

Visual Arts

By design

Raymond Loewy's influence on the American way of life reverberates today

By Felicia Feaster

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It may disturb some Freedom Fries-loving Americans to learn that the vessel that transports their president around the world, Air Force One, was designed by a Frenchman.



A surprising amount of our visual world, in fact, was conceived not by the almighty but by a debonair chap with a groomed mustache, walnut tan and, depending upon proximity to the cocktail hour, a cigarette or highball clutched in his grip.

The Parisian-born industrial designer and subject of the Museum of Design Atlanta exhibition Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture adapted his native European sensibility to the exploding American consumer consciousness, where his fanciful and prolific visual imagination found a profitable berth.

Considered one of the most influential 20th-century designers and arbiters of taste, Loewy seemed to have an innate understanding of the American expectation of the good life. He set himself up as an icon of the jet set that the public might aspire to in the tradition of lifestyle mogul Martha Stewart. Loewy gave the American desire for everyday luxuries form, lending Art Deco sizzle to an ivory Coldspot refrigerator (on view in the exhibit) with sky blue logo, and designing everything from the Pennsylvania Railroad trains and a line of Studebakers to an egg beater and electric razor.

The impression that the MODA show gives is of a man who was not a fussy designer searching for perfection. Loewy was a life-embracer looking for delight who considered a chicken's egg the acme of design. A prolific, flexible designer who created not only products but corporate identities, Loewy's logos for Nabisco, Formica, Canada Dry and Shell are as etched into our visual syntax as the Roman alphabet.

Loewy's early experience designing trains and cars spilled over into the domestic sphere. His chrome 1934 pencil sharpener has the aerodynamic lines of an industrial machine, but Loewy seemed to understand the American thirst for science in any number of forms.



A China tea service and Studebaker designed by Raymond Loewy (Museum of Design Atlanta)

In the '50s, he created an Aunt Jemima Corn Bread Mix with its own baking dish built into the packaging. Sometimes the forces of frumpiness would inhibit his flight, though. His design of a 1946

television on display featured clunky housing four times the size of its bread plate-sized screen.

Some of the most satisfying aspects of this survey of Loewy's career, which spanned from the '20s through the '70s, are not Loewy's designs but the photographs and magazine spreads that helped position him as a design celebrity. A 1958 spread in Family Circle magazine encapsulates the stylish Loewy way. It features his +berchic wife, Viola (with a Cruella De Vil gray streak in her ebony hair), queening over her high-style minimalist home, and an incongruously sweet '50s child (daughter Laurence, who now oversees the Loewy empire from her Marietta home) in a pink dress looking like a rental.

Not that Loewy's designs aren't a draw. The man who redesigned the iconic red-dot Lucky Strikes cigarette packaging still in use today churned out looks that will make design nuts want to bust some display vitrines to get to the line of luminous pastel melamine dishware that Loewy created for Lucent in 1956. In extreme cases, the cosmopolitan Loewy lifestyle and general attention to design details that are so absent in modern packaging and products may inspire an urge for time travel.

The show is bracketed by the sense of boundless imagination that defined Loewy's professional life and which this representation of his work makes apparent.

At age 13, like many children, he was sketching steam engines and boats. In his later years, he was consulted to imagine the look of the future as he did in a sketch on display of a "Hydrofoil." Even at age 72, Loewy was still dreaming.

Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture

Through Dec. 23. Museum of Design Atlanta, 285

Peachtree Center Ave., Marquis II Tower. 404-979-6455.

www.museumofdesign.org. Tues.-Sat., 11 a.m.-5 p.m.