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MICHIGAN MODERN  
 DESIGN THAT SHAPED AMERICA

ARNOLD & CONWAY



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edited by AMY L. ARNOLD and BRIAN D. CONWAY

# MICHIGAN MODERN

DESIGN THAT SHAPED AMERICA

This volume shines well-deserved light on Michigan's role in the development of Modernism, not only in America but worldwide. Throughout the twentieth century a multitude of architects and designers, including Albert Kahn, Emil Lorch, Eliel Saarinen, Harley Earl, Eero Saarinen, Charles Eames, George Nelson, Alexander Girard, Florence Schust Knoll, Minoru Yamasaki, Alden B. Dow, and Ruth Adler Schnee; academic institutions such as Cranbrook Academy of Art and the University of Michigan architecture program; and companies like Herman Miller and General Motors have contributed to America's outstanding Modern legacy.

In Michigan, the Bauhaus ideal of bringing quality design to the machine age became a reality. The home of Henry Ford's assembly line, Michigan pioneered the introduction of design to mass production in automobiles, furniture, and buildings, ushering in a new age. Its products touched nearly every aspect of American life. Michigan's design and manufacturing innovations resulted in social changes as well as the ideas and products that became synonymous with the American dream.

An impressive array of contributors tells the story of how Michigan shaped Modern America. Through scholarly exploration, interviews, reminiscences, and photographs the incredible Michigan Modern story is unveiled. Its breadth will surprise you.

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Harley Earl introduced clay modeling to automobile design. Here he stands next to a wood and clay model of the 1951 Buick LeSabre concept car. Courtesy General Motors.

The Fishers were impressed with Earl's approach to car design. Among his talents was the use of modeling clay to develop the forms of the diverse components. In some of his creations Earl was also designing the complete automobile, molding the hood, fenders, lights, and other ingredients into a unified whole rather than a collection of unrelated parts.

Alfred Sloan, of course, knew that. His job as president was to know all such things. He had more to talk about—the idea of styling that he had carried in a corner of his mind for so long, the idea whose time had come to translate into action. In the Fisher brothers, long-visioned as he himself was, Sloan found ready response, hearty acquiescence. He picked up the phone and asked for Los Angeles.

The next day, Harley Earl got on a transcontinental train and started east to meet with Sloan and the Fishers. Discussions followed.

Earl told the editors of *Automobile Quarterly* in 1967:

About 1926, Cadillac thought coming through with the LaSalle and several people had worked on it to create what they wanted. They had a price on the car and they wanted it not to be quite as conservative as the Cadillac. They were shooting at more of a two-car family; that was their philosophy. Fred Fisher recommended that they permit me to do one, just to get a different angle. That's when Larry Fisher came into the picture and he asked me to come back to Detroit and talk to him about it. I was just to be a consultant for Cadillac. When you are a designer, you kind of think, 'Well, if I were building one for myself from the chassis up, what would I do?' The Hispano was a car I was deeply in love with, from stem to stern. I didn't want to take too big a chance and do something that didn't look like anything.<sup>1</sup>

Earl returned and sketched a few designs, after which time the executives asked him to stay and finish it. "The models and sketches took about three months, from sketch to mock-up," Earl said. "Mr. Sloan brought in the heads of the departments and asked if they saw anything that would be a problem, like tearing the dies and salvage problems. They went over it very thoroughly and said they would make some little dies and stretch metals. They didn't have any trouble. After a full-size dog was completed, Mr. Fisher gave me a trip to the Paris automobile show, as a sort of token. It was my second trip abroad."

That trip to Paris introduced Earl to his beloved Hispano-Suiza, the curvy lines of which were soon found on the drawing boards in the Cadillac studios, and thus the lovely LaSalle was created.

So it was that 1927 marked the beginning of the modern automobile as we know it today, from the styling viewpoint at least. Designing the automobile was a modest activity until the advent of the stylists, largely attributed by many historians to the birth of GM's Art and Colour Section led by Earl.

## Lightning Strikes More Than Twice

All that the GM design studios had accomplished through the late 1950s—and indeed has passed on to the modern studios at GM—has been due to its people. They were capable and alert and eager. They breathed ambition. From the beginning, in the ill-equipped first floor of the Annex Building, the Art and Colour Section staff were intent on doing the best job that could possibly be done, damn the odds.

The men came from all over the map—from Atlanta, from New York, from Europe. The common denominator was a love for automobiles and the work the section was doing to make them better. Early on, Howard O'Leary, Earl's chief administrator, hired them. He chose them wisely. He was ever on the lookout for talented people, and he ferreted them out with canny intuition. He read an article by Jules Andrade on the techniques for modeling cars, and he wrote him and offered him a place. He listened to Ivan Gustafson relate his experience with wood modeling, and he persuaded him to come to GM to try clay. He inquired around town for people who had blackboard experience, and that was how Vince Kaptur happened to come in. He hired Rudy Potocnik to work on the bench in the woodshop, and a day later made him into a draftsman. He heard about Bill Mitchell from friends who had seen Mitchell's automobile design concepts.

All these names, and many more, can be seen on those now-classic, treasured design prints.

Hiring procedures were anything but conventional. When Art Ross came to the section for an interview in 1935, he forgot to bring his portfolio, which included drawings prepared for Duesenberg. Ross was directed to a drafting table and instructed to draw anything that came to mind. Three hours later, Ross began his twenty-four-year design career with GM. Some of the design elements sketched during his three-hour crash audition were, in fact, used on the 1937 Buick.

Virgil Exner was hired in 1933. According to Exner's son, Virgil Exner Jr., a design legend in his own right, his father joined Art and Colour at a time when older talent from shuttered coachbuilders were being supplemented with fresh, young faces. Exner Sr., with some advertising experience, was one of them. Art and Colour was "not formalized in any way," according to Exner, "with a philosophy yet to be developed, and so it gave birth to a great variety of design which General Motors was—consciously at that time—promoting their products to make each one of them different. So it was just a natural pool that developed there." Exner's first report was to Frank Hershey, head of the Pontiac studio; Exner would go on to head the Buick studio.



Employee dining room, General Motors Technical Center, Warren, Michigan. Photographer: James Haefner. Courtesy General Motors.

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The twenty-eight essays presented here showcase Michigan's contributions to Modernism in architecture, automobile styling, design education, home and office furnishings, textile design, and recreation, from its early beginnings to its postwar explosion. Contributors include nationally recognized scholars, children of renowned designers, and experts in Michigan design heritage, as well as artists, architects, and designers from the period and today.

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