THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
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SYMPOSIUM ON AUTOMOBILE DESIGN AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

On Wednesday, April 12, at 8:30 p.m., the Department of Architecture and Design of the Museum of Modern Art conducted a symposium in the Museum Auditorium entitled "The Esthetics of Automobile Design." The following panel members participated:

Moderator:

PHILIP C. JOHNSON, Director of the Department.

Speakers:

J.M. CRAWFORD, Vice President, General Motors Corporation.

WILDER HOBSON, car owner and licensed driver.

RAYMOND LOEWY, design consultant for the postwar Studebaker.

GEORGE NELSON, architect and industrial designer.

D. CAMERON PECK, collector of fine automobiles, President, Antique Automobile Club of America, President, Sports Car Club of America.

HOWARD DARRIN, designer for Kaiser-Fraser.

Following is a digest of the points of view expressed by the participants.

Moderator Johnson:

I think I am an excellent moderator because I am on both sides of what I hope to be a cleavage tonight. I just bought the most wonderful car in the world last week - a Buick. I bought it for the same reasons people buy cars in this country: it is a very powerful car. The car turns on a dime, goes 80 miles an hour when I think it is going 40. I have been arrested 3 times. At 10 below zero it starts off right up the hill, and I don't miss my train. And next year I will get a good trade-in. What more could you ask?

But on the other side I find I have to be very polite and take my hat off when I get in the door, or it will knock it off for me. And it would be a little better if I could see the right fender, because it is all scratched up. Moreover, I find the Buick car the ugliest object I have ever owned. My friends say to me, "I don't see how you can have that thing in your front yard!" You feel embarrassed to have your personal possessions criticized like that. It is a situation which might lead to serious psychotic disturbances, because, on the one hand I really love it, but on the other I do have reservations - that mouthful of teeth, and the extended bubble gum along the side!

Wilder Hobson:

I am here to grind 2 axes: the axes of honesty on the one hand, and grace on the other. According to Aristotle: "A good style must first of all be clear. It must not be mean or above the dignity of the subject. It must be appropriate." The little MG is an example of honesty: simplicity, economy of line, no pretentiousness, no excess decorative package. One of the striking things about it is that it looks exactly like the kind of automobile it really is. It is easy to maneuver, it has excellent visibility for the driver, it looks like an automobile.

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But on the streets I find torpedo-like contraptions that look as though they were aching to be off in the limitless spaces of the more scientific comic strips. Another feature is the tendency to make it exceedingly difficult for a service man to operate on the car.

To vent a few private prejudices, I don't care for station wagons painted to look like wood. I don't like huge hoods containing relatively small engines. I don't see why. I see no point in cars with coats of arms on them. These are dishonesties.

As for grace, it is achievement in the form which draws from and suggests the fluid and harmoniously proportioned elements in nature. There is no reason why the general American type of body design should not result in a graceful product if enough people care about grace. It is not necessary to elephantize the bumper. Perhaps the public likes it, but it has not had a chance at anything else. I hope that American designers will aim for future prospects.

In the Cisitalia, a small, low car, there is nothing in its good proportions that is impossible on a larger scale. The upward flow of the fenders and downward flow of the hood is a singularly beautiful balance of curves. You can see the wheel; it is used as a definitely decorative stroke.

J.M. Crawford:

I am here to present the automobile engineers' approach to the problem of improving the appearance of the modern motor car. I am not taking a defensive position here. Rather I feel that a better understanding of the problems and contributions of the engineer is necessary.

The engineer has always had responsibility to lay the groundwork for safe, comfortable and efficient individual transportation, to sell in the price bracket determined by the management, and that can be produced at a profit to the stockholder, But in the early '20s, due to competition, stylists or industrial designers were employed to improve appearance. But this does not mean that the automotive engineer must not constantly increase safety, comfort, efficiency and utility in spite of changes in appearance.

First to consider: performance characteristics, package size, price bracket. Engineering work is based on development, test work, field experience. In this way the engineer is responsible for chassis and overall car design; the stylists for esthetics of car design. Next, management, engineers, sales executives and body-producing facilities review decisions of stylists. This calls for a period of adjustment of viewpoints to lead to the production program.

Recent models compared with prewar designs show greater balance and harmony between the hood and the trunk; seats have been moved downward and forward, the engine itself has been moved forward, the roof is down and forward. The fixed weight of mechanical units must be considered: over 50% of total weight must be on the front wheels for safety. The variable weights - passengers and luggage - must be considered for good balance between both. These have been worked out so that the loading of the car will have very little effect on its handling or riding characteristics.

The engine design has a very important effect on over-all car design. Height of hood is determined by the clearance between the sheet metal and the air cleaner. Height, width, forward weight, road clearance, position of radiator dependent on efficient cooling, all determine design. Over-all height is somewhat determined by the relation of the driver's eye to the bottom of the windshield.

Thus the very considerable weight of the power plant is a governing factor.

Seat height and position have their influence: the seat must have a certain relation to the belt line - the bottom of the windows - for comfort and for driver's signals. The top of the seat and the roof rail must be related for easy entrance. The center pillar must allow visibility and signaling. Here the engineer and the stylist co-operate for maximum comfort and greatest eye appeal.

In addition, safety limitations are imposed by law: headlamps are at a fixed distance from the ground; shape and size of headlamps are standardized; license plate mountings are controlled, etc.

Customer Research is an established method for learning the customer's viewpoint on design: a representative sampling of the car-buying public.

The major objective is the development of safe, comfortable and efficient individual transportation with enough eye appeal to make the owner want to trade in his present car for a new one.

D. Cameron Peck:

Ever since man first eased his weary legs by riding over earth's surface on wheels, his vehicles have been created and embellished with all the skill and artistry at his command. There are three fundamental factors in the esthetics of road vehicle design that are seldom mentioned: 1) the wheel, an eye-satisfying circle, is the most important feature of its design; 2) the vehicle, being for use in a horizontal plane, shares with architecture an inescapably horizontal base line and, with wheels forming a parallelogram, its basic shape will be rectilinear; 3) the vehicle is directional, pointed towards its owner's destination, hence should look as if it would go even when at rest, with front advancing end clearly differentiated from back trailing end.

Car design has its roots in centuries of slowly perfected horsedrawn vehicles. Even the earliest designers were concerned about esthetics because of criticism that they were replacing that beautiful animal with an ugly metal box. By 1901 the component parts of the motor car had assumed relative positions in the chassis which they still occupy, and the 1901 Mercedes, the most advanced car of its day, was a pattern which others copied in succeeding years: a lengthened wheelbase and a neat hood and radiator, flared front fenders adding a feeling of motion, a striping scheme providing a repeating rhythm of accents from front to back. The classic straight line formula reigned supreme for another 20 years.

The bulbous Buick of 1929 and the airflow Chrysler of 1933, with much talk about streamlining, heralded the arrival of the present automobile design formula, based not on straight lines but on curves. The new school reduces the badly needed horizontal emphasis to the truncated base of the bubble plus applied ornamentation, as in the 1950 General Motors cars, heavily belted with chromium and giving the effect of divorcing the top part of the body more and more from the bottom thus destroying design unity. Grotesque dentures in front are framed by a stretched out chromium lip as though fingers had been inserted in the corners of the mouth like when a child pretends he is a tiger. So little of the back wheel is visible that the implied sense of motion of a rolling wheel is entirely lost. From the side, there is no clear feeling as to which end of the device is the front.

The Kaiser Special emphasizes a quality common to most of the present day designs: its effect is bloated and overweight, quite inconsistent with the litheness required for forward motion in a horizontal plane. Mr. Loewy's Studebaker is noticeably cleaner than many current models, being quite innocent of meaningless chrome ornamentation, and less bulbous in effect, with the top line paralleling the base line for a good horizontal emphasis. The front end is far better than most of today's grinning masks, but one may question whether or not an automobile still earthbound should look like a jet fighter. But the sweeping sheer line from front to back and the rather flat top binds the vehicle to earth while its reaching lines suggest speed and motion.

The "curvilinear school" may have something when they get back to certain fundamentals as is evidenced by the Ford. The front end is several degrees less objectionable than the Buick, although still too heavy in feeling. The body sides are clean and swooping, not overly convex although sadly split by a chrome strip. Unfortunately the Mercury and the Lincoln are not nearly as well done - true bubble boys these, and with each increase in price the customer receives an increase in the amount of meaningless design-negating chromium.

The Cadillac has a certain nouveau riche glitter and is not ungraceful in spots, but the alarming chromium bandaged wound at the front of the back fender virtually cuts the car in two, a horrid sight.

The Nash covers the front wheels as well as the back making it look rather like a quonset hut standing on 4 naked white feet, so that what does show of the wheels seems almost immodest. The front grille design is satisfactorily symmetrical but overemphasized by its heavy chrome frame. Good points are the continuous sweeping belt line unifying the design and the unmistakable and business-like hood. At least one knows which end of this car comes first.

Howard Darrin:

I would like to try to explain that it is a little more difficult to build a car than it is to take it apart and criticize it. I would like to show you the apparent reason for the European cars having a better appearance than the American cars. European cars are custom-built, built by hand. A designer designs one car, builds it, and it is on the road. In America it costs about 100 million dollars to build a car, and if it isn't what the public will buy, we are really sunk. The stylists are really behind the eight ball because they are brought in to decorate what is already done by the engineer. That is why I want to be a "body architect" to work on the whole thing from the beginning.

(Mr. Darrin's subsequent comments were largely related to slides he showed, demonstrating that design elements he first used 20 years ago appear in his most recent cars.)

George Nelson:

I am going to consider the automobile as an art object, a very complicated art object. One of the characteristics of such an object is that, in addition to opening a door or moving, it can also be looked at.

(Mr. Nelson's subsequent comments were largely related to his slides which were chiefly a series of close-ups of details of the hardware on cars. He concluded with the Jeep, his "favorite automobile.")

Raymond Loewy:

As designers we are anxious to follow the limitations outlined by Mr. Crawford because we know that in doing so we will automatically reach our one and only goal: to give the American public the kind of automobile they want, thus creating mass manufacturing, mass sales and mass employment.

As a designer, I am on a spot because I think the American roads are covered with monstrosities. There are automobiles that are practically obscene and an offense to anyone that has any taste. I have been against that kind of design all my life.

There is a difference between designing one special sports job built for two on a long wheel base with a long hood to sell for $5,000 to $20,000 and designing a sedan with leg room, head room, width, comfort and done inexpensively and at the same time safely.

You pay 90¢ a pound for steak, 70¢ a pound for butter, and your car costs you an average of 68¢ a pound. The English pay $1.50 a pound, the Italians $3.30 a pound. It takes nothing short of American technological genius and engineering and business sense to make this possible.

The Europeans can't get in the car with a hat on. They sit on the floor with their legs stretched under the hood or their knees under their chins. Europe is at present where we were in America at the time of the Vanderbilt Cup; driving is a sport, not mass transportation. American designers never have the luck to be assigned the problem of a 2-passenger speedster to sell at $5,000 to $20,000. If we were to get that kind of job, we would make these foreign cars look like a 1920 Mack truck. If it is dishonest to put a small engine under a large hood, that is just what the MG does, for a large section of the space is used to store the customer's feet, so the hood is a fake, and Mr. Hobson has been hoodwinked. In America customers insist on riding in the body on seats; they refuse to ride under the hood!

The Cadillac to me is a beautiful car with balance and no vulgarity. I had nothing to do with its design.

The Cisitalia was built by men of taste. It has grace and it has balance, but it is a special sports job. Unfortunately there is no mass market for that kind of automobile here. Americans want to carry more than 2 passengers and they want more head room. If the Cisitalia were to be proportioned larger so it could take 6 passengers, the car would get to be ugly.

The Oldsmobile I consider to be the most advanced power plant in the world today. Its new rocket engine is respected and admired as a great engineering feat by every automotive engineer in the world. It is quite a job to house a thing like that in a hood, yet its hood is quite small, a masterpiece of designing.

(Mr. Loewy concluded with slides of a series of cartoons which he uses with his designers as expressive of his philosophy of design. They stressed the following design points:

Weight and bulk are enemies.

Visibility is essential.

Cars should not be too low or too wide.

Accessibility to car parts and tires for changing is essential.

Have nothing to do with station wagons.

Forget about the lavendar-and-old-lace school.

Forget about the plastic top, and the roadster.

Omit the "waffle school" of chrome carrier that covers the whole front, and the jelly-mold inflationary type of designing that leaves the ground.)

Mr. Geoffrey Smith, editor of the British publication "Autocar," from the floor:

I find you have to duck into big cars like the Lincoln - it is a jolly nuisance to get in and out. On visibility, if you suffered from the fogs we suffer from in England, you would never make the bonnet so long or so high or the steering-wheel a half mile away from the windscreen - quite impossible for driving in our London fogs.

I hold no brief for the MG, but Mr. Loewy took a car designed 20 years and has compared it to the modern car. I don't think that was quite all right. The MG sells the biggest number in America, and I think those are darned good cars. The tank at the back just runs you about 400 miles on one fill-up, and that is not too bad. You can get at the engine too.

Environment does affect design. Mr. Loewy seems to think every car should be a sedan. I suggest that it would not be for us to buy cars by the yard. Let a man buy whatever car he wants.

Mr. Eliot Noyes, former Director of the Department of Design of the Museum of Modern Art, from the floor.

I think the first postwar Studebaker has come close to being the most effectively received car of the postwar years. But in the design of the 1950 model, many people feel that they have been tricked and betrayed by a change of design direction. Was this intentional or did it happen under force of management and engineering requirements?

Mr. Loewy:

The reason for the change of design is that we like it better, we think it much more dynamic; it has more directional design. And since sales are much higher than last year, the public seems to like it better that way too.

Moderator Johnson:

Advertising can make people like this or that, and the consumer will vote only for things he knows. He has never had a chance to have anything else. You don't vote against your own choice of clothes.

Mr. Crawford:

Nevertheless when people in New York were asked "Is there anything about the new 'blank' car that you especially like?" 20% of them answered "Appearance" as the number one item that they liked. Above every other thing they liked the appearance.