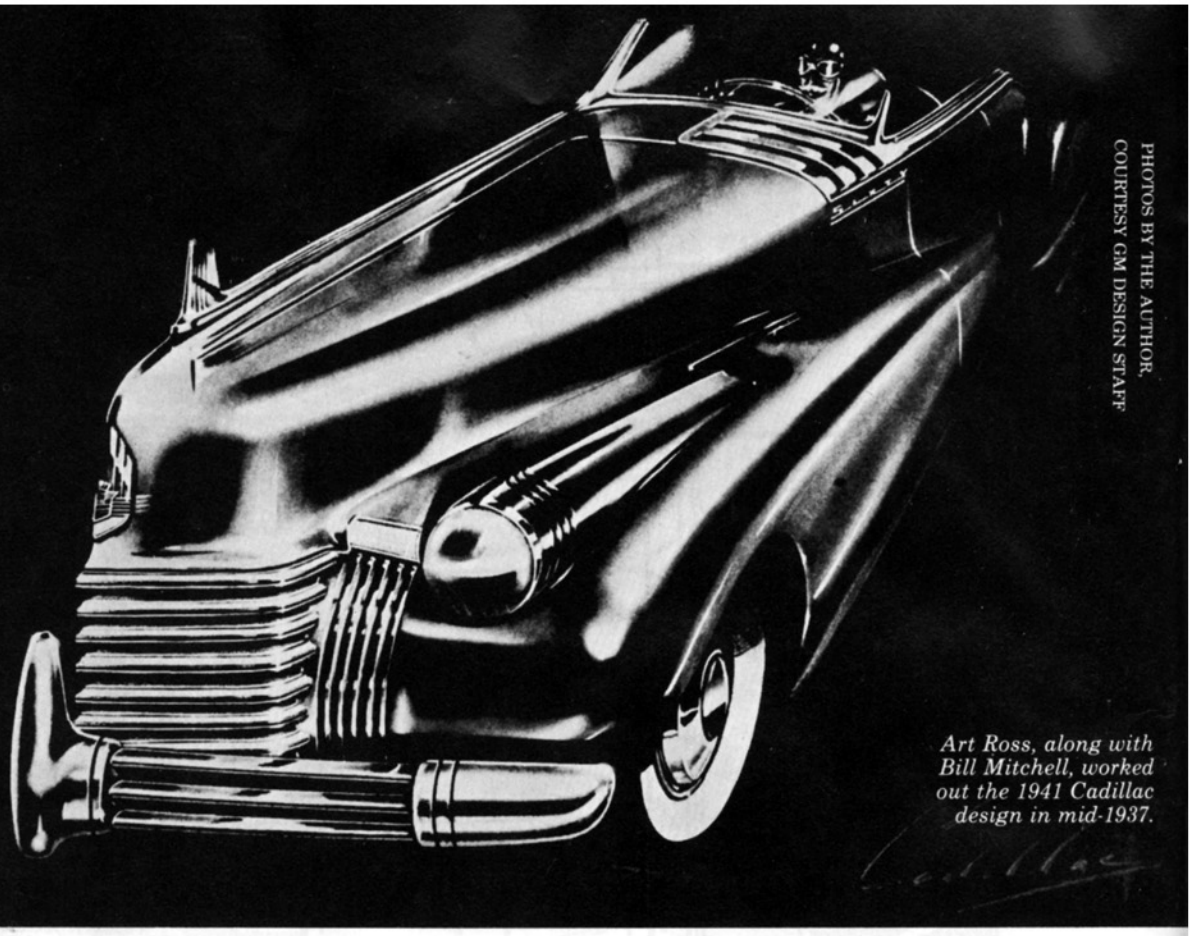
Harley Earl's Scrapbooks

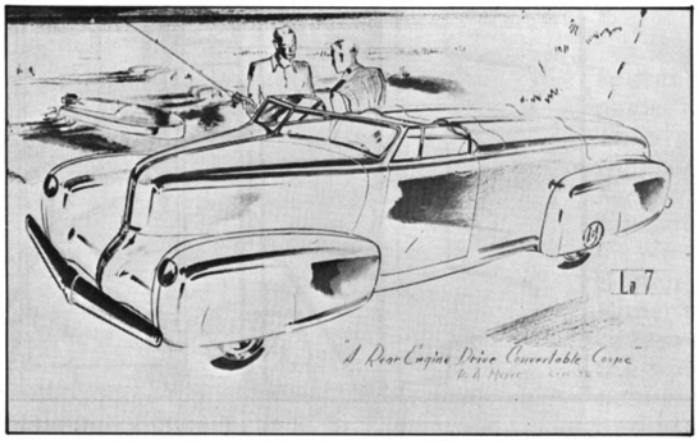


PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR, COURTESY GM DESIGN STAFF

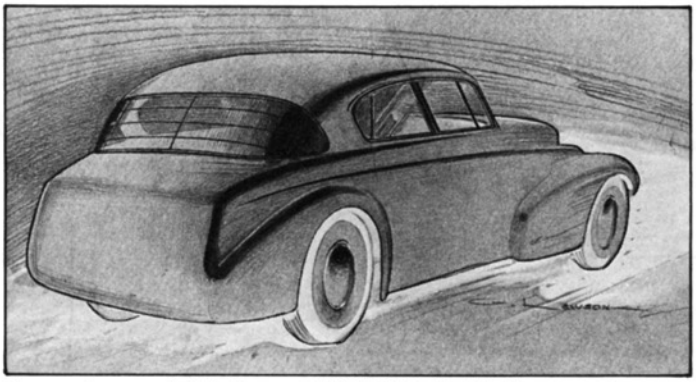
Art Ross, along with Bill Mitchell, worked out the 1941 Cadillac design in mid-1937.

Fabulous design studies from GM's 1935-40 styling staff.

by Michael Lamm, ***Editor***



In an advanced studio, Paul Meyer rendered this mid-engined LaSalle in 1936. Meyer is credited with '37 Buick.



George Lawson's fabulous untitled 1937 sketch shows roof similar to 1953 Studebaker & early '60s Rootes Group cars.

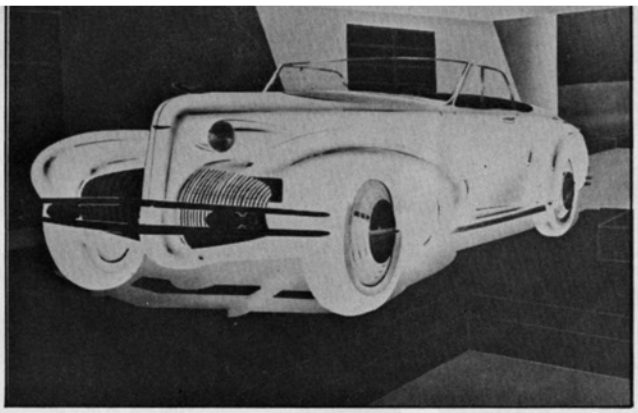
In the great spelunking and archeologizing tradition of issues past*, SIA brings you another original find from the digs of automotive history. Precisely what we have here, though, remains something of a puzzle.

These pictures come from three black 3-ring binders that presently reside in the General Motors Design Center library. The binders are called *The Harley Earl Scrapbooks,* although it's not at all certain that Harley Earl put them together. Nor does anyone yet know why they were put together. In a nutshell, the story behind them is this.

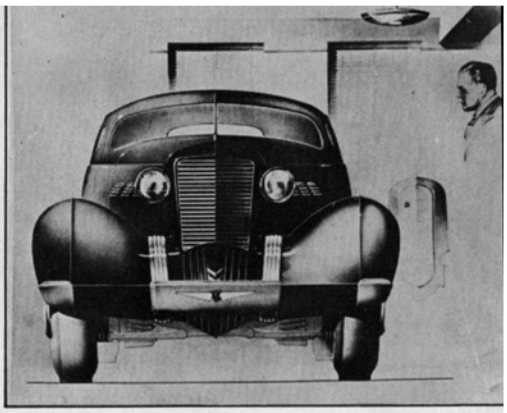
About four years ago, the late Warren (Fitz) Fitzgerald was supervisor of automotive information services at the GM Design Center. Fitz had an interest in automotive history and a gift for writing about cars, especially classics, that very few people could match. He'd written regularly for ROAD & TRACK, he co-authored a book on Ferrari, was doing a history of Porsche, had been a college professor, had been a chief GM designer himself; he held a patent on the GTO urethane bumper; he was one of the founders of the Classic Car Club of America and of the Ferrari Club of America; he used to emcee at many old-car

*For previous auto-archeological discoveries, see *Fantastic Ford Finds,* SIA #2; *Stude Graveyard,* SIA #6; *Ford Experimental Engines,* SIA #19; *GM's X-Cars,* SIA #8; *Wartime MoPars,* SIA #5; *Airflow Prototypes,* SIA #16; *Chevy's Cashiered Postwar Light Car,* SIA #20; *MoPar's Star Cars,* SIA #10; and a host of similar articles.

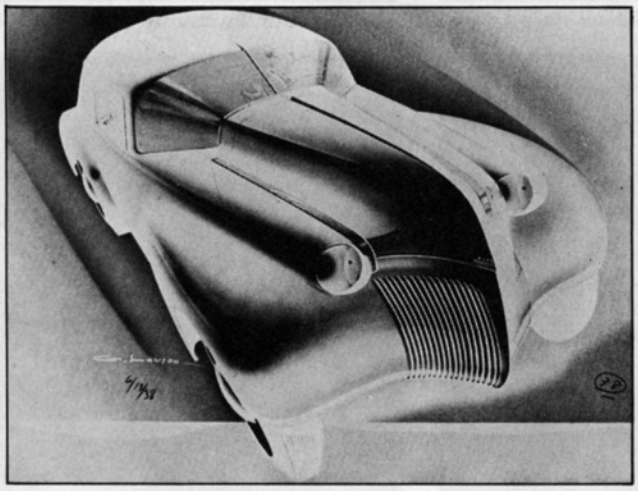
Harley J. Earl



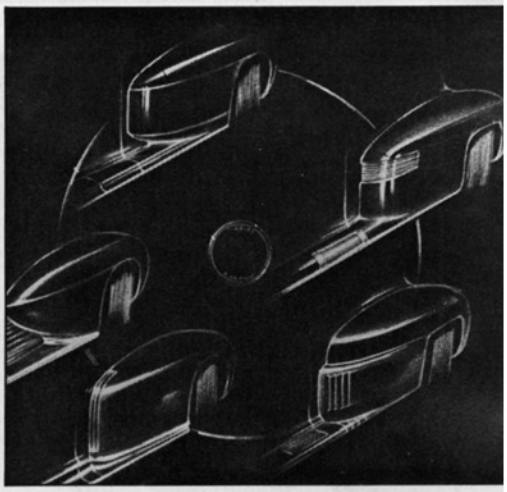
Jon Hauser's 1938 proposal for a low, lithe Cadillac.



Joe Shemansky placed Earl into sketch.



A Lawson Cadillac with wraparound windshield.



Roy Brown, later to head Edsel Studio, did fender studies as a young designer.

events in and around Detroit; in short, he was an amazing and very impressive person in many, many ways.

On one of my trips to GM, Fitz invited me to take a quick peek through these three black scrapbooks. He'd pulled them from a filing cabinet somewhere on the mezzanine of the GM Design Center library. Fitz called these binders simply *The Harley Earl Scrapbooks,* but he didn't elaborate.

I was bowled over, naturally. Here were these wild drawings—hundreds of them: the most fantastic stuff I'd ever seen. As I say, Fitz gave me just a quick look, and then we moved on to other things in the library. The place was crammed with old photos, drawings, brochures, literature files, some huge leather-bound Motorama display books, a few formal styling presentations, etc., etc. *The Harley Earl Scrapbooks* were only a part of that dazzling collection. I felt like a tourist in King Solomon's mines.

I later asked Fitz whether SIA might someday do an article—or several articles—on some of this material. He asked me to be patient, and I then got the feeling that he himself wanted to write about the scrapbooks and other items he was showing me. He didn't say that in so many words, but he left little doubt, and I respected the message. After all, no one would ever be more qualified as a researcher, historian, and writer.

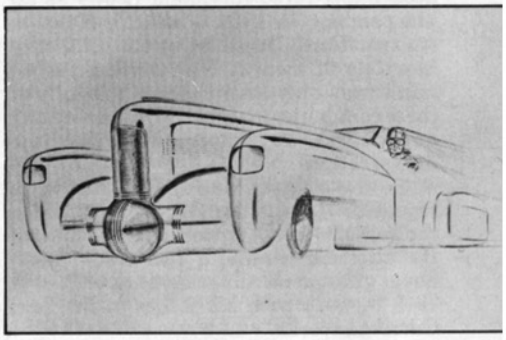
But just a few months later, on Oct. 6, 1972, Warren Fitzgerald died of cancer. He died very suddenly, and it was a great shock and loss to everyone who'd known him.

After that, I slowly began working up the courage to ask other people inside GM what they knew about the scrapbooks. At first, it seemed that the binders had disappeared. No one could find them, at least not where I'd remembered them. The search went on for about two years, and then finally they showed up.

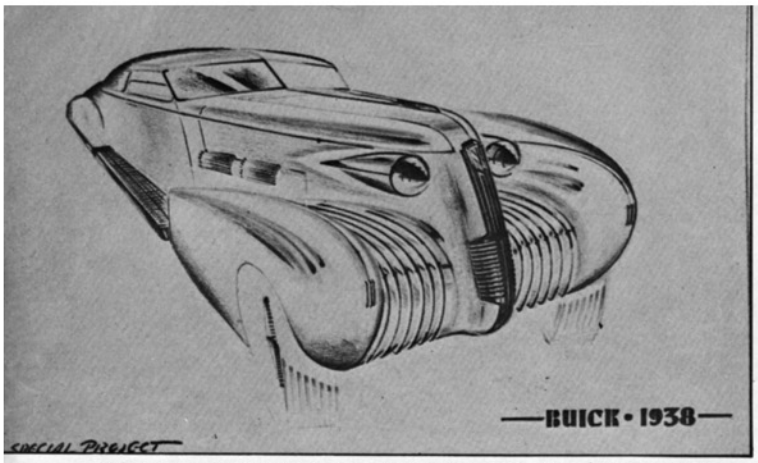
Last winter I flew back to Detroit and photocopied about 200—approximately half—the drawings inside these scrapbooks. Since that time I've been trying to find out what the scrapbooks mean: who compiled them and why. What were they used for? What historical significance should we attach to them? Why were these 400-odd drawings photostated and saved when thousands upon thousands more were tossed out? These are all questions I've so far been unable to answer, although I have gotten numerous opinions from several quite knowledgeable people. But before I go into the theories, I'd like to talk about Harley Earl and his tremendous impact on automotive design, not just at GM but throughout the industry—and his direct influence on the sale of some 50 million GM cars plus his indirect influence on the sale of untold millions of competitive makes. Because as Harley Earl went, so went the industry.

"Our father who art in Styling, Harley be thy name." That early bit of insiders' humor soon became a liturgy, repeated over and over by successive generations of designers both inside and outside GM. Most good designers either got their training there or at least passed through:

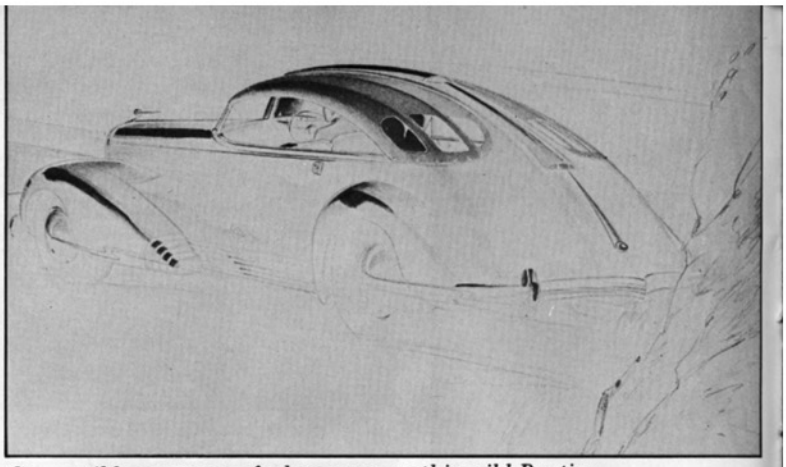
Buick Century coupe by unknown artist.



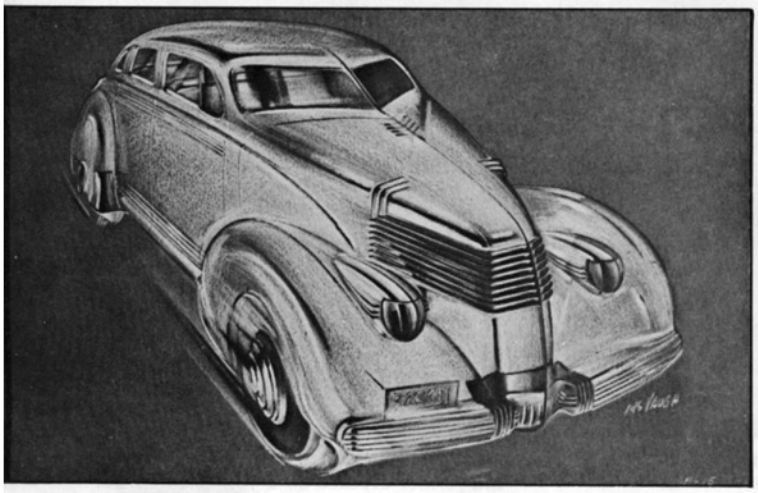
Jon Hauser suggested fwd 1938 LaSalle.



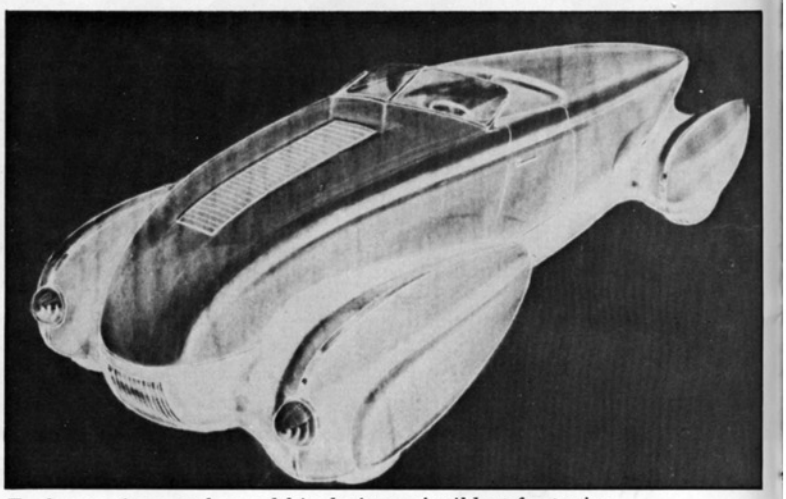
Always lots of action and stretch in Bill Mitchell's sketches.



Convertible canvas roof edges open on this wild Pontiac.



To Earl, tall hoods implied powerful engines.



Earl sometimes welcomed his designers' wildest fantasies.

Scrapbooks *continued*

Buehrig, Hibbard, Mitchell, Jordan, Holls, Rybicki, Kaptur, Hershey, Exner, Reinhart, Teague, Bordinat, and hundreds more—the Art & Colour alums make up a *Who's Who* of the design industry.

And being a finite, rather tight-knit industry in which everyone knows everyone else, Harley Earl became very much styling's father. He set up the first major corporate styling department, and the people who passed through then fanned out and set up other corporate styling adjuncts patterned very much along GM lines. In other words, Harley Earl got his commission at GM in 1927; then Chrysler set up its own Art & Colour section in 1932—a much smaller version; Ford established an even tinier styling section under Bob Gregorie in 1935; Studebaker hired Raymond Loewy as an independent in 1936; Packard, Hudson, Auburn/Cord/Duesenberg, etc., had only handfuls of men at their styling tables; and it was only after the war that any of these companies (except GM) made styling an integral, big, important part of the organization.

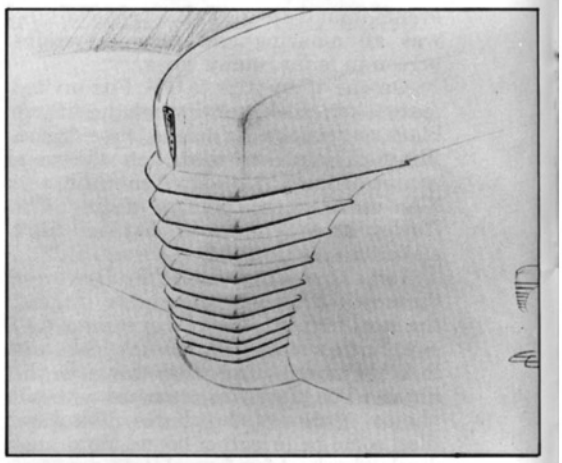
So the story of Harley Earl has to be repeated. He was born on Nov. 22, 1893, the son of a Los Angeles carriage maker. He attended Stanford, ran track there, never graduated, and went back to L.A. in 1918 to work with his father in the Earl Carriage Works.

His dad began doing custom automobile bodies for movie stars and starlets, getting quite a bit of business through Don Lee Motors, the Hollywood Cadillac dealer-distributor. Don Lee hired young Harley in 1919 to design custom cars, setting him up as general manager of the Don Lee Coach and Body Corp.

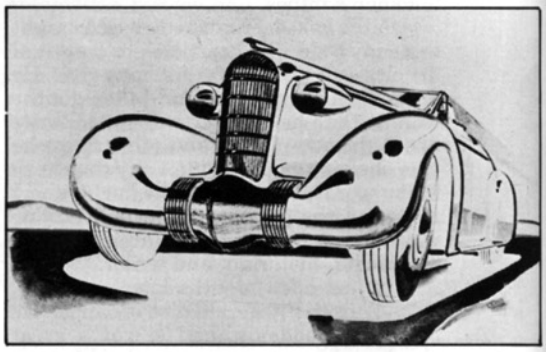
In late 1925, Lawrence P. Fisher, who was head of Cadillac Motor Div. at that time, paid visits to various distributors and dealers around the country, among them Don Lee Cadillac in Hollywood. In talking about custom-bodied Cadillacs, Lee showed Fisher his shops and introduced him to Harley. Fisher was impressed, especially since young Earl was using clay models to show clients the shapes and forms of what their finished cars would look like. Harley was also pioneering the blending of such elements as fenders, cowls, runningboards, lamps, etc., into an integrated whole.

Fisher arranged a meeting between Earl and GM president Alfred P. Sloan Jr., and Sloan was similarly impressed. Early in 1926, Sloan and Fisher decided to hire Earl specifically to design the car that became the 1927 LaSalle. That car made its debut in Mar. 1927 and became an instant success—a fact Mr. Sloan attributed (probably correctly) to the car's styling. Sloan was so pleased that on June 23, 1927, he and GM's executive committee established the Art & Colour section, with Earl as its head. The initial charter called for hiring 10 full-time designers plus 40 supporting personnel.

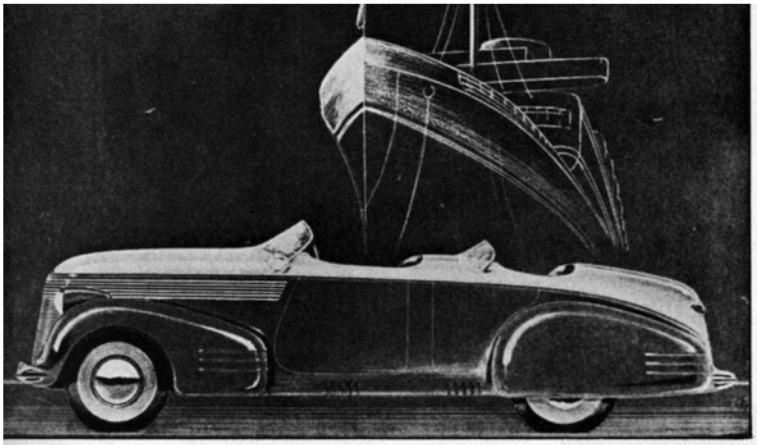
Alfred Sloan was one of those men who, early on, recognized styling as a prime mover of automobiles—*the* leading stimulant of showroom sales. Sloan men-



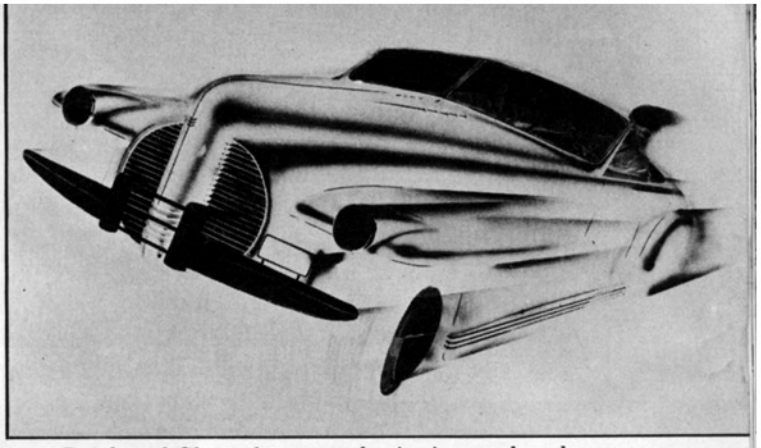
Cord 810 influenced GM considerably. Ed Anderson, later AMC design head, did this Olds proposal in 1936.



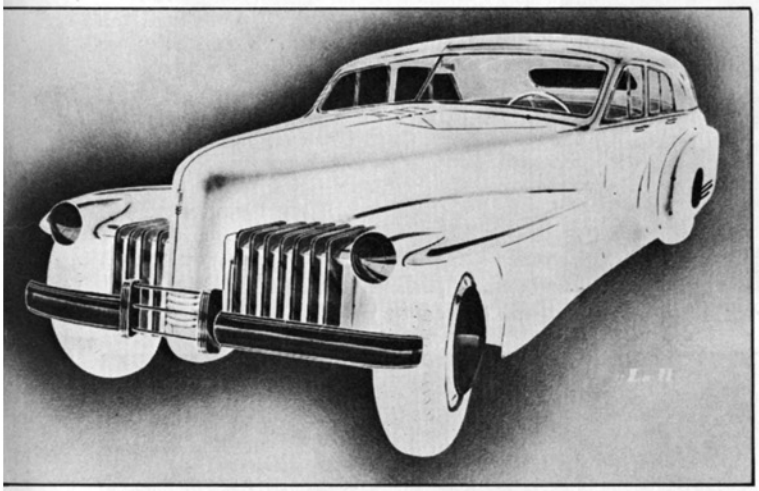
Fwd Miller axle rubbed off at Buick.



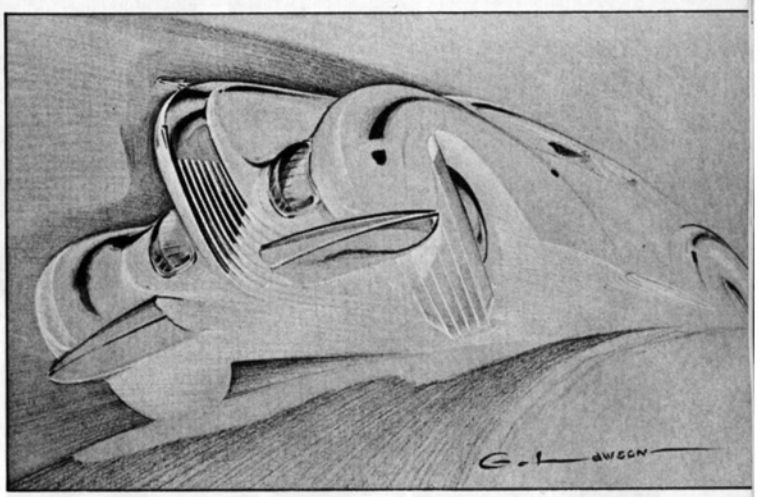
Boattail Pontiac phaeton by T-Bird designer Frank Hershey.



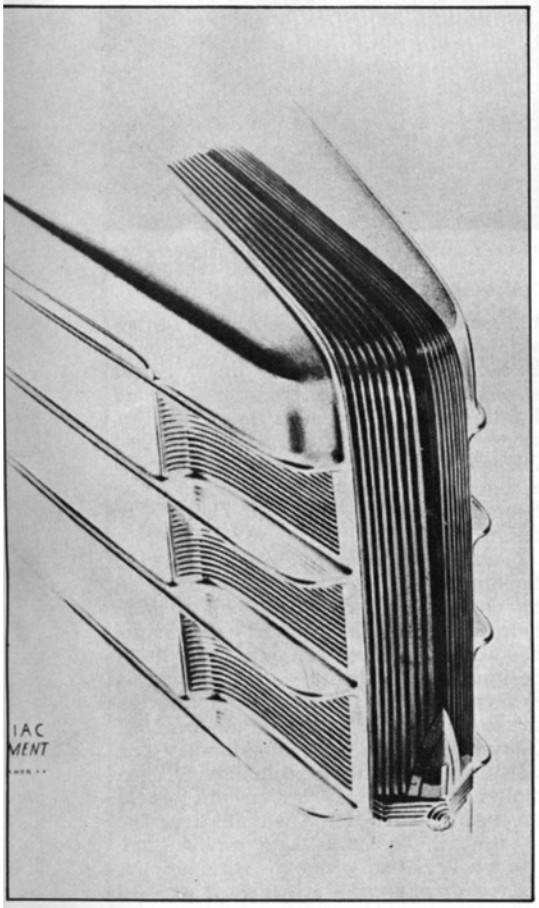
1940 Buick and Chevy fronts are beginning to show here.



Check the new Pontiacs to see where these catwalks ended up.



Lawson's almost angry rendering uses worm-eye perspective.



Total control, beautiful detail mark Pontiac grille by young Virgil Exner!

tions in his book *My Years with General Motors* (Doubleday & Co., 1963): "The consumer [takes] for granted the varied engineering excellence of all competitive makes of cars, and so his shopping is strongly influenced by variations in style." As an early advocate of annual styling change, Sloan put great stock into the selling power of appearance. He foresaw the day when Styling would reign supreme. "At the close of World War II," he wrote, "we made the projection that for an indefinite period the principal attractions of the [automobile] would be appearance, automatic transmissions, and high-compression engines, in that order; and that has been the case."(It became the case partly because Sloan believed in it so strongly and was in a position to shape the outcome of his own prophesies.)

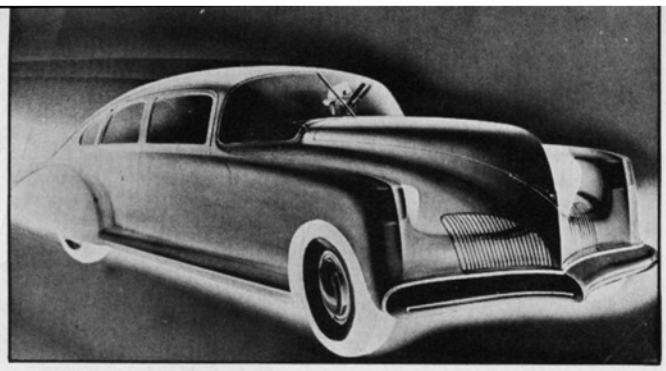
Setting up an Art & Colour section was one thing; getting it accepted within GM proved a little harder. It was only with the patronage of Mr. Sloan, Lawrence Fisher, engineering vice president O.E. Hunt, and other GM higher-ups that Art & Colour flourished. Since styling dictated some aspects of engineering, particularly body engineering, an armed truce grew up between the two departments and, of course, it still holds today.

In outlining the function of Art & Colour, Sloan wrote: "The degree to which styling changes should be made in any one model run presents a particularly delicate problem. The changes in the new model should be so novel and attractive as to create demand for the new value and, so to speak, create a certain amount of dissatisfaction with past models as compared with the new one, and yet the current and old models must still be capable of giving satisfaction to the vast used-car market. Each line of General Motors cars produced should preserve a distinction of appearance, so that one knows on sight a Chevrolet, a Pontiac, an Oldsmobile, a Buick, or a Cadillac. The design must be competitive in the market."

Harley Earl was a big man—6-foot-5 and imposing. He wore pink shirts with light blue suits and white shoes when everyone else in the business world had on grey flannel. He stood out in crowds and didn't mind a bit.

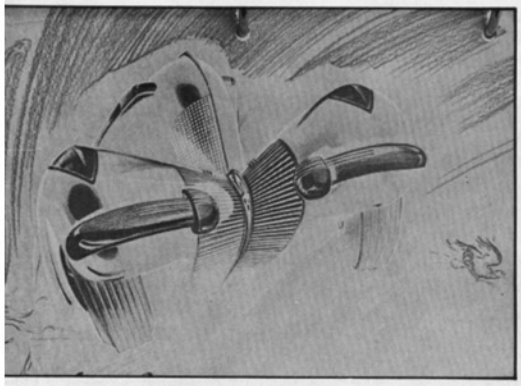
What Earl did in GM Art & Colour (the name became GM Styling in 1934 and was finally changed to GM Design Staff in 1972) remains a topic that could fill a book—as could what he didn't do. He was never a designer in the pencil-pushing sense of the word. He didn't sketch and he occasionally had a hard time explaining what he wanted. Many people who worked under him say he didn't know exactly what he wanted, especially in his later years.

What he did do, though, was to establish the studio system—one for each division plus advanced and special projects. He dreamed up competitions between the various stylists and studios, and this was one way he assured himself of pulling the best work out of everyone. He did do that, although sometimes it took 1800 sketches of a single tail lamp to get to the final one. Says John Foster, who worked in the Olds studio before WW-II,

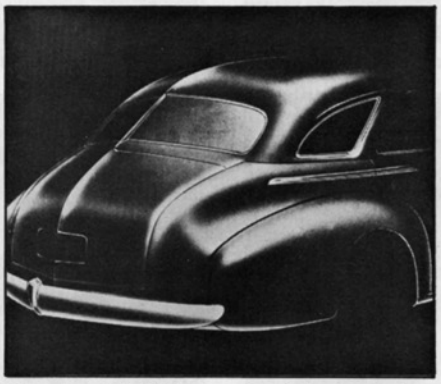


Much Zephyr and some Silver Arrow influence in this drawing.

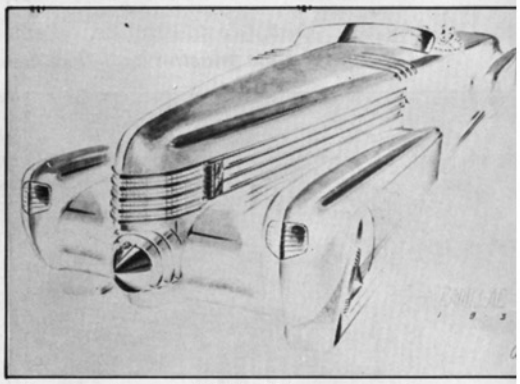
And occasionally a touch of humor to break the tension.



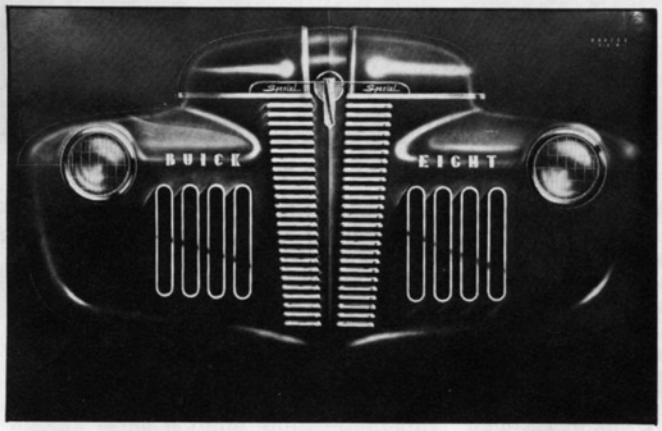
Imploded Olds front by unknown artist.

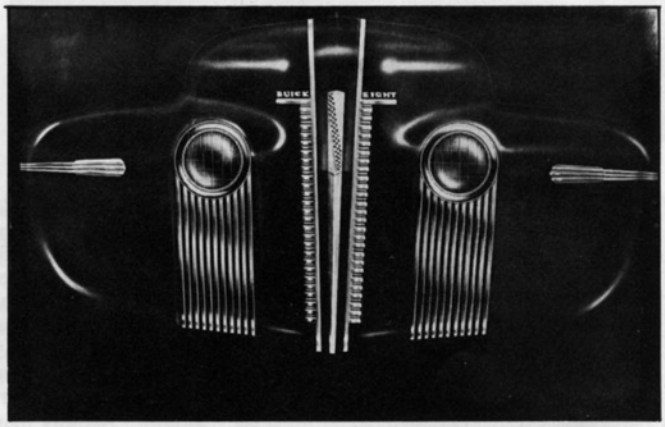


Strother MacMinn's crisp A-body deck.

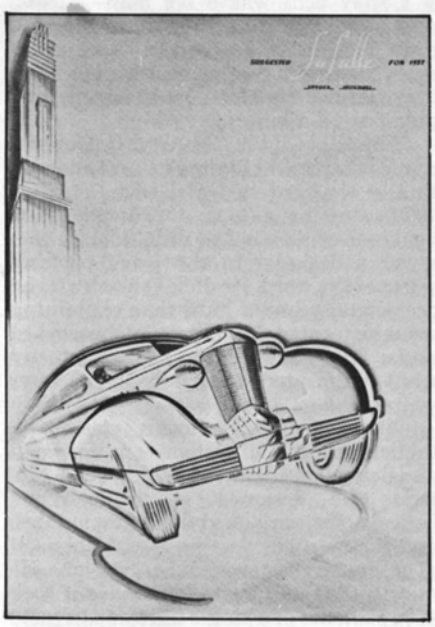


Six miles long and lots of louvers.





The '41 Buick begins to take shape in these full-scale airbrush renderings dated 5/39. Earl held contests to shake out best designs.



Snyder-Mitchell '37 Olds with fwd.

Scrapbooks

continued

"My biggest recollection is of details—doing 1800 tail lights and 400 hood ornaments and 300 side ornaments; hubcaps by the hundreds—there always seemed to be an indecisive area where nobody could really decide what a thing should look like."

Earl had some fairly fixed theories of car design. One that he voiced publicly in 1954: "My primary purpose for 28 years has been to lengthen and lower the American automobile, at times in reality and always at least in appearance. Why? Because my sense of proportion tells me that oblongs are more attractive than squares...."

Earl also believed in tall hoods as reflecting big, powerful engines. He believed in keeping bumpers massive and low, because the large expanse of chrome would draw the eye downward and make the whole car look lower.

It was Earl's effort—and in some ways his genius—that gave distinctive design symbols and easy-to-recognize ornamentation to GM's five car lines. Silver streaks, for example, traditionally said Pontiac. Portholes meant Buick. Tailfins were Cadillac. Rockets symbolized Oldsmobile—all this being instantly recognizable from half a block away despite quite a bit of body interchangeability.

And Earl believed in the use of trim and appliques to hide poor body repairs when his cars got dented. His idea here was to help GM makes keep their value in the used-car market—something most designers don't think about. Take this example: the broad, ribbed appliques on the front and rear fenders of top-line 1941 Chevrolets. These vulnerable fenders took the brunt of minor collisions. When crunched, the body repairman would inevitably leave some waviness in the sheetmetal. To compensate, a new applique would not only hide the waviness but tended to draw the eye toward its own smoothness and away from the bumped

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fender's imperfection. That's only one example, but Earl often insisted on trim for that reason.

At any rate, no matter how he arrived at them, Harley Earl's decisions usually stuck. He put on a good show for management and got along beautifully with GM's higher-ups. The divisions were all his clients, their general managers standing in line for Earl's best designs.

One thing Earl *wasn't* was a compiler of scrapbooks. From what I've heard, he simply didn't do that sort of thing. So we're back to the questions, Where did these particular binders come from, and why?

As I say, I've gotten several theories, but I must stress that theories they are. These come from various people inside and outside GM; some active, some retired.

The predominant theory is that Harley Earl had the scrapbooks put together as a handy desk reference to both sketching techniques and specific design forms. For example, suppose he wanted to explain to his Chevrolet studio head something he'd seen and liked in Oldsmobile. Instead of describing or sketching it, he could pull out the scrapbook and show more or less what he had in mind. So in a way, the scrapbooks might have been catalogues of design ideas and sketch styles.

Another theory says that the scrapbooks preserved the work of Earl's best or favorite designers—the most innovative and creative of his various staffs. William L. (Bill) Mitchell, who became Earl's successor, is heavily represented in these books, always with lots of wild action in his cars, always the cars cornering at speed, often with dramatic prespective to heighten the effect of motion.

A third theory hinges on the fact that GM Styling moved from its quarters in the research annex behind the downtown GM Building out to the GM Technical Center in Warren, Mich. This happened after WW-II. During that move, hundreds and perhaps thousands of old styling drawings got tossed out. It might have been that someone—perhaps Harley Earl—decided to save some for posterity by having selected sketches photostated and put into binders. What criteria entered for choosing or rejecting certain designs no one knows. And whether there might originally have been more than just the three scrapbooks comes as another intriguing possibility.

Whatever the case, it's good that someone *did* compile and save this extraordinary work. The scrapbooks make a fascinating sampler of what went through the minds of GM designers in those formative years of Art & Colour and GM Styling. The historical importance of these books isn't so much in the drawings themselves as in the thinking they represent. □

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