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GM's 'Image' Cars

Will these cars help polish a tarnished image?

By Michelle Krebs
AUTOMOTIVE NEWS STAFF REPORTER

NEW YORK — Buick: premium American motor car; enduring design; beauty and power; substantial.

Cadillac: American standard of the world; unique; elegant; dignity; class.

Chevrolet: Heartbeat of America; more-than-expected; up-level features for entry-level buyers.

Oldsmobile: contemporary family car; freshness; originality; functional; uncluttered.

Pontiac: fun-to-drive; excitement; performance; roadability; expressive.

During the past year, those are the words General Motors execu-

tives have used to describe the kinds of cars each of its divisions will sell in the future in its efforts to wipe out look-alike cars and overlap among the divisions.

Now, the automaker will show the world what those words look like.

Image cars — dramatic, futuristic vehicles that offer a glimpse into the future of each division's path to distinctiveness — will be the main attraction at the automaker's extravaganza this week at New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel.

The show, entitled "GM Teamwork and Technology for Today

and Tomorrow," will showcase advanced technology and modern manufacturing methods on which the company has spent billions of dollars. Production vehicles, the result of GM's massive investments, also will be displayed.

From Tuesday through Thursday, more than 14,000 guests will be invited to attend the show, which will occupy 23,000 square feet of the hotel's ballrooms. GM said guests will represent a nationwide cross-section of its "publics" — dealers, stockholders, employees, union representatives and suppliers as well as news

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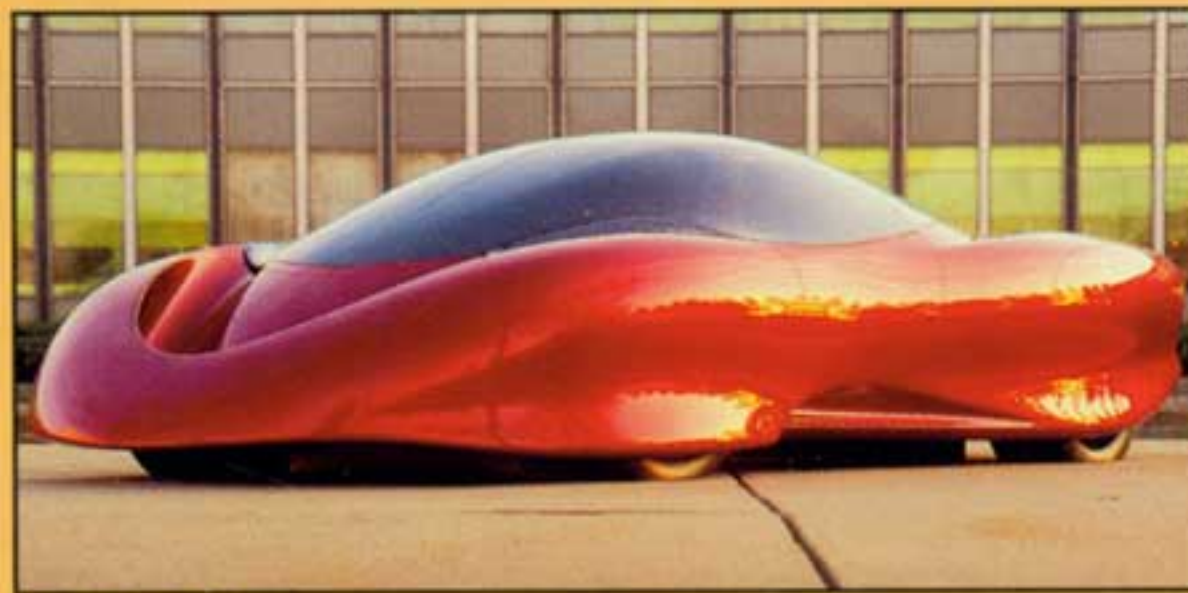
Buick Sceptre



Pontiac Concept Car



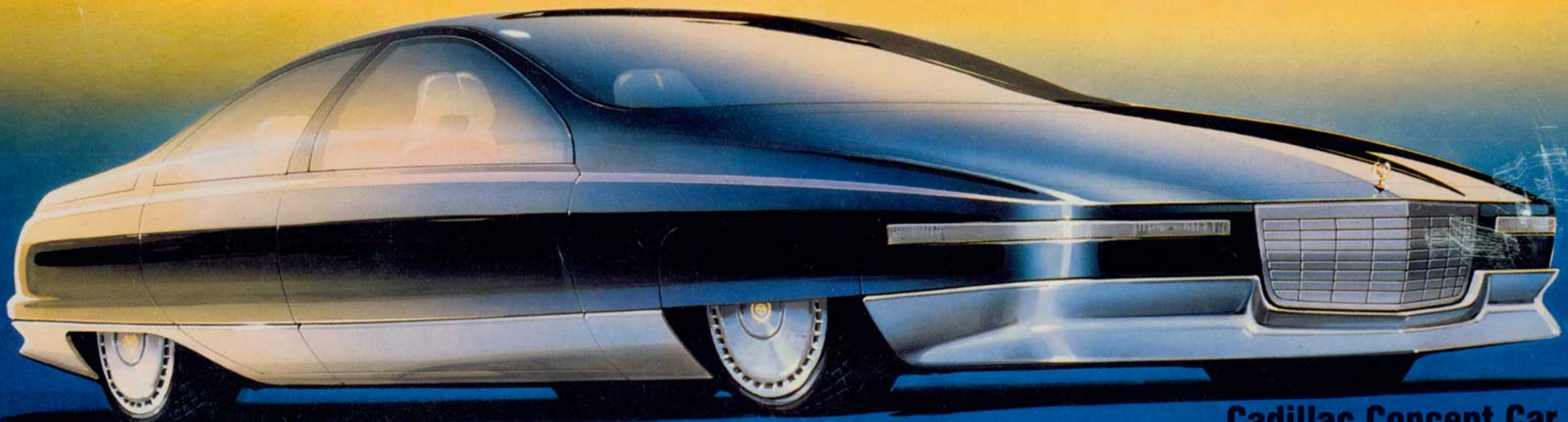
Chevrolet Venture



SRV-1



GMC Centaur



Cadillac Concept Car

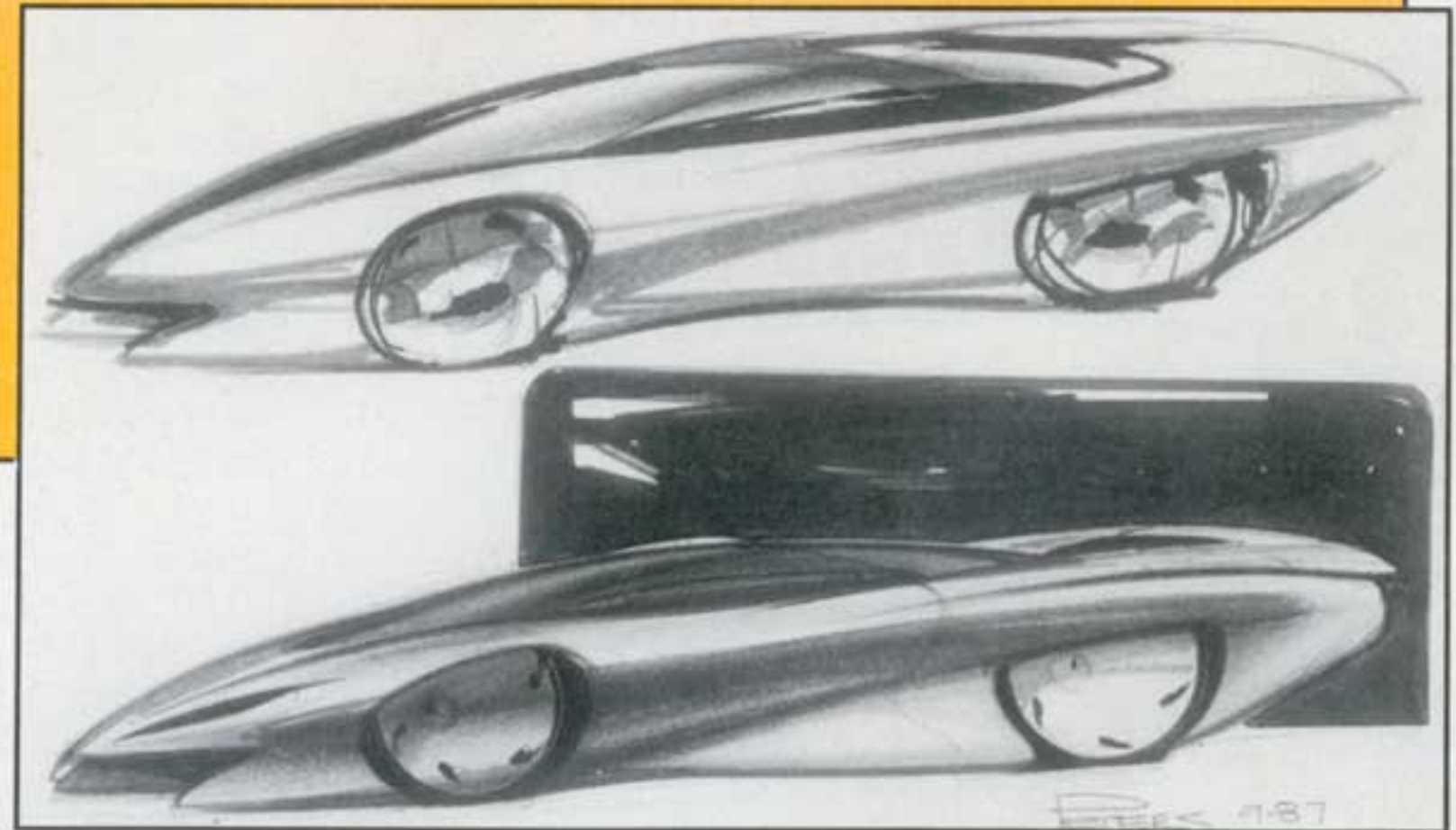
GM'S 'IMAGE' CARS



Sculptor works the beltline of the Pontiac Banshee clay model, upper left. Interior, upper right, places controls on the steering pod, as in some current Pontiacs.



Model of the Pontiac Banshee, lower left, and initial sketch, lower right, feature the distinctive low-slung front that is typical of Pontiacs.



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media and leaders from business, government, education and the arts.

For the corporation, the show is yet another effort to polish its badly tarnished image. GM's image has been damaged by sagging sales and profits as well as by the backlash from the highly publicized \$750 million buyout of Electronic Data Systems founder H. Ross

Perot more than a year ago.

The exhibit is also an opportunity for GM to show the skeptical world the fruits of its massive investments and the direction in which it is headed instead of simply talking about it.

With the image cars being the main attraction, styling and product take center stage. And with good reason.

In the past two years, GM execu-

tives have been accused of being preoccupied with high-tech wizardry in GM plants and financial finagling of the bottom line rather than focusing on the basic business of vehicle building.

The cars GM has turned out in the past decade have looked too much alike, critics charge.

Such criticism, along with a car market share that has shrunk by 9 percentage points in two years,

has led GM to boost its spending on product to record levels for the next five years — even though overall capital spending will drop.

GM Chairman Roger B. Smith said in a recent interview (Automotive News Nov. 16, 1987) that capital spending will drop from \$11-billion-plus in 1986 to an average of about \$8.5 billion in 1987 and 1988.

GM executives have said that the

dollars spent on product will go toward items that the customers can see and that are a factor in a customer's buying decision.

Lloyd Reuss, executive vice president of North American car operations and worldwide truck and bus operations, has said that more will be spent on "specificity," such as exterior body panels and instrument panels specific and unique to

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GMC Centaur interior, upper left, has large, easy-to-reach switches. The five-passenger, mid-engine Centaur, lower left, re-thinks the idea of what a truck is.



GMC Centaur, upper right, maintains the standard truck bed for load-carrying. Sketch of Centaur interior, lower right, retains truck-like features with car-like comforts.

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each division.

In that vein, top managers of the car groups and divisions, under Reuss' direction, have spent the past two years searching for distinct images for each division.

They divided the total car market into segments and divided those segments among the divisions with as little overlap as possible.

Another objective of the study was to "deproliferate" models; that is, to drastically reduce the number of models being sold by 1989.

From the study emerged image words and mission statements for each division. The image cars, originally only an internal exercise, were an outgrowth of those words.

The image cars became the No. 1 priority for Charles Jordan, who was named vice president of design on Oct. 1, 1986.

"People would ask why can't we go back to the old days when you could tell a Chevy was a Chevy and a Cadillac was a Cadillac," Jordan said. "But there are a lot more cars on the road so there's a mishmash, there's confusion, a blurring. Our

goal here is to clarify the image."

Jordan recalls that at the start, designers sat together throwing around the words that represented each division. They talked about what in the design made a car specific to a given division.

"I told my guys, surely there are some thoughts that go through our minds when we're doing a Chevy or when we're doing a Buick," Jordan said. "What are the important elements? What characteristics are important?"

The exercise, Jordan said, forced the design staff to think in a rational manner about what designers do emotionally or subconsciously in designing a car.

"It made us examine what we do to make sure when we lay it all out on the table from Chevy to Cadillac that each is clear and aimed at the particular customers that have been defined for a particular division," Jordan said.

When the discussions were finished, Jordan said, it was time to "put up or shut up."

"You can only talk so long," he said, adding it was time to turn words into a design.

"You gotta wheel something out and say, 'Now there's a Buick image,' or you've got to develop a new Electra so that you say, 'Wow, that looks like a Buick.'

"You can't design cars in words or image statements," he said. "You can advertise. You can say things. But it's what you see going down the street that really counts."

The decision was made to do a series of what were called image cars, one for each division. They would show what the words describing a division's image meant. Initially, they were to be used only internally to show GM decision-makers what the design staff meant.

However, it was then decided that the cars would be displayed on the auto show circuit, some debuting at the Detroit auto show later this month.

Then, before the cars were even built, it was decided that an entire auto show, something along the lines of the old Motoramas held at the Waldorf-Astoria, would be built around the cars. Instead of being a public show like the Motoramas of the 1950s and early

1960s, GM would show the cars to its important publics.

"We were torn between giving away our secrets and making a very positive public statement," Jordan acknowledged. "But our image is not good out there on the street. We know that, and it's bothersome. We believe that we need to get a positive image out there that says, 'Hey, this is where we're going' to get that excitement revved up."

Buick's image car, the Lucerne, is based on a Riviera. Cadillac's image car, the Voyage (pronounced as in bon voyage) is a large, luxury sedan. The Chevrolet Venture is a family sedan. Pontiac's Banshee is a futuristic Trans Am.

Oldsmobile will be represented by the Aerotech. Oldsmobile liked its original image car, the Silhouette, so much that it will not be shown and is scheduled to become an exclusive Oldsmobile production vehicle in the 1990s.

The Centaur, a five-passenger, mid-engine truck, is GMC's image car. And the SRV-1, a car symbolizing GM's Group Lotus PLC of England, is the ultimate luxury

sports car.

Earlier versions of Buick's Lucerne actually were called the Riviera, then the name was changed to Sceptre and finally to Lucerne. It shows Buick as the premium American motor car, part of the division's mission statement. It is large, substantial, with a combination of beauty and power, as it is described by its designers, without being the doctor's car of Buick's past.

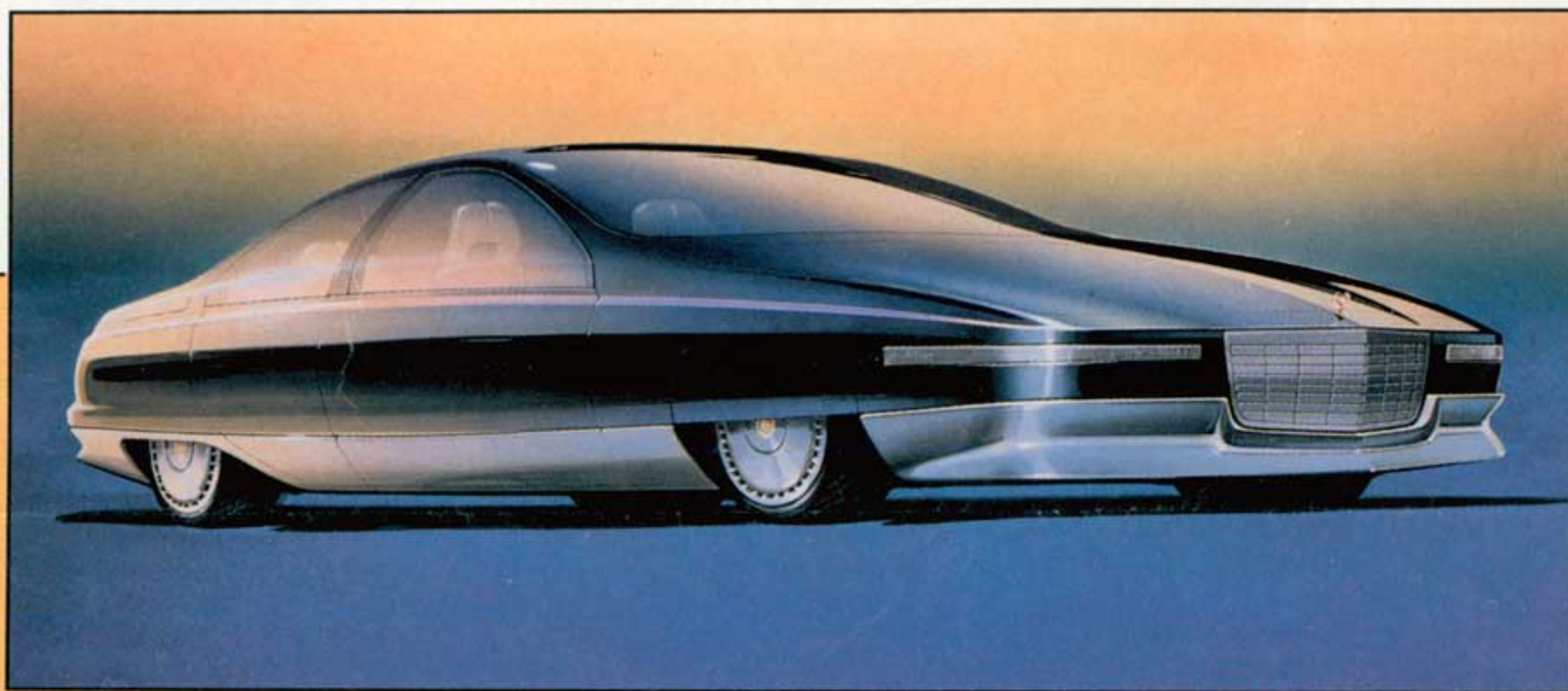
"But it has more than that," said Jordan. "It has flair."

Flair is one of the most important features of Buick, Jordan said.

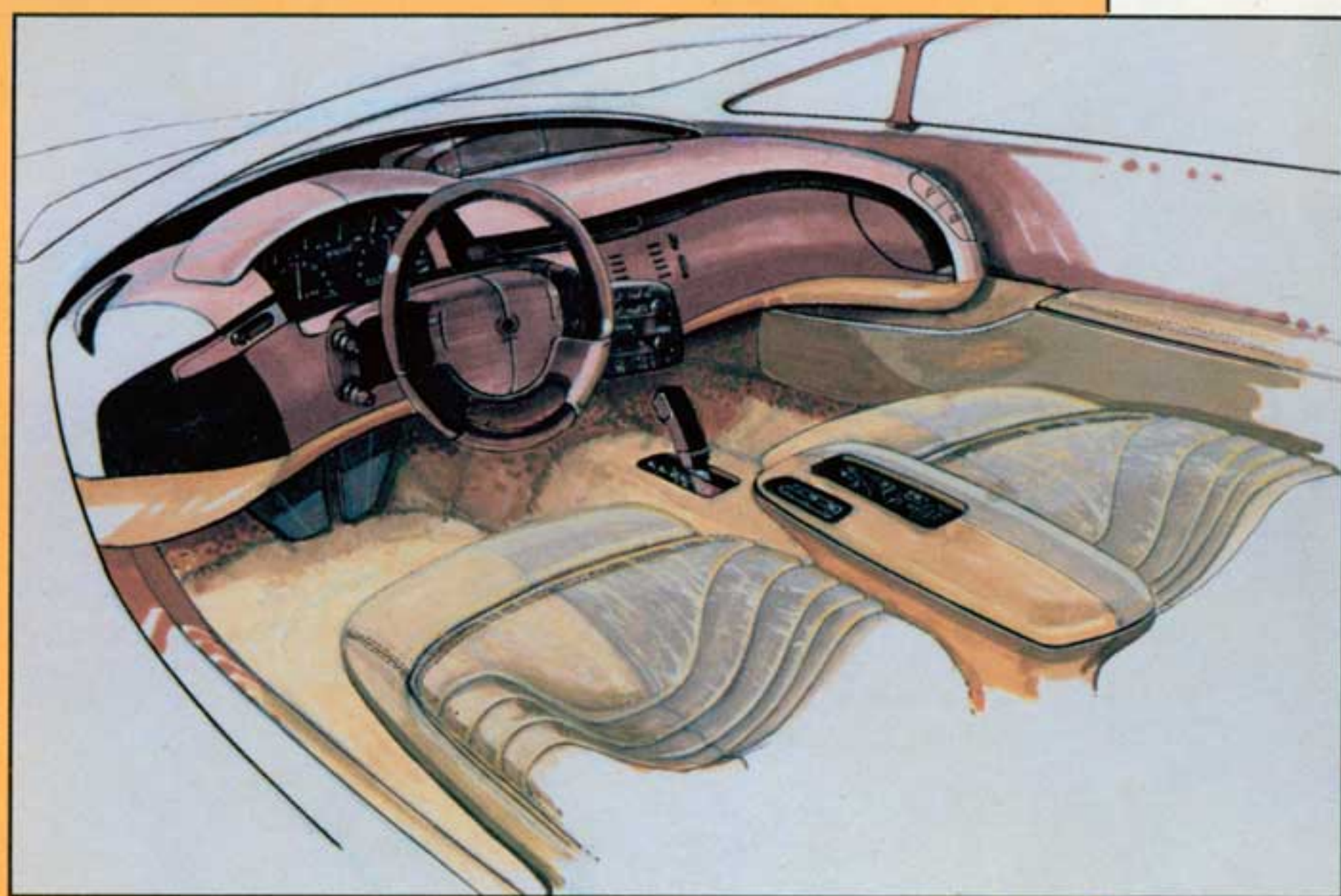
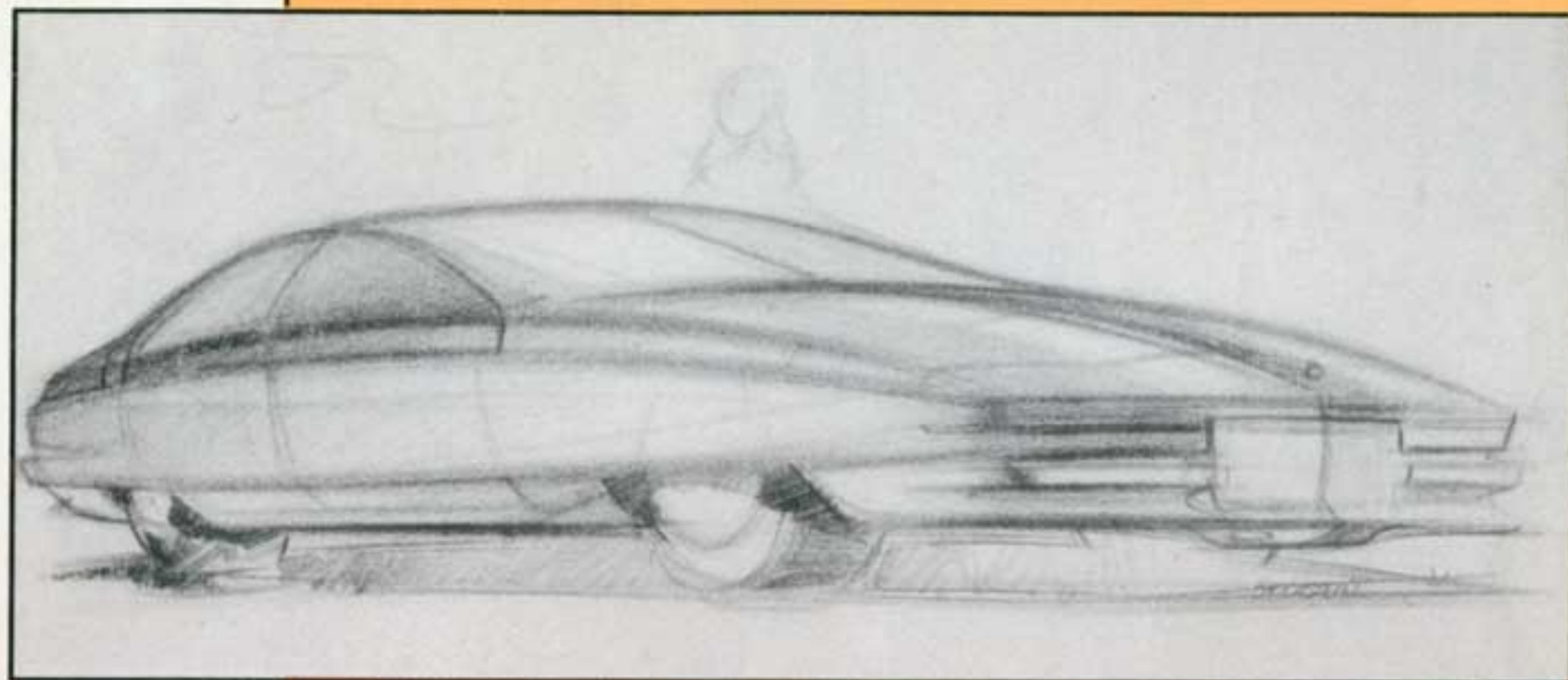
"The image words for Buick are substantial, massive, substance, graceful, muscular grace," he added. "But that doesn't mean Buick's got to be a big lump. Buick in its heyday had substance and power, but it had flair, and Buick is going to have flair."

Phil Garcia, chief designer of Advance Studio 1, said the designers of the Lucerne tried to capture the image and tradition of the popular 1967 and 1979 Riviera models but in a more contemporary way with soft surfaces, sharp edges and

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An all-glass upper gives the Voyage an expensive look that only Cadillac could afford.

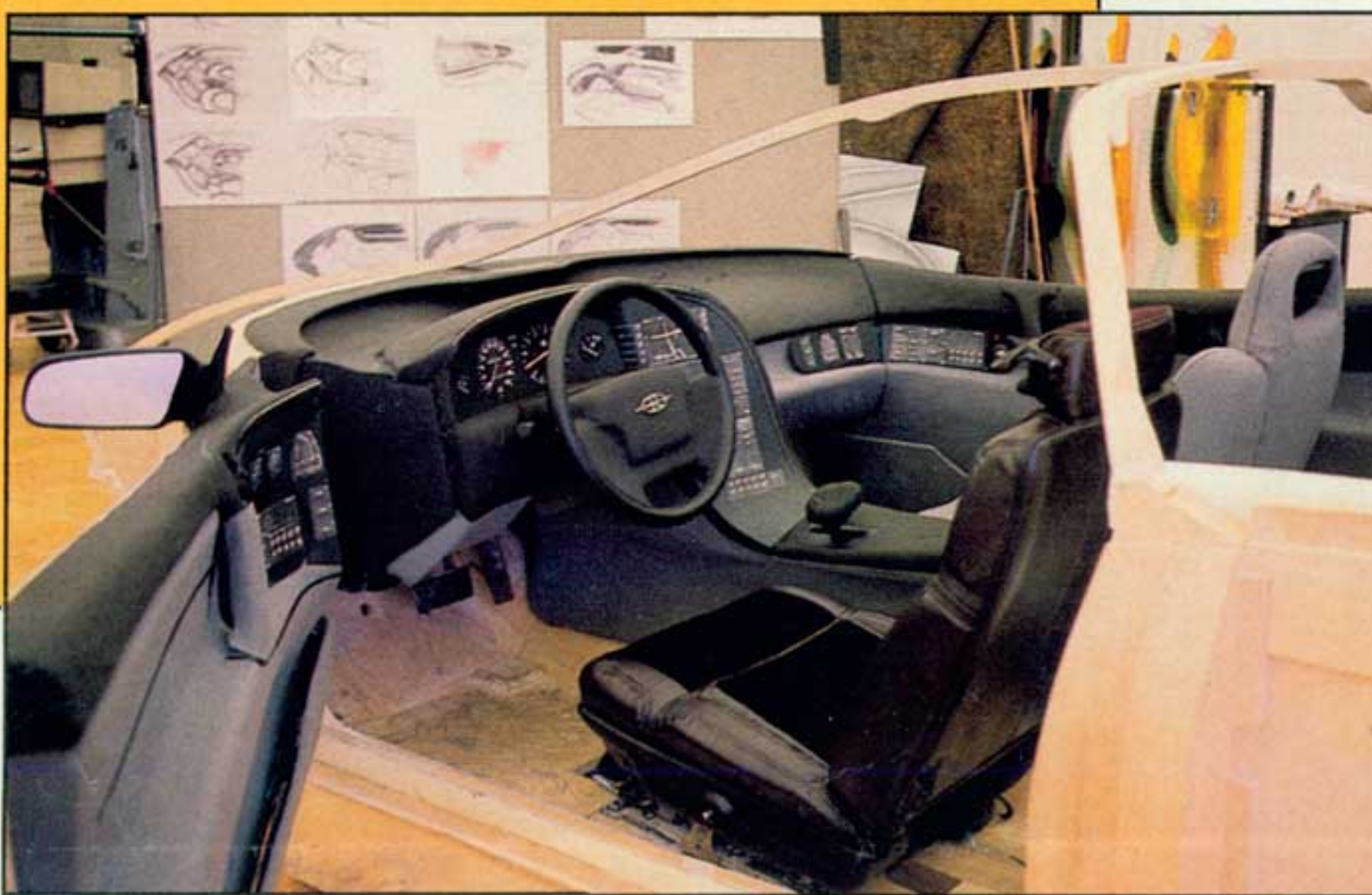
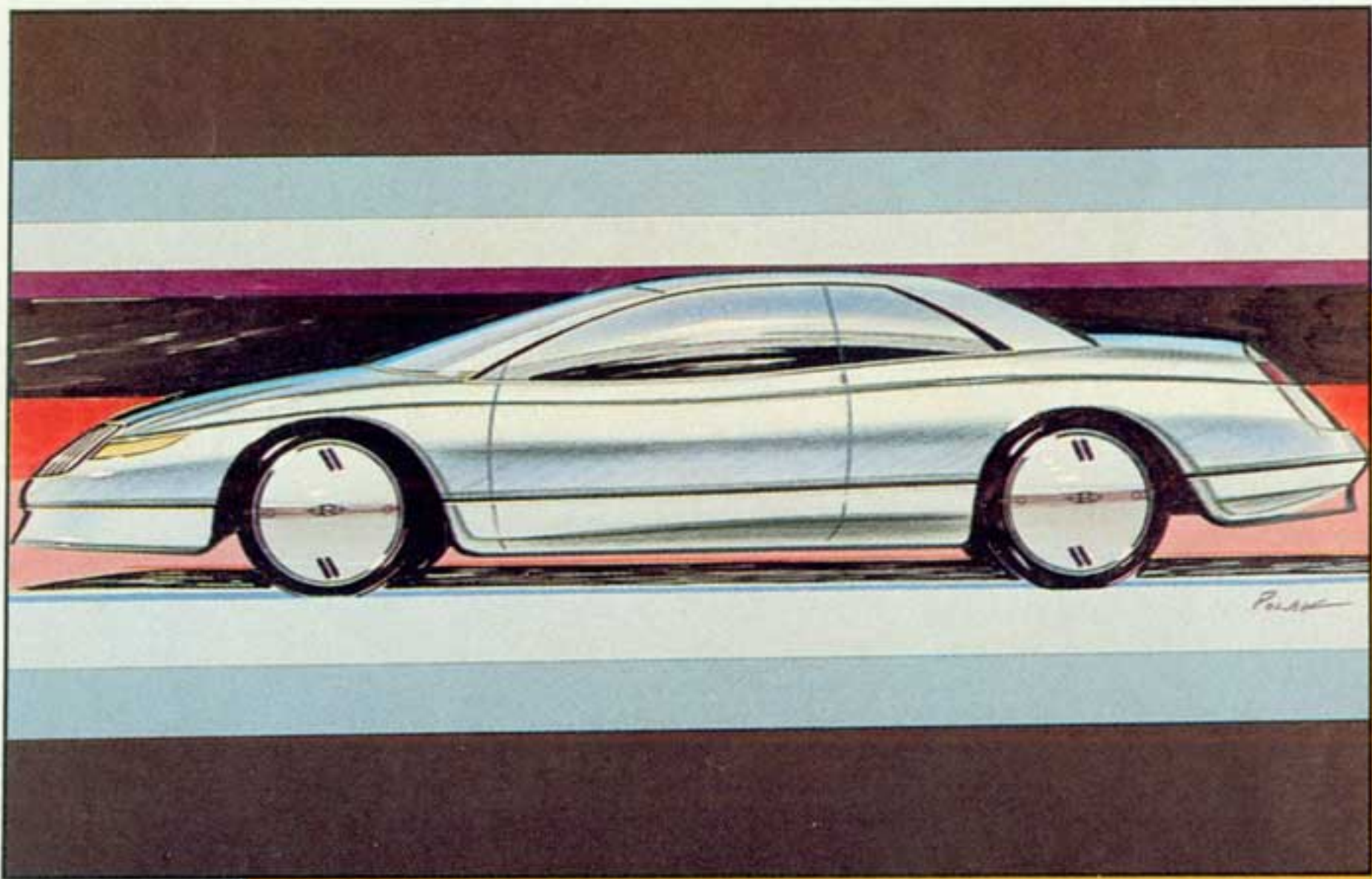


Original sketch, top left, envisioned the Voyage as a future Seville. Sculptors work on clay model, bottom left, to achieve a large but lean look.



Interior sketch for Cadillac Voyage, top right, attempts a youthful but elegant look. Wheel skirts on this version, lower right, were revived for aerodynamics as well as styling.

GM'S 'IMAGE' CARS



Original sketch, top left, of Buick Lucerne attempted to capture the tradition of past Riviera models. Lucerne model, bottom left, represents Buick's image of substance and grace.

Sculptors smooth out the lines of the Buick Lucerne, top right. A longer wheelbase than today's Riviera gives the Lucerne more interior room, lower right.

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undulating sides.

The Lucerne is based on today's front-wheel-drive Riviera but is longer and has a longer wheelbase.

There are no plans to build the Lucerne as a production car, but it is feasible to do so, Garcia said.

The Cadillac Voyage, originally envisioned as a future Seville, was designed to take the division a step beyond where it is now. Originally designed to accommodate a V-12 engine, the car will appear at the New York show with a V-8.

"It's a question with Cadillac: Is it time to leave all the past behind and join the world?" Jordan said.

Cadillac has a wonderful heritage but the Voyage was designed to put it into a "worldwide arena," Jordan noted. "We weren't just doing it for somebody in Kansas.

"This isn't the mainstay. This is the lead car," he added.

Allen Young, chief designer of Advance Studio 4, said the Voyage gets back to a strong Cadillac image but in a contemporary way.

One of the main design features of the Voyage is the use of glass, which covers the top of the car.

"We did things the glass companies didn't think they could do in the past," Young said. "We treated the glass more like sheet metal."

That use of glass "says that Cadillac is a more expensive car and that there are things we can do with glass that Oldsmobile and Buick can't do," Young added.

The traditional Cadillac features on the car, as described by Young, are the lean, straightforward look and large size.

The car is designed to be four-wheel drive. Four-wheel steering was considered but time ran out; it may be added for later auto shows. Special tires were designed by Uniroyal. Wheel skirts have been revived for styling and aerodynamics, Young said.

Young said the Voyage is a continuous project. In addition to four-wheel steering, other features that may be added in the future including a liquid crystal glass upper, which allows the driver to switch electronically from a darker to a lighter upper depending on lighting conditions.

No one will say whether the Voyage will become a production car, but GM insiders say Roger Smith — after showing a photograph of the car at a meeting — said someday it would be built.

The Chevrolet Venture, a family sedan that is intermediate size — smaller than a Caprice but bigger than a Celebrity — fits in with the division's mission of being entry level but providing more than the customer expects.

"The other part of our mission statement is to make sure we don't do any boring cars, that whatever we do is exciting and youthful," said Don Lasky, chief designer Chevy 1 Studio. The Venture embodies that new spirit of exciting, youthful design, he said.

A sedan was chosen because Chevrolet sells more sedans than coupes. However, Bob Munson, a designer in the Chevy 1 Studio, noted that the designers took a sporty coupe approach to designing the car rather than a formal sedan approach.

The car has a high rear, long nose, angled sideglass and a lower, faster windshield than most Chevrolets.

Even though it is aerodynamic, it does not have a "jelly bean" look, Lasky noted.

The flavor of the interior is tied into the flavor of the exterior, Lasky said. "There were things formed on the outside that relate to forms on the inside."

The roof is removable glass. The instrumentation is high-tech with voice-activated controls. The car has touch switches rather than a door handle. It is equipped with anti-lock brakes and is designed to accommodate 4wd.

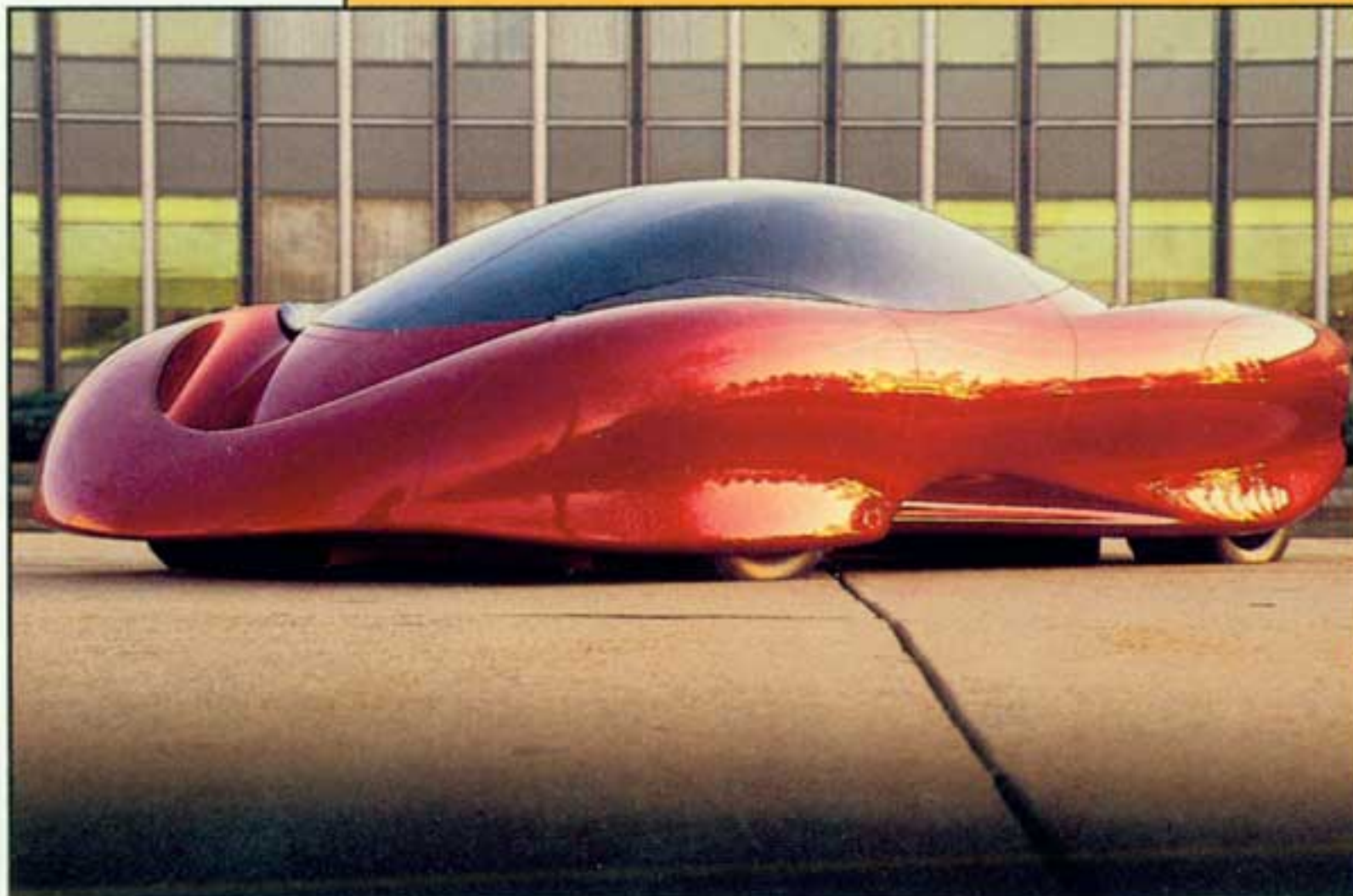
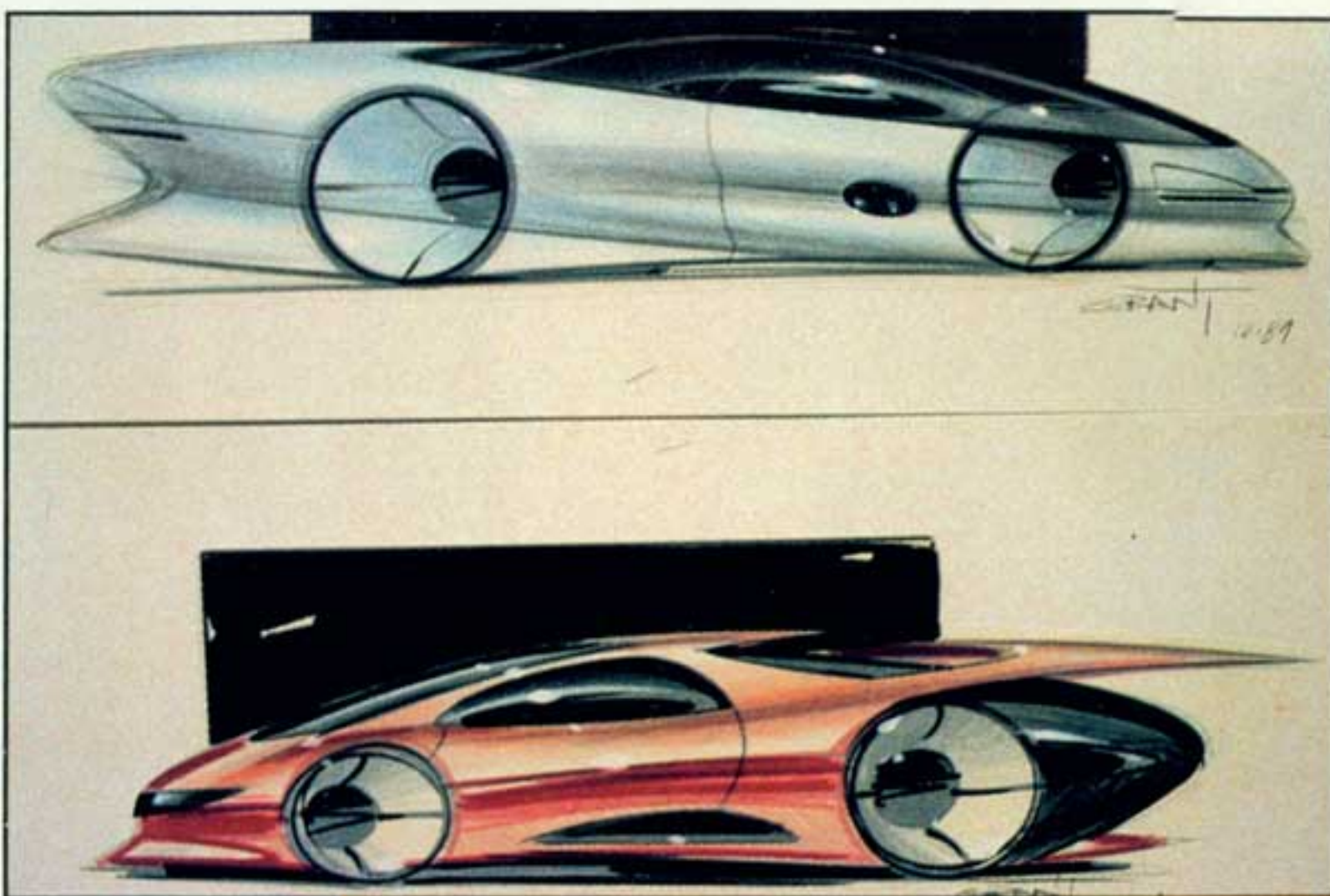
"The Venture fits in with Chevrolet's theme of giving more than the customer expects," Lasky said. The car, for example, is equipped with 17-inch wheels.

There are no present plans to make the Venture as a production vehicle. However, the designers said it was designed so that it was potentially buildable perhaps as early as 1992.

The Pontiac Banshee, a wild 2+2, is a futuristic look at what a Trans Am might be. Even though the Trans Am is not Pontiac's best seller, it certainly qualifies as the division's image leader.

"The Trans Am is the personification of what Pontiac is," Jordan said.

The Banshee, he said, exhibits Pontiac's requirements of being exciting and performance-oriented through aggressive use of materials and shapes. Jordan said the Trans Am should be second only to the Chevrolet Corvette in terms of aggressive design.

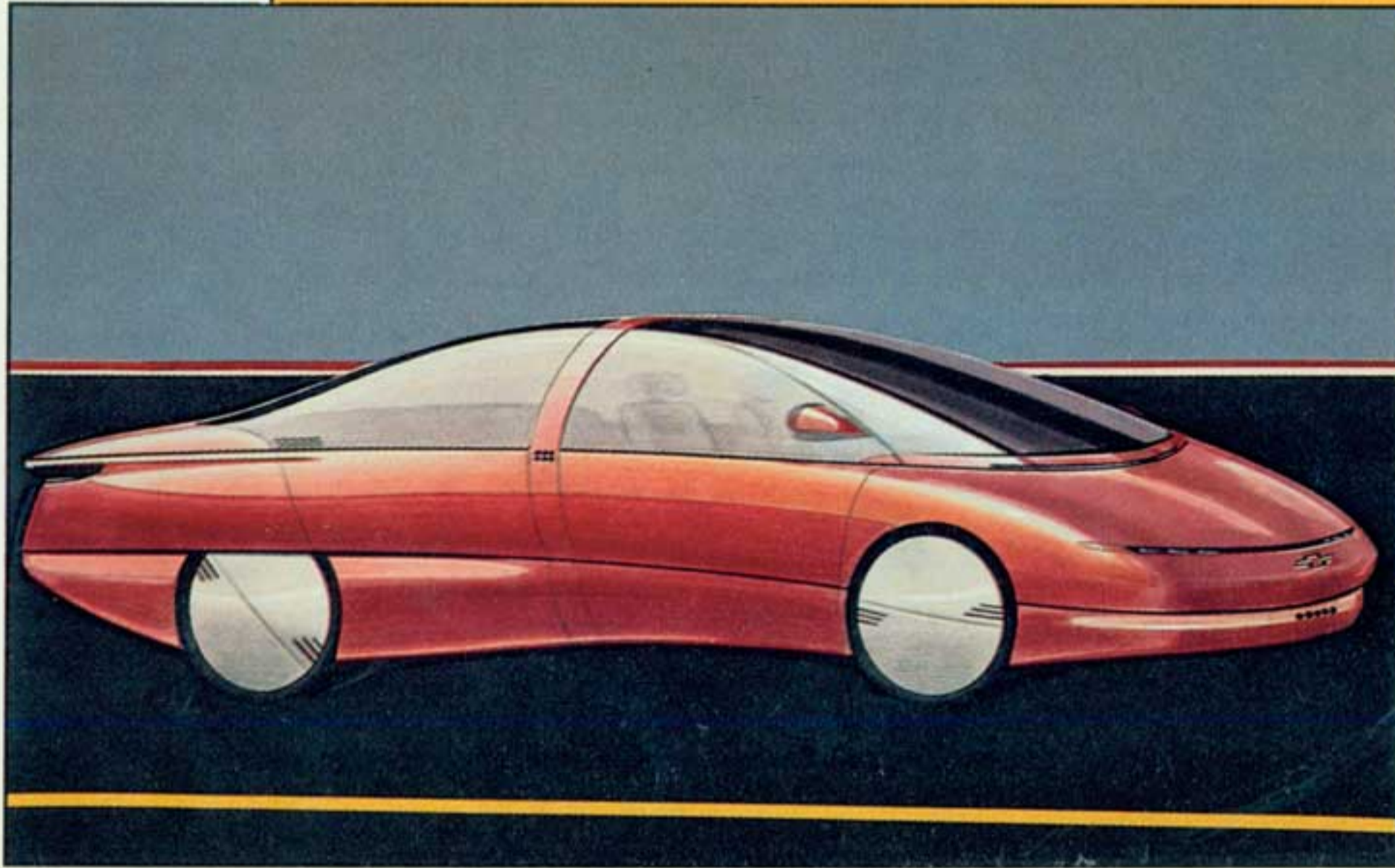


Initial sketch for the SRV-1, top left, envisioned it as the ultimate two-seater. Finished SRV-1, bottom left, is equipped with nearly every high-tech feature.

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Completed Chevrolet Venture is an intermediate-size family sedan.



Early sketches of Chevrolet Venture took a sporty approach to a sedan design.



Venture interior packs in more items than the Chevrolet buyer expects.



SRV-1 seating buck, top right, is surrounded by sketches of the then-named "Stealth." Sculptor works on clay, lower right, with scale model as guide.

Glass, again, is used as if it were sheet metal with the upper part of the car being entirely glass. The car features the distinctively Pontiac sloping front end.

The car remains a front-engine, rear-drive vehicle like today's Trans Am.

The interior focuses on being driver-oriented, part of Pontiac's theme. It is equipped with a steering wheel with controls on the pod, much like some production Pontiacs.

Oldsmobile's image will be represented by the Aerotech at the New York Show.

The premise of the Aerotech was an engineering project more than a design exercise. The car was built to test the new Quad 4 engine to its limits. The Quad 4 is GM's new multi-valve engine. A souped-up version of the production engine broke a world speed record at Indianapolis Motor Speedway with A.J. Foyt at the wheel.

"Form followed function more than usual because the car had an assignment," said David North, chief designer of Oldsmobile 2 Studio, "and that was to run as fast as we could make this car run. The assignment wasn't to make it pretty."

Nonetheless, North and Ed Welburn, his assistant and designer of the Aerotech, said the car's design fits Oldsmobile's image of contemporary and original design. Some design cues from the Aerotech, and more particularly upcoming versions of the Aerotech, are finding their way into Oldsmobiles of the 1990s.

"We have a car in the studio now," North said. "It's a replace-

ment for a production car for the 1990s. You can see some of (the Aerotech) in it such as the aero influence and the smooth integrated shape — one shape being the whole design of the car, not with pieces tacked on."

The Aerotech and cars that follow in its footsteps are designed to appeal to younger buyers, North said, adding that that must be one of Oldsmobile's goals to succeed in the future.

"Oldsmobile's image is kind of an older person's car," North said, "and it's very critical to our success that we attract younger buyers. Younger buyers are very astute on cars. . . . Unless we can come out with cars specifically aimed at those people, we're not going to be successful in the marketplace."

The Centaur, GMC's representative image vehicle, was an exercise in looking at a truck in a whole new way. Despite improvements in trucks, the configuration of the engine in the front, cab for two or three persons and a long bed in the back has remained unchanged since the birth of trucks.

However, the Centaur is entirely different. It is equipped with a mid-engine; the engine is behind the passenger compartment. It can carry five passengers; two in the front and three in the car-like rear seat. The rear seat is a 60/40 split. The Centaur still has a traditional truck bed for load carrying.

The interior takes a new approach with big buttons and switches but maintains a truck-like feel, said Jim Brinkerhoff, the interior designer of the Centaur.

The idea, he said, was to make the buttons and switches large and

easy to reach so the driver can use the controls without taking his or her eyes off the road.

The SRV-1, which loosely represents Group Lotus, now owned by GM, will not be displayed in its entirety at the New York show. One room at the show will be set up as a working design studio showing the latest equipment used in the design process and tools that ultimately will help speed up the lead-time for making new vehicles.

The SRV-1 will be the vehicle on the design tables. Half of the car will be completed; the other half will be in the full-size clay model stage with sculptors working on the model.

Clark Lincoln, chief designer of Advance Studio 2, said the SRV-1, known internally at GM as "The Stealth," was designed to be the ultimate advanced two-seater sports vehicle.

The car is equipped with virtually every advanced high technology feature being used or under consideration by the auto industry — anti-lock brakes, four valves per cylinder, turbocharger, drive-by-wire, voice-activated controls, active suspension, head-up display, night vision, a navigation system and rear vision using video cameras.

The SRV-1 has no steering wheel; rather, it has left-hand and right-hand sticks for steering. The sticks also double as the electric shift lever for the manual transmission.

The car has an elaborate communications system programmed to specific voices and to respond either by audio or video.