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Art Historian Lauds the Work of Car Designers in New Book

A relative handful of visionary artists are responsible for the success or failure of new American cars in the marketplace, according to C. Edson Armi, professor of art history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of the recently released "American Car Design Now."

The product of more than three years of research, the book is a collection of Armi's essays and interviews with the design directors of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler.

The author was given unprecedented access to the notoriously secretive and guarded design studios of the car giants, and the result, according to a review of the book, "is an insider's perspective on the making of new American cars, of new American dreams."

The production of a new car is years in the making, according to Armi, who established himself as the authority on car design with his first book on the subject published in 1988.

He says that the stake for American carmakers is enormous. "It can cost as much as \$1 billion to design a new car," he said.

He describes the car design profession as a "relatively small club," with most top designers coming from just three schools: the Royal College of Art in London, the

Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

Armi said that the best designers have taste, determination, imagination, patience, and "an almost fanatical attention to detail."

The Big Three automakers, Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors, have struggled against foreign competition for many years, and are determined to bolster car profits with innovative new designs.

For example, the industry is rushing to produce "crossovers," a growing category of alternatives to sport utility vehicles combining car and truck features.

One such automobile, scheduled to go on sale in the fall, is Ford's Freestyle, characterized by Armi as "an amazing vehicle.

It combines the subtle styling of a German luxury car with the seating position of a SUV." It was designed by one of the premier artists in the business, J Mays, who came to Ford in 1997 from Volkswagen where he had designed the new Volkswagen Beetle.

Armi said that Ford is developing other interesting cars for release this year and in the years ahead.

"Ford owns Volvo now, and some of the new Fords will be built on Volvo chassis," he said.

In conversations with Armi, Mays told the author that he is convinced that although geometry is the foundation of all good design, "I also believe that cars should express values and emotion."

"So far, Mays's successes at Ford, in large part, stem from his persistence and drive for perfection," Armi wrote.

Mays agreed: "I guarantee you that a lot of design is just stick-to-itiveness ó being able to stay in there, to have the stamina and, when everybody else gives up, to just keep going."

Chrysler is facing new challenges as their longtime chief designer, Tom Gale, retired after Chrysler became DaimlerChrysler in 1999 and "the fortunes of the company

took a dive," Armi said.

Although the new design team, led by Trevor Creed, "seem keen to continue a number of Gale's policies, such as encouraging and respecting individual input at all levels of the design organization, the first signs are not encouraging.

Creed has not been able to translate a concept car into a successful production mode."

Armi describes General Motors (GM) chief designer, Wayne Cherry, who retired last fall, as a "man with a mission: to transform forever the way cars are designed.

Cherry's major contribution to designing cars at GM has been to install computer-aided design as an integral part of the operation.

"In the decades ahead, this technically advanced method of design will come to dominate the creation of all cars," Armi said.

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