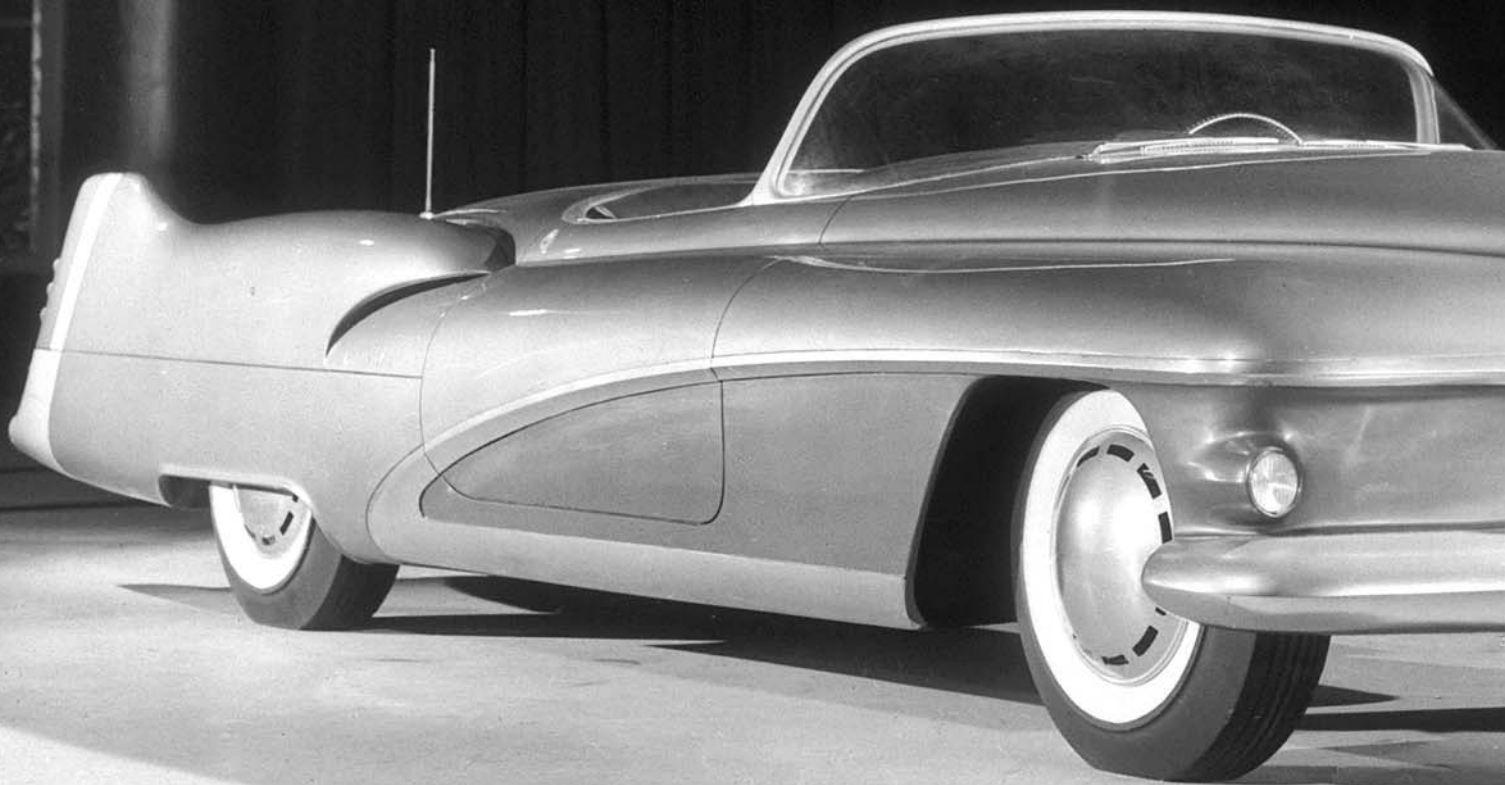


The Lost Legacy of Harley Earl

By David Willson



Harley Earl stands next to a full-sized clay model of the Le Sabre concept car during a 1950 photo session for advanced publicity. The working concept car toured America beginning in 1951.



All images provided by General Motors unless otherwise noted.

How many times have you heard the phrase “As GM goes, so goes the nation”?

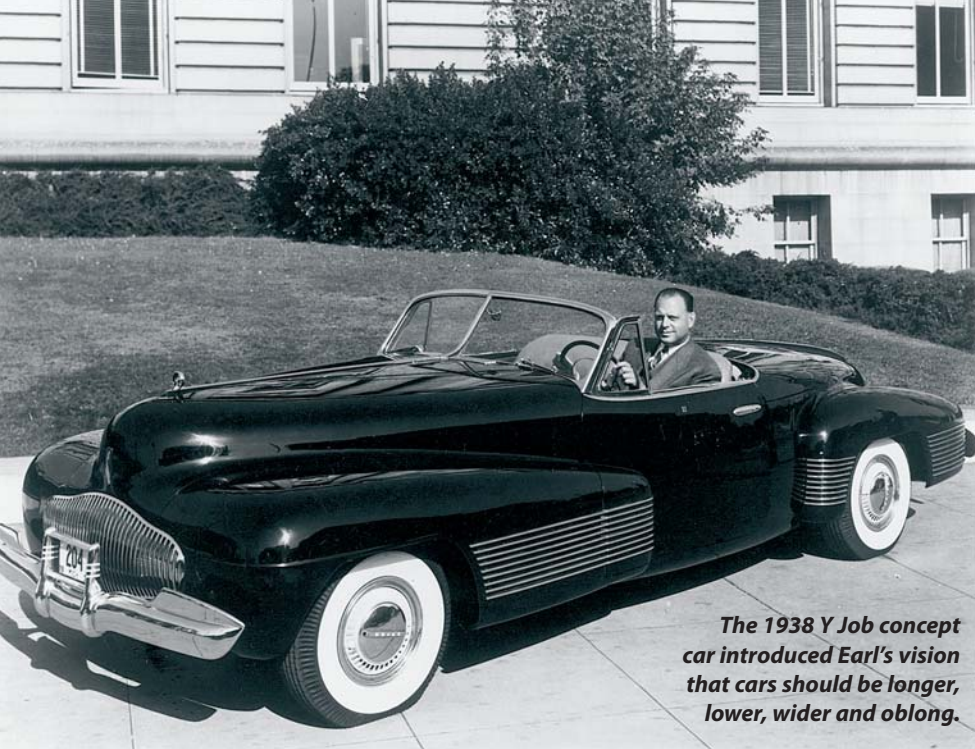
How often have you come across someone referring to “America’s love affair with the automobile”? These common sayings epitomize American culture in the 20th century and remind us of a heritage that we struggle to retain. And this tradition probably would not exist if not for one man — Harley Earl.

Harley Earl came to General Motors in 1927 and retired in 1958. During that time, he turned the business of designing, mass-producing and marketing automobiles on its head. With the possible exception of Henry Ford, no other person has single-handedly contributed more to the evolution of the modern automobile industry.

Yet oddly, outside the world of automotive historians and classic car buffs, Earl’s name and legacy are virtually unrecognized today. He is best known as the designer of the big tailfins of the 1950s, but he actually created and legitimized the profession of automotive design in the process, giving birth to the modern car — freeing it from its “Tin Lizzie” beginnings. Before he was finished, he would become the father of the Corvette and stretch the definition of the automobile almost to the breaking point with fighter jet-inspired Firebird concept cars.

In fact, Earl was the first to introduce the idea of the concept car. The 1938 Y Job was a sleek, low-slung, wide prototype built for the sole purpose of testing, demonstrating and conducting market research for Earl’s design principles.

Earl’s time at GM was punctuated with exuberant specials and Dream Cars. Under Earl, GM was the first to showcase cars of the future at its GM Motorama shows and road races such as Watkins Glenn.



The 1938 Y Job concept car introduced Earl's vision that cars should be longer, lower, wider and oblong.



Photo: Barrett-Jackson Auction Company

The 1954 Bonneville Special at the Barrett-Jackson auction, January 2006.

Earl often used these unique marvels as his own car. Several of these vehicles have recently fetched record-breaking prices at auction. His 1954 Oldsmobile F-88 concept car sold for \$3 million at the Barrett-Jackson Scottsdale auction in January 2005, breaking a 15-year record by \$1 million.

One year later, two more Earl classics sold at Scottsdale for a combined \$6.8 million, also setting new records.

The 1954 Bonneville Special Motorama concept car sold first, for \$2.8 million. Immediately afterward, a 1950 GM Futurliner Parade of Progress transport bus was on the block. After furious bidding, the Futurliner went for \$4 million to the bidder who had just bought the Bonneville Special.

California dreaming

Henry Ford once said, "People can have the Model T in any color — so long as it's black." That statement in essence describes the state of the automobile industry when Earl went to Detroit in 1927. Building automobiles was a matter of cobbling together the engine, transmission, frame and wheels, then bolting on a casket-like body and the remaining seats, headlamps and accessories. Engineers on the assembly line worked up any changes.

At the time, a diverse cottage indus-

try of coachbuilders was responsible for taking Detroit's chassis and drive trains and converting them into stylish special-label cars for wealthy enthusiasts.

Earl learned his craft at his father's successful carriage works in Los Angeles. After graduating from Stanford University, he began constructing coach-built cars for Hollywood movie stars. He built such a reputation that he eventually was hired by the Cadillac Motor Company as a consultant to build the beautiful 1927 LaSalle. It was the first American production car designed by a stylist. With 27,000 units sold in the first year, it was a phenomenal success.

Earl was immediately invited by GM President Alfred P. Sloan Jr. to join GM and establish the first design studio for a major automotive manufacturer.

Earl's personal vision was to transform the automobile for the masses. To do so, he needed the unqualified support of Sloan and other major stockholders of GM, and he got it. Earl's little department had unprecedented power over the entire development and manufacturing process. This fundamental change in business strategy would shake the very foundation of the automobile industry and quickly make GM the dominant auto manufacturer for decades.

The original GM Art and Color Section founded by Earl became part of the GM administration within a few years when

'Harley Earl is responsible for more than half of GM's greatest 20th century milestones.'

Design Innovations of the Modern Automobile by Harley Earl

- Removal of running boards
- Chrome window reveals, body molding and garnishing
- Gloried hood louver designs
- Streamlined fender headlamps
- Streamlined bumpers and guards
- Built-in trunks
- Hidden spare tire
- All-metal turret roof
- Lowered chassis and center of gravity
- Distinctive radiator grille designs for easier model identification
- Two- and three-spoke, flexible and thin-rimmed steering wheels
- Steering wheel horn
- Grouped instruments in front of driver for better visibility
- Wider body design
- Torpedo-style body and two-toned paint jobs
- Streamlined coupe body
- Streamlined door handles for safety
- Wraparound bumpers

Earl was named vice president of Styling in 1940. By 1950, the Styling Section had equal corporate decision-making power with Finance and Engineering. It is no coincidence that, during this period, GM's market share skyrocketed and it became the largest auto manufacturer in the world.

Prior to Earl's arrival, the engineer was king in Detroit, so Earl was plagued throughout his entire career by jealousy from the company's engineers and the manufacturing managers. Any engineer who tried to cross GM Styling, however, came to regret it.

Telling the future

Henry Ford also said at one time, "You can't build a reputation on what you are going to do." Wrong again. That's precisely what Harley Earl set out to do. With concept cars, promotional tours and a showman's instincts, Earl had the American populace imagining an auto-topian future. He captured the hearts and minds of America for GM.

Because of his panache and steady stream of much-ballyhooed concept cars during the 1950s, he is often viewed primarily as a stylist, but Earl was an excellent engineer in his own right. He once wrote that "in the case of the automobile, mechanical improvements, too, have contributed to improved appearance. In fact, it is rather an accepted principle that as a product is improved functionally, it tends to become better artistically."

In a taped interview, Irvin W. Rybicki, a 42-year GM veteran who worked under Earl and later became a vice president of GM Design, said, "Harley Earl is responsible for more than half of GM's greatest 20th century milestones."



Earl points out a feature on the full-sized clay model for the Club de Mer concept car.

'A picture is worth a thousand words, and a model is worth a thousand pictures.'

Earl can legitimately be called the father of the automotive design profession. Detroit had never seen techniques like his before. He was the first to do full-sized drawings and full-sized clay models before building prototype vehicles. He believed that in doing so, designers avoided the pitfalls of bad design, and he liked to say, "A picture is worth a thousand words, and a model is worth a thousand pictures."

By 1950, the GM Styling Section employed over 1,000 people and had a solid monopoly on being the trendset-

ter for the auto industry. No one could argue against the success of Earl's design-first approach or the fact that style was the main factor that sold cars.

The other auto manufacturers staged raids to pirate away GM designers. This spread Earl's techniques far and wide, and soon the whole industry was using Sloan and Earl's harmonious design, manufacturing and marketing methods to one degree or another. The GM Styling Section was the emanation point for modern automobile industry practices such as the yearly style changes that Earl called "dynamic obsolescence."

Earl was also instrumental in founding the Art Center College in Los Angeles in 1934, by funding landmark design scholarship programs to teach his design methods. By the 1960s, over 25 different colleges nationwide were

By founding the first design studio for a major auto manufacturer, Harley Earl had the opportunity to literally reinvent the modern automobile. Some of the innovations of GM's design group under Earl include:

- Curved rear windows
- Wraparound windshields
- Electric windows
- Heated seats
- Keyless entry
- Hideaway power convertible top
- Concealed filler caps
- Double tail lights
- Front and rear stylized built-in parking and turn signals
- Glamorized dashboard designs
- Built-in car radio and speaker grill
- Telescoping radio antenna
- Needle-type speedometer
- Interior sun visors
- Crash-test dummies
- Annual style changes: "dynamic obsolescence"
- Interchangeable bodies across all GM divisions
- Concept cars and Motorama shows



Earl and the Damsels of Design pose for a 1958 magazine article.

involved in styling partnerships with GM.

Ahead of his time

Earl was always on the lookout for new talent and recognized that creative minds came in a variety of packages. He hired the first female designer in the industry in 1943, and continued hiring women and some openly gay design-

ers as a matter of practice. Eventually, he had a woman on each design team — noting that women cast the deciding vote in 70 percent of automobile purchases.

In 1956, he used his staff's diversity as a PR and marketing tool by presenting special auto fashion shows where his female designers were given carte blanche to add feminine design touches

'Design dragged engineering kicking and screaming into the 20th century.'

and brand names to various GM concept vehicles.

Sue Vanderbilt, an art graduate of Pratt Institute who was the only woman member of the Cadillac design staff for nearly two years, quoted Harley Earl as once saying, "Design dragged engineering kicking and screaming into the 20th century."

Giving female designers decision power proved to be a lightning rod for Earl's detractors and created additional internal controversy around the Styling Section. Many in the male-dominated industry were dead set against it. After Earl's retirement in 1958, GM's incoming VP of Styling, Bill Mitchell, demoted all female designers, saying, "No women are going to stand next to any senior designers of mine on any exterior styling of Cadillac or GM's other major brands."

A larger-than-life target

While Earl was often front and center when rolling out new car models, he



The Le Sabre concept car had over 80 features never seen on a production automobile before.

studiously avoided promoting his own celebrity or taking personal credit for the end result of GM Styling. He often admonished reporters who excluded giving his staff full credit. He was also known for throwing lavish dinners and parties for the Styling staff on GM's dime.

Earl's department was the goose that laid the golden egg. There was seemingly no limit to its budget. Earl preferred to drive unique hand-built cars, and would often have very valuable concept cars flown to his travel destination for his personal transportation. None of this served to reduce the animosity that other division heads and management held toward him.

Father of the Corvette

In 1951, GM's Styling Section unveiled the Le Sabre concept car — arguably the most famous concept car of all time. The Le Sabre drew a very strong response from both men and women at auto shows. The car had so much sexual power that wives of GM executives complained when their husbands toured with it.

One of the first public outings for the Le Sabre was at Watkins Glenn, a European-style road race event begun in 1948. Through the local Chevrolet dealer, Earl arranged for the Le Sabre to be the pace car. The outing was a successful PR venture for GM. But the Le Sabre, as a concept car, was built for research purposes too: Earl was eager to learn how a group of American auto enthusiasts would react to his car of the future.

What he found was that Ferrari, Maserati, Jaguar and Alfa were having a field day selling small, fast sports cars to post-war road-racing enthusiasts in America. The intensely patriotic Earl went back to Detroit determined to give America its own sports car.

Two years later, a new GM concept car appeared out in front of the same Chevrolet deal at the Watkins Glenn race, the Corvette. It was only 33 inches high, with a fiberglass-reinforced plastic body. Its high-compression aluminum-piston "Blue Flame" engine utilized triple side-draft carburetors and an in-body dual exhaust system to increase performance.

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Earl had the idea for the Corvette, America's first sports car, at the Watkins Glenn race.

The Corvette was a true sports car. Its size and weight were a significant departure from previous GM models, or any other American-made car, for that matter. But its styling lineage definitely emanated from the Le Sabre — especially when looking at the cockpit with its rakish wraparound windshield and the hide-away power convertible top.

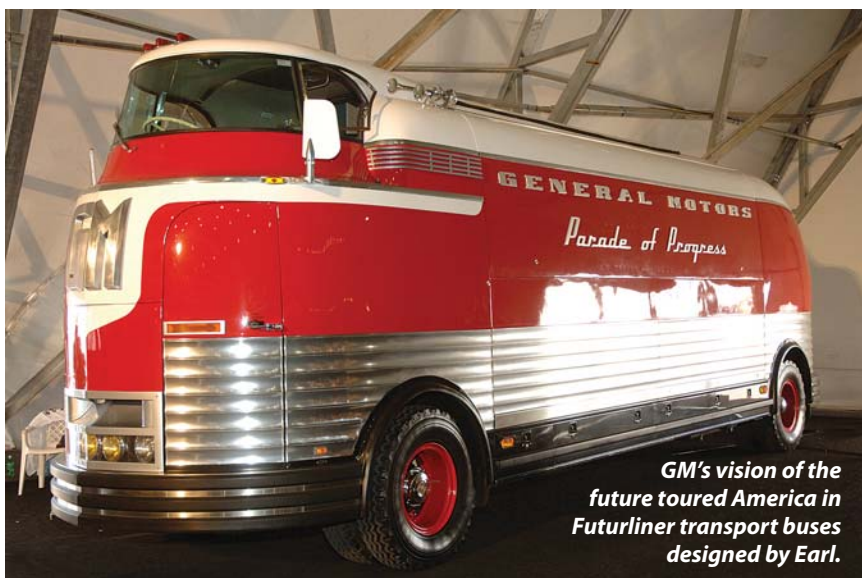
Promise lost

In an article in the March 1950 issue of *GM Folks* magazine entitled "Growing Stops for Automobiles," Earl stated that he thought automobiles had reached their maximum width and length and that, through better space utilization,

automobiles would begin to shrink in size without reducing interior space and comfort.

The 1954 GM Motorama introduced a bevy of smaller concept cars across all of GM's brands. It was a treasure trove of new ideas that included the Oldsmobile F88 and Pontiac Bonneville Special, both mentioned earlier in this article for bringing record prices at auction today. Many new Chevrolet models would eventually come from this litter of pups — Corvair, Nomad and El Dorado, to name just a few.

GM Styling reached a new level of exuberance in the mid-1950s. New designs experimented with Plexiglas



GM's vision of the future toured America in Futurliner transport buses designed by Earl.



Earl stands with the gas turbine powered Firebird I (XP-21), the Firebird II and the Firebird III. This is the direction GM cars were headed when he retired in 1958.

bubble tops, light-weight exotic metals, fiberglass and plastic body construction, and new power plants. The 1954 XP-21 Firebird was a gas turbine-powered jet on wheels.

As exotic as the Firebird was, Earl also saw it as a practical experiment. "The design for the car of tomorrow will emphasize economy, fewer handles and knobs, more glass, less weight and [be] more



The 1954 Bonneville Special ... granddaddy to the Solstice?

agile at lower speeds," said Earl in a 1954 newspaper article. "Maybe the experimental XP-21 Firebird, with its economical running engine, holds the answers.

Photo: Barrett-Jackson Auction Company

The first jet plane could only fly for a minute or so. Now they cross over the Atlantic. Answers are stubborn things. But if you don't start something, you never find them. At least we have a gas turbine engine in a car."

When Earl retired in 1958, he was clearly ahead of the curve on the small-car revolution. But foreign imports would lead that revolution 10 to 15 years later — and U.S. automakers would be caught with their pants down. How did this happen?

As Earl's inevitable retirement approached, a number of GM's top designers began jockeying for position to become the new Earl of Detroit. None of them could match Earl's powerful leadership, however. GM's Financial and Engineering divisions gained increasing leverage over the process, and design became more of a committee function.

One result of this change of focus in management is that Earl's "dynamic obsolescence" strategy, which annually enticed buyers to trade in their cars for more fashionably styled vehicles, is now often confused with "planned obsolescence," connoting disposable products with a short lifespan.

The once all-powerful GM is now a beleaguered corporation with a market share that continues to head south toward 25 percent. Like its U.S. rival Ford, it appears that GM will be eclipsed by Toyota in the next few years as the world's leading auto manufacturer.

American pride

These days, GM President Rick Wagoner and the CEOs of Chrysler and Ford are beseeching President Bush for tax breaks and other programs to "level the playing field" with foreign car manufacturers. Bush, on the other hand, has been quoted by the Associated Press as saying what manufacturers really need to do is create "a product that's relevant."

It is interesting to note that the 2007 Pontiac Solstice looks remarkably similar to Harley Earl's 1954 Pontiac Bonneville Special. Is this return to Earl inspired design too little, too late? It would appear that, without reasserting the strategic pre-eminence of design that Harley Earl's GM Styling Section enjoyed, it probably is. **VR**

www.carofthecentury.com

Richard Earl knew his grandfather Harley Earl as "Pops," and he grew up with a lot of really cool cars around. It wasn't until a 1985 visit to the GM Technical Center, where he viewed some of Pops' clay model prototypes that he became fully aware of the depth of his grandfather's contributions to the automobile industry. Today, Richard Earl makes appearances to speak about Harley Earl's legacy and maintains the extensive, and somewhat controversial, Web site www.carofthecentury.com, detailing Harley Earl's design history.

The controversy comes from Richard Earl's discovery of numerous interviews and documents which lead him to the conclusion that, subsequent to Earl's retirement, GM administrative and Style Section leaders may have intentionally squelched, and even altered information about the Company's heyday under Earl, in order to promote their own agendas.