take these home for fear of industrial espionage. Some artwork was taken away, but only many years after it was produced.

Designers regularly moved from one studio to another within a company. Management felt that such movement would keep ideas "fresh." If a designer was selected as chief of a studio he might well remain there for three to five years. There was a great emphasis on secrecy, even among studios of one company. Certainly no designer was expected to reveal trends to a rival car manufacturer. Despite these strictures, designers did move laterally between companies; and some moved from very responsible positions at GM to equally important positions at Ford or Chrysler.

Interior Design

The design of car interiors is an often-overlooked aspect of automobile design. Historically, the interiors of horse-drawn carriages and coaches defined the importance of the vehicle, and coach-builders were keenly aware of the sense of style and comfort required by their clients. This tradition was gradually transformed by the car manufacturers into a series of interior design studios.

A General Motors organization chart dated December 1955 provides an excellent window into the importance of interiors. The Interior Design and Color section of the Styling Division of GM had a large staff: 56 designers and 43 engineers. Each of the five GM auto brands had its own interior studio, which usually included at least one female designer. In addition, there were interior studios devoted specifically to trucks, aircraft, experimental vehicles. Designers had access to the illustrators, modelers, and sculptors assigned to the various studios.

Interior design concerned itself not only with obvious details such as upholstery, door handles, knobs, radios, and dashboards but also with less obvious aspects such as lettering and interior graphics.

Contemporary fashion was extremely important to the men and women working in interior design studios. They looked to magazines such as Vogue for the most current fashion ideas and expected vendors of upholstery fabrics to send representatives to major fashion shows in Paris so that they could keep abreast of the latest trends.

Interior design studios had to react quickly to changes in technology as well as taste. Such interior advances as seat belts, air bags, and electronic systems created new design challenges. The designers who worked in the interior studios were attracted to the product-oriented nature of the assignments; however producing attractive renderings was the easiest part of the work; dealing with engineers and cost calculators often meant that less than 10% of any original design found its way into a production car.

Interior design studios were the first places to welcome female designers, and as usual Harley Earl at GM led the way. He hired his first female designers in 1943 and expanded the total to 9 trained female industrial designers by the mid-1950s. GM proudly promoted this group as “the Damsels of Design” and issued press releases and photos which praised the women not only for their contribution to selection of colors and fabrics, but equally for their contributions to making car interiors appealing and functional for lady passengers.

Commercial Vehicles

Development of the automobile during the first three decades of the 20th century created a demand for motorizing a wide assortment of commercial vehicles, including trucks, tractors, fire engines, buses, and even mobile homes.

In the 1930s the manufacturers of such vehicles adopted the dominant styling of the decade, known as “streamlining.” In the 1950s they responded to the appearance of autos by incorporating fins and chrome ornamentation wherever possible.

For example, Henney Motor Company, a builder of professional car bodies (ambulances, hearses, and limousines) hired the New York City designer Richard Arbib to update the appearance of their vehicles. They were convinced that adding style to even such a prosaic group of products would increase sales.

The trucking industry received an enormous wake-up call when the United States Congress passed the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. America was about to embark on the largest public works program in world history, building a network of interstate highways which would cross the country from east to west and north to south. Trucks would carry loads previously considered inconceivable, for long distances and at high speeds. They had to include sleeping berths and other comforts and to become more aerodynamic. Larger engines and more wheels were required for the heavier loads; ultimately tandem trailers were added.

An organization chart for General Motors in 1955 listed two truck studios. One was for Chevrolet trucks, and one for G.M.C. trucks. These studios were part of the Automotive Exterior Design section of the organization. Designers could thus be rotated out of car studios and assigned to trucks. Management often made such a decision when they felt that a designer had run out of useful ideas for autos, but they believed that he could make a contribution in truck design.

Stylish commercial vehicles ultimately led to development of recreational vehicles and sports utility vehicles. Motor home trailers were in increased demand. They originated in the 1930s as a tubular aluminum streamlined form, and were restyled in the 1950s. Recreational camper vehicles emerged as a competitive product.

Advertising Artwork

Once production cars had successfully emerged from the design process, selling them became the province of an entirely different group of artists. Independent art studios, working under the direct supervision of national advertising agencies, developed the artwork needed for a sales campaign. The advertising agencies had headquarters in New York or Chicago but maintained offices in Detroit to work closely with the auto companies. A group of special illustration studios existed in downtown Detroit; these employed the artists, providing them with a collegial work environment. In a sense, the studio system established in the auto companies was replicated in the illustration studios.

Advertising artwork usually combined two artistic requirements: the car advertised needed to be rendered accurately, with particular attention to exterior highlights, and then put in a setting that was attractive, always glamorous and often romantic. In most cases different artists were used for the two component elements, which were then photographed as a single entity.

The most important ingredient was the skillful and elegant rendering of the car. It was the "star" of the advertisement, and needed to exude a sense of style and fashion. In the 1950s, special attention needed to be paid to the chrome trim and large fins.

It is interesting to note that the artists who created these automobile images were never credited in the resulting print advertisements. Like the designers in the auto company studios, they remained anonymous contributors to the overall effort. Occasionally, however, the background art in a printed advertisement would carry the signature of a well-known illustrator.

The most dominant theme in advertising artwork in postwar America was the importance of a family owning a car (or even two cars, as prosperity increased). Images of a husband and wife—sometimes with children and a dog—were posed in front of a contemporary ranch house or a traditional colonial home. As an alternative, they were shown in a recreational setting, ranging from a ski chalet to a campground.

Another important theme of advertising art in the 1950s was romance. Cars were associated with elegant women, dressed in fashionable clothing and jewels, escorted by very handsome, well-groomed men. The lifestyles of these glamorous couples apparently took them to exotic places such as Bangkok or Monte Carlo, metropolitan settings such as Paris and New York City, and adventurous locations such as snow-capped mountains or lush jungles.

Advertising copy always stressed the latest technical innovations: powerful engines, power steering and brakes, air conditioning, and automatic transmissions, to name a few. Selling a car in postwar America required not only a stylish exterior and thoughtful interior, but a variety of engineering miracles.

Advertising art was produced in large quantities. It was used for print ads but also for product brochures, consumer catalogues, and point-of-purchase material like signs, banners, posters. When the campaign for a particular model was over, the art became the property of the agency that had commissioned it. Like the design artwork it was generally deemed redundant and destroyed. It is amazing that some items did survive, and have now become desirable works of art.