

VISUALARTS

Ahead of the curve

Loewy streamlined consumer products, shaping design for decades

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In his heyday, Raymond Loewy was the king of consumer design. From the 1930s until his retirement in the 70s, Americans could barely take a step without! Encountering the designer's touch. In the kitchen, were the Coldspot refrigerator, the eggbeater, the boomerang pattern on the Formica table. In the cupboard, the red Nabisco triangle on the package of cookies, the label on the Canada Dry ginger ale. At the table, the china, the flatware. In the garage, the Studebaker. Visiting relatives? Loewy designed the Greyhound Scenicruiser bus and a number of trains with your comfort in mind.

Logos, appliances, sketches and clippings in "Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture" at the Museum of Design Atlanta offer an illuminating look at the man, his star-kissed career and his impact on American culture.



Image Courtesy of Laurence Loewy, Loewy Designs, LLC
Raymond Loewy, with the S01 Locomotive at the 1939 New York World's Fair, was a leader in streamlined design that dominated America's mid-20th century.

Loewy was a leader in popularizing the look that came to dominate design in mid-20th-century America. He kicked the dark, heavy aesthetic of the previous generation out the door. He banished the right angle. He stripped off the fussy decoration. Their replacement: a sleek streamlined aesthetic dominated by curves based on the aerodynamic shapes of planes and ships but applied to everything from shavers to pencil sharpeners.

Loewy was not the only designer to adopt the streamlined look. You can see works by his peers in the Stent Family Wing of the High Museum, including Peter Muller-Munk's "Normandie" pitcher, shaped like a ship's prow, and William Dorwin Teague's "Nocturne" radio, a 45-foot-tall floor model featuring a blue mirrored circular front. But the other designers didn't have Loewy's charisma, or his flair for self-promotion. The exhibition includes spreads from the shelter magazines that featured the debonair designer, his beautiful wife Viola and adorable daughter Laurence - who lives in Marietta and runs the Loewy Foundation — and their glamorous homes in Mexico, Palm Springs, New York and France.

REVIEW

"Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture."

Through Dec. 23, 11a.m.-5 p.m.
Tuesdays-Fridays
Museum of Design Atlanta
285 Peachtree Center Ave.

Loewy, who rejiggered the proportions of Coca-Cola's famous contour bottle when the company was introducing a 16-ounce size, had the eye of an artist. But he also had the mind of a businessman. "The most beautiful curve is arising sales graph," he once said. In his hands, industrial design, a cross between art and engineering, became a marketing tool as well. The French emigre, who began his New York career in advertising, knew that the consumer does not live by logic alone.

Advertising, packaging and product design became the holy trinity of consumer seduction.

It seems that a good part of his practice was more about image-making than product improvement. The image was modernity, and it became the symbol of the American aspiration and identity. We wanted to think of ourselves as a fast-moving, forward-looking, technologically current, efficient society. It didn't matter that no one needs an aerodynamic toaster - it's the thought that counts. No wonder companies wanting to capture customers hired Loewy to update their look. MODA's back gallery is devoted to Coca-Cola products - from a soda dispenser to a cooler/radio - that bear his stamp. Coke's archivist Phil Mooney says he also designed the Fanta bottle.



Hagley Museum & Library
Loewy's designs, like this 1958 jukebox, utilize sleek curves that are reminiscent of aerodynamic shapes.

There's a dark side to all this. Although consumer capitalism helped get the economy going during the Depression, it also spawned planned obsolescence, shopaholicism and full-to-bursting landfills.

Though never shy about the commercial intent of his products, Loewy saw himself more as a white knight. "I can claim," he once wrote, "to have made the daily life of the 20th century more beautiful." □

MODA's back gallery contains Coca-Cola products updated by Loewy's designing talents such as this 1947 Coca-Cola fountain.

