



## Harley Earl 1893~1969

As car companies spend millions of dollars each year advertising new car models, consumers rarely question who designs the cars that appeal to our individual style. While the style of a car may be just as important to us as how the car runs, automobile manufacturers did not begin to pay attention to car designs until the 1920s. It was not until 1927, when General Motors decided to hire designer Harley Earl to displace Ford Motors prominence in the automotive world that design became important. What Henry Ford did for the automobile is what Harley Earl did for car design. Harley Earl loved Sports Cars, and returning GI's after World War II were bring home MGs, Jaguars, and the like. Earl convinced GM that they needed to build a sports car. The result was the 1953 Corvette!

Harley Earl was born November 22, 1893 in California to well-established parents. His father, J.W. Earl was a coach builder in California beginning in 1889. J.W. Earl kept up with technology and later changed the name of his shop to Earl Automotive Works. Earl's mother was originally from California and was the daughter of a civil dignitary.

Earl's stature matched his personality. He was a large man and was described as an intimidating person. It has been said if he smiled at you, it made your day, and if he was yelling it made you tremble. Those who worked with Earl say he was an impeccable dresser. His suits were always clean and pressed and he kept duplicate wardrobes in his office closet in case he were to wrinkle during the day he could always change before cocktails.

Earl had originally began his studies at Stanford University, however Earl decided to leave the university and study design with his father at Earl Automotive Works. Earl Automotive Works was a custom design shop which could boast of the biggest movie stars of the 1920s. By the age of 30 Harley Earl was able to boast of wining and dining with the biggest celebrities of the time. Cecil B. De Mille, a director who owned two Locomobiles, a Lincoln limousine, a touring Cunningham, a Cord roadster and a Model A, just to name a few believed the success of movies and automobiles went hand in hand. De Mille said the success of movies and automobiles reflected "the heart of motion and speed, the restless urge toward improvement and expansion, the kinetic energy of a young, vigorous nation." While only the rich could afford custom cars, Earl boasted of designing a \$28,000 car for Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. And western star Tom Mix had a custom Earl design car complete with a real leather saddle on the roof and painted stars with the TM logotype all over the vehicle.

When Earl Automotive Works was sold to Cadillac's west coast distributor Don Lee, Harley Earl was hired in 1927 to supervise the newly created Art and Colour Section at General Motors. The creation of the Art and Colour Section was the first department of its kind in the automotive world. GM President Alfred Sloan had wanted to establish style and colors of cars which were mass produced. The new Art and Colour Section was initially only concerned with recognized style and color. Sloan wanted a varied models of cars to not only "attract the affluent and style conscious consumer of the twenties, but also to make a change in a routine part of his corporate procedures." Sloan knew design alone could not lure consumers to purchasing a car, so at the same time, he marketed his cars buy letting consumers buy using an installment plan or used-car trade ins. With products based on price, model, and style, Sloan came up with "a car for every price and purpose."

Earl took nearly 10 years establishing the outlines of an automobile designer. In 1937, Earl changed his Art and Colour Section name to Style Section, reflecting the new general focus on design--including creating and modeling. One of the ways Earl helped innovate models and creations was by introducing two types of design methods. One was a two dimensional rough sketch which consisted of line drawings and the other was three dimensional clay models which were presented to management as realistic mock-ups. Earl helped formalize and lay down the rules which still guide car design today. When Earl retired from GM in 1959, he left behind him a design legacy using classic chrome, two tone paint, tail fins, hardtops and wrap around windshields. Earl founded the GM Design and Styling Department in 1927 and by the time he retired in 1958, it had grown from a staff of 50 to 1,100.

Harley Earl is remembered at GM by: "Our father who art in styling... Harley be thy Name!"