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## Art and Industry (1962): Article 04

Seymour Freedgood

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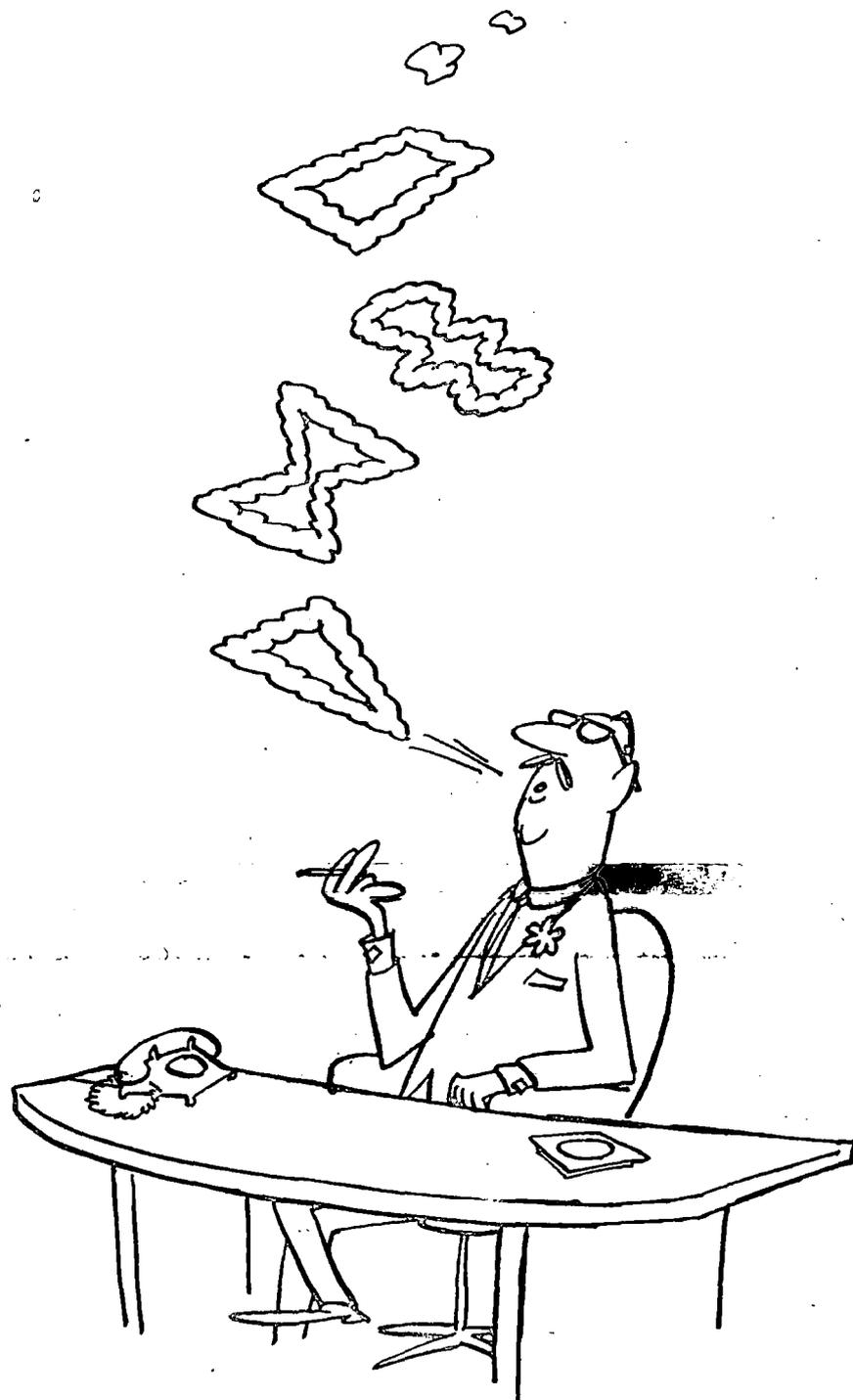
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The industrial designer, once just a cosmetician to industry, now offers a "total service." His can include anything from the redesign of a product to redesign of the corporation that produces it.

# Odd Business, This Industrial Design

by Seymour Freedgood

The president of a small but venerable midwestern manufacturing firm recently had his first experience with a consulting industrial designer. He still isn't sure what he has let himself in for. When he called the designer in, largely at the urging of the vice president for sales, the firm's need was urgent: the sale of its biggest item—an electric paint sprayer—had taken a sudden slump, quite obviously because the competition was flooding the stores with a better-designed machine. The president remembers vividly his first meeting with the designer. The man arrived in a Kharmann-Ghia, but aside from this flourish, hardly presented a picture of the "eccentric genius" the president half expected; he wore a conservative business suit and a buttoned-down collar and looked, the president recalls, "like a hard-working architect." The president innocently suggested that he thought a "face lift" job would do wonders for the sprayer, and asked how soon he could see some art work. The designer said that he considered himself to be something more than a "cosmetician" and that he would need some information before he could solve the problem of the sprayer. After that they could discuss price. Meanwhile, his fee would be \$250 a day, plus preliminary survey costs.



The designer is a trained dreamer always trying to think of new ways to reshape familiar objects down to and including the toothpick.

The designer put in an intensive, all-day session with the firm's production men and salespeople, then drove back to his office in Chicago. In two weeks he was back with a volume of reports that included a detailed analysis of the appearance, mechanics, usefulness, and costs of the ailing sprayer; a similar analysis of the chief competitive sprayer; a summary of twenty-five interviews with buyers, store managers, and salesclerks; and a set of recommendations that reminded the president of a Soviet Five-Year Plan. The firm, he said, should design two sprayers. One, which would represent an intermediate step in development, would be a more attractively styled and colored version of the old model; the other, to be designed for the 1960 line, would incorporate extensive mechanical and physical changes that would make the sprayer better as well as better-looking than its competitors. He also suggested that the firm design a smart new carrying case that would make it possible to sell the sprayer in gift as well as in hardware and do-it-yourself departments. And finally, he hoped that the company would permit him to set standards for and redesign the visual symbols that made up its "corporate image." By these he meant its trademark, logotype, wrappers, and other insignia

by which it identified itself to the public. From his interviewing, he said, he had learned that the present symbols made people feel that the firm was "slightly old-fashioned, if not stodgy." This could be corrected by a strong "corporate identification program"; included in this program would be the eventual redesign of all of its products, packages, and promotional material to give them a "family look."

Since then the president has paid the designer \$10,000 to design the intermediate model and its carrying case, and to redesign the logotype used on the firm's products, its letterheads, business forms, and packages. Just recently, when the new sprayer came out, he got some good news: early ordering had pushed sales up 25 per cent over 1957. Nonetheless, the president is an uneasy man. The other day, he says, the designer came around to try to talk him into setting up a product-planning committee with which the two of them could discuss the 1960 model and future models of the firm's other power tools. The president is thinking it over. "Mind you," he observes, "I like the fellow. But I sometimes get the feeling that he isn't satisfied to be a designer—he wants to be my right hand and maybe even me."

### The "total service"

The incident is fairly typical. By and large, today's industrial designers are a hard-working lot who depend far less on the sudden insight than on painstaking analysis and careful planning to help the manufacturer "visualize [as one designer likes to put it] a proper solution to a design problem." On the other hand, this matter-of-fact approach cloaks a considerable confidence in the role that designers are prepared to play throughout industry. At least one admits that he thinks of himself as a modern-day Leonardo da Vinci (who could plan and design anything). If a manufacturer of plumbing supplies, for example, is looking for someone to design the identification badges for a big sales meeting, do the prototype architecture for a series of branch offices, or explore the possibility of getting into another line of business such as manufacturing fire extinguishers or toy soldiers, the typical industrial-design office will gladly offer its services. Although all industrial designers have their specialties—e.g., product design, industrial architecture, packaging, etc.—most claim to offer a "total service," which can mean anything from redesigning a product to repackaging the whole corporation that pro-



Scientific design is the new panacea: some firms won't let an artist pick up a pencil until the researchers have told him what to draw.



The product must be designed with an eye to usefulness, cost, safety, ease of maintenance and handling, as well as good looks.

duces it. Scientific design is the new panacea: some firms won't let an artist pick up a pencil until the researchers have told him what to draw. Nevertheless, the typical designer is a trained dreamer always trying to think of new ways to reshape familiar objects down to and including the toothpick; he is convinced (as Raymond Loewy once said of the craft) that he must "never leave well enough alone."

It is this self-confidence and the general busyness of the trade that have given many U.S. executives the illusion that industrial design is a thumping big industry, with thousands of practitioners who draw down hundreds of millions of dollars annually for their work and advice. In fact, there are probably no more than 300 firms in the U.S. that meet the generally accepted definition of an industrial-design office—i.e., one providing two or more design services, including a variety of product designs. And although some individual designers are wealthy men, the 300 or so firms in the "industry" probably grossed no more than \$40 million last year. The truth of the matter is that most popular ideas of the business derive from the spectacular and sometimes eccentric men who originated it, although these early practitioners have by now faded away—or drastically redesigned their own public images.

### The wizard of gloss

It was a generation ago that some pioneers set out to persuade manufacturers that an attractively designed product would always outsell an ugly one. There were about twenty-five in all, most of them from diverse business or professional backgrounds, with little in common except their flamboyance and gift for salesmanship, a gift that the vocation has retained ever since.\* Norman Bel Geddes, who died last year, established the stereotype of the industrial designer as a high-priced wizard and P. T. Barnum of the arts. A famous theatrical designer who became equally famous as the "father of streamlining," he once boasted that the products outdated by his new designs had cost U.S. industry "over a billion dollars." Raymond Loewy, who now spends much of his time in his native France, added glamour to wizardry; easily identified by his maroon suits, French cuffs, and bristling mustache, he lived in a famous villa, owned ocean-going yachts, and astonished New Yorkers by driving to work on a motorcycle.

The pioneers were fabulously successful. In the doldrums

\* Among the surviving members, Henry Dreyfuss and Russel Wright started out as stage designers; Donald Deskey and Lurelle Guild as furniture designers; Loewy as a fashion illustrator with an engineering background. Walter Dorwin Teague (a solemn exception to the exotic breed) and John Vassos were advertising artists.

of the 1930's, when the U.S. market was choked by a great flood of radio sets, toasters, kitchen ranges, and other consumer items that looked as if they had been put together by a demented New England mechanic for use in a Moroccan coffeehouse, the industrial designer had a singular role to play. He was, as Peter Müller-Munk, the Pittsburgh designer, recalls, "a wizard of gloss, the man with the airbrush who could take the manufacturer's widget, streamline its housing, add a bit of trim, and move it from twentieth to first place in its field."

This was no exaggeration. In the 1930's, after Loewy restyled one manufacturer's radio set at a retooling cost of \$15,000, its sales rose by 700 per cent. For services like these, at the bottom of the depression, hard-pressed manufacturers paid designers flat fees of up to \$100,000. And, in a single decade, the face of just about every mass-produced appliance was cleaned up and its features redesigned.

### Guns, phones, supermarkets

Almost from the beginning, however, some industrial designers like Dreyfuss and Teague argued that they must do more than simple styling: if manufacturers expected customers to continue to buy their new products, they said, the designer must be permitted to "design in depth"—i.e., to shape the products from their inception with an eye to usefulness, cost, safety, and ease of maintenance and handling, as well as good looks. A few manufacturers listened to them. Bell Laboratories, for example, asked Dreyfuss to help redesign its instruments for better handling as well as looks in 1930, and he has been doing the job ever since.

Most manufacturers, however, continued to use industrial designers strictly as face-lifters. Then came World War II, and interestingly enough, the U.S. Government bought the doctrine that industry had thus far treated so warily. Defense agencies brought in industrial designers to work as "human engineers"—that is, specialists who would see to it that guns, for example, were built to fit the human shoulder. This gave a number of designers whose previous contacts had been primarily with the sales force an opportunity to work with engineers and production men.

After the war, when big industry began to apply "modern design" to office machines and other products en masse, there were many new opportunities. The old magicians were joined by architects, engineers, and commercial artists who were emerging from the armed services. An increasing number of technological institutes and art schools established courses in industrial design, and their graduates added to the fold. The business grew rapidly, but by the end of the 1940's the consultant designers no longer preempted the field. Burned by what they considered high fees and convinced that they could provide the same services for them-

selves more cheaply, many big and not-so-big consumer-goods manufacturers had set up their own design departments. At the same time, an increasing number of basic-materials suppliers—e.g., glass, metals, synthetics, pulp—began to build "captive" staffs to supply product and package design services, either gratis or "at cost," to actual or potential customers. A number of consultant design firms faced up to a future in which they might have to declare themselves obsolete, and go out of business.

Often accused of being "masters of obsolescence," the independent designers nonetheless refused to obsolete themselves. Instead, they began to supply design services to machine-tool and other capital-goods manufacturers and to solicit smaller and smaller consumer-goods manufacturers; but more important, they wholeheartedly plunged into areas far beyond the domains of simple product and package design. And as a result, industrial designers today are performing a bewildering variety of assignments for both government and industry. The Walter Dorwin Teague office, for example, is now completing the biggest job an industrial-design firm has ever tackled: designing and selecting some 1,700 different kinds of furniture and equipment for the new Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. For the city of Montreal, the Loewy group has just completed a study and made recommendations for the building of a cultural center, and for the city of New York, Donald Deskey is designing a street fixture to coordinate all public lighting and fire, police, and traffic signal systems. Industrial designers (among them Dave Chapman, Inc., and Russel Wright) are employed by the International Cooperation Administration to help manufacturers and handicraftsmen in Pakistan, Viet-Nam, and other underdeveloped countries improve their products both for domestic use and for export. Designers are providing U.S. managements with counsel on long-range product planning; they are designing supermarkets, gas stations, trade exhibits; they are helping rearrange the "corporate image" of companies like International Business Machines by giving a "family look" to its products, buildings, and offices, and all its promotional material; and selling a variety of other services such as market and consumer research.

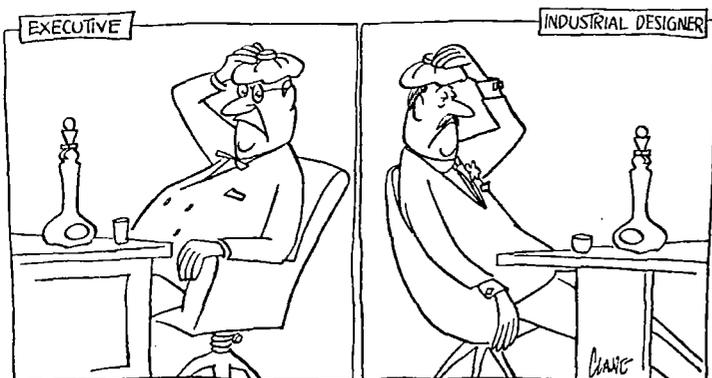
### Guide to the designers

Such "total" design service can be very profitable, but how good is it? All design firms cannot be equally total: some must stress certain services at the expense of others. But it is difficult to make fair appraisals because of the mystery in which the industry wraps itself. Designers tend to make a trade secret of almost everything touching on the way they do business. It is hard even to ascertain who the major design firms are (see page 201 for a list of twenty major ones), what they charge, what their specialties are, exactly what they are providing to meet industry's changing needs.

What follows is based on replies to a questionnaire that FORTUNE sent to some 180 design firms and to 120 corporations, and on a number of interviews with designers and their clients, many of whom, for one reason or another, wish to remain anonymous.

Considering the fact that any billboard artist or basement inventor can set up shop as an industrial designer, and many do, it is not surprising that no one knows precisely how many legitimate practitioners there are—or how much they earn. About 180 firms (of the 300 roughly identifiable as industrial designers) are represented in either the American Society of Industrial Designers or the Industrial

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I can see it on my wife's dresser, but how about in Joe's Bar?

# Industrial Design

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Designers' Institute, or, if they belong to neither, are solid enough for the societies to be aware of them. The 180 firms range from one- or two-man studios to 200-man factories. Of the estimated \$40 million paid to all free-lance industrial designers last year, about \$20 million went to twenty firms. And probably only eight of the twenty grossed as much as \$1 million.

This is not to suggest that the designers are starving. Most of the top firms netted over 20 per cent before taxes, and at least one netted over 40 per cent. But the day when a leading design office could ask—and get—\$50,000 to redesign a single cigarette package has passed. The increase of corporate design staffs is one reason. Another reason is increased competition among the independents themselves. The big New York design offices are now being challenged by a group of outfits located conveniently near factories in the Midwest or on the West Coast.

The effect has been to make prices more realistic. Although designers charge for their services in a variety of ways, a usual method is to ask for a basic monthly retainer, for which the design firm will make the time of its partners available to a client and agree not to work for the client's competitors. This fee may range from \$500 to \$5,000 a month, depending on the prestige of the design organization, the amount of partners' time required, etc. In addition, the client will be billed for the man-hours spent by the design staff on actual design work. When the hourly rates for line designers, draftsmen, and other technicians are averaged out, this charge may range from nearly \$20 a man-hour for some of the blue-chip eastern outfits to about \$10 a man-hour for some lesser design offices, most notably in the Midwest.

## The silent salesman

The New York designers have not surrendered the midwestern market—representatives of some New York firms have been seen pursuing potential Chicago clients into Wisconsin duck blinds, just as designers from Pittsburgh and points west have been observed pursuing eastern industrialists aboard yachts in the Bahamas. However, the Midwesterners have been getting an increasing amount of the product-design work, and most of the bigger New York outfits are expanding

their services to include almost everything else—e.g., packaging, architecture and interiors, graphics (logotypes, etc.), design engineering, and market research. Actually, product design has now become a secondary part of the business of most New York firms. Not all New Yorkers, to be sure, are deserting the product field. By deliberately limiting the scope of their operations, Henry Dreyfuss, Raymond Spilman, and Russel Wright remain among the most sought-after product designers in the country.

The big New York designer makes a specialty of helping manufacturers cope with "the revolution in the market place," by which is meant the rise of the self-service store, where the package must be its own "silent salesman." A strong area of concentration, accordingly, is package design. He will also design shopping centers, supermarkets, and other retail outlets that dispense the packaged items, and redesign the corporate profiles of the companies that produce them.

For many years the Loewy organization was undisputed leader among the firms offering such a "total service." Under the direction of managing partner William T. Snaith, an architect turned marketing expert who describes himself as a "designer of status symbols," the firm's retail-store-planning division has become the strongest part of the business; it

has designed scores of splendid, efficiently organized shopping centers and branch stores all over the country. Loewy is also retained by some forty companies including National Biscuit and National Dairy Products to design their packages.

To service this volume and variety of work—plus a considerable amount of product and transportation design—the Loewy group has set up a plans board, an engineering section, and a market-research unit. The net result is an organization willing and able to take on a "one-shot" assignment or to handle an enormous "corporate-identity program" like the one it is doing for United Air Lines. This continuing program has so far included the interior design of United's ticket offices in five cities, and the redesign of the interiors of its aircraft, the uniforms worn by its pilots and hostesses, the print used on its menus, as well as its passenger-loading stairs, baggage-loading trucks, and other ground equipment.

## The new wizardry

Pounding hard on the heels of the Loewy group is the much younger, but perhaps even more businesslike, firm of Lippincott & Margulies. Founded in 1946, L. & M. is organized on ad-agency lines with a plans board and account executives, and it too concentrates on designing self-service stores and the packages

that are sold in them. What distinguishes L. & M. from its rivals is its insistence that if an item is to sell on the basis of its package design alone, the designer (as partner Walter P. Margulies explained recently) "must be backed in depth by experienced marketing and research experts."

All designers use research of one kind or another: in planning a wall-hung refrigerator, for example, the designer needs such facts as how many walls in U.S. homes will support such a refrigerator's weight. He will also do "market observation"—i.e., roam the stores to discover what colors, shapes, and refrigerator accessories are attracting the customers. In addition, he might pretest his design by setting up a model in a store and asking people if they like it. If the public is noncommittal, he might hire an expert in "motivational research" to discover what's going on in its subconscious.

Most designers in the end (as Loewy's William Snaith observes) "will sit down, take a deep breath, and trust to a belly hunch." But not L. & M. It gave up what Margulies calls the "intuitive rightness" approach some years ago when five staff designers, given the same test assignment, came up with five different design solutions and each insisted his was the right one. L. & M.

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## The Twenty Biggest Industrial Designers\*

(in terms of gross revenues)

The years they were established, and their major and secondary sources of income. In personnel they range from over 200 to under 20; in billings they range from over \$2 million to less than \$400,000.

Raymond Loewy Associates, N.Y. and Chi.	1929	Architecture & interiors, packages, graphics
Cushing & Nevell, N.Y.	1933	Engineering services, exhibits
Lippincott & Margulies, N.Y.	1946	Packages, architecture & interiors
Walter Dorwin Teague Associates, N.Y.	1926	Architecture & interiors, products
Jim Nash Associates, N.Y.	1934	Packages, corporate identity
Donald Deskey Associates, N.Y.	1928	Packages, corporate identity
Henry Dreyfuss, N.Y. and Pasadena	1929	Products, architecture & interiors
Harley Earl, Detroit	1945	Products, packages
Dave Chapman, Chi.	1936	Products, packages
Peter Müller-Munk Associates, Pittsburgh	1938	Products, corporate identity
Sundberg-Ferar, Detroit	1933	Products, packages
Walter Landor & Associates, San Francisco	1941	Packages, corporate identity
Brooks Stevens Associates, Milwaukee	1935	Products, architecture & interiors, corporate identity
Eliot Noyes, New Canaan, Conn.	1947	Architecture & interiors, products, corporate identity
George Nelson, N.Y.	1947	Architecture & interiors, products, exhibits
Smith, Scherr & McDermott, Akron	1947	Products, packages
Becker & Becker Associates, N.Y.	1950	Products, architecture & interiors
Peter Schladermundt Associates, N.Y.	1944	Products, packages
Latham, Tyler, Jensen, Chi.	1955	Products, corporate identity
Russel Wright, N.Y.	1928	Products, exhibits

\*Excluded from the list are a number of important designers, like Charles Eames, who, although he designs furniture (the Eames chair) for mass production, and serves as an I.B.M. design consultant, doesn't use the title of industrial designer. He considers himself "a creative guy who's interested in the philosophy of design."

## *Industrial Design continued*

set up in 1957 the Package Research Institute, to provide basic information on what stimulates the consumer in the way of design; and today an L. & M. artist is forbidden to pick up a pencil until the researchers have told him what to draw.

Under the direction of Dr. Myron Helfgott, a social psychologist and former director of research for the Ogilvy, Benson & Mather agency, L. & M.'s four-man "institute" has done some imposing studies. When American Tobacco decided that it should make a new Tareyton cigarette equipped with a *double* filter, L. & M. was asked to design its package "to express the qualities [as Helfgott puts it] of the new cigarette." To do this, he and his staff flashed the brand names or packages of eight different cigarettes, including Herbert Tareytons, before some 500 filter-tip cigarette smokers, and rated their responses to an elaborate series of questions. Does the brand or package suggest a cigarette that is bad or good tasting, that is masculine or feminine, that is for low-income or high-income smokers? On the basis of the answers, L. & M.'s

designers evolved four different package designs, each of which was then pretested for consumer preference. The overwhelming vote was for the present white-and-red Tareyton package.

As one admiring rival of L. & M. points out, this "new scientific wizardry gives manufacturers faced with the terrifying unknowns of impulse buying the confidence to make a move when nobody really knows which way to go."

### The product men

Among the midwestern designers, Brooks Stevens of Milwaukee stands out like a figure from the gaudy past. Habitually dressed in black Homburg and jet-black topcoat trimmed with karakul, he has astounded each of the last four National Motor Boat shows in New York by unveiling what he calls a "shrieker"—this year it was a twenty-eight-foot outboard-motor-driven "houseboat" mounted on a fiberglass catamaran, which he had designed for Evinrude as a sales-promotion device. But most of Stevens' colleagues are an unpretentious company of shirtsleeve designers, inclined to make much of what leading Chicago designer

Dave Chapman calls "the flight from Madison Avenue."

The Detroit outfit of Sundberg-Ferar, which now designs probably more products—mostly major and small appliances—than any other design office in the country, exemplifies the down-to-earth breed. So does Harley Earl, Inc., another big Detroit office, which has designed a great deal of heavy equipment. Urbane Pittsburgh designer Peter Müller-Munk, although rarely seen in shirtsleeves, is another big appliance designer, with Westinghouse as a plum account. A number of newer, smaller offices like Reinecke Associates of Chicago and Smith, Scherr & McDermott of Akron make a specialty of serving small and medium-sized manufacturers in the \$1-million to \$25-million range.

But even in the hinterland the amount of available product work is becoming more and more limited. If the present trend continues, the midwestern group may soon be confronted by two choices long familiar in the East: either to spread out further into fields that are now pre-empted by architects and advertising agencies, or, as at least one midwestern firm is now starting to do, to give up day-to-day design and

become in effect, and in fact, management consultants on long-range product planning.

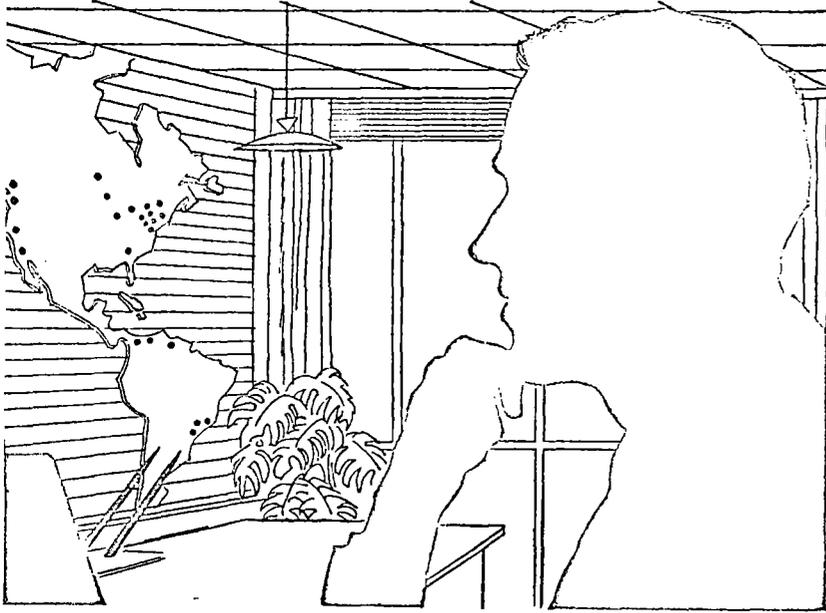
### The problem of incest

"There was a time," Chicago designer and educator Jay Doblin observes, "when I was happy if I got an order in the mail to design a quarter-ton air conditioner to retail at \$149.50. Now that the manufacturer has his own design staff, he turns up at my office himself and says, 'What do I do next?' This business is changing drastically from a service into a consulting business."

Doblin was overstating the situation. Nevertheless, he underlined a curious fact. The companies with their own design staffs now include the Detroit auto makers, all but a very few of the top fifteen home-appliance manufacturers, and about half of the big consumer and capital-goods manufacturers and basic-material suppliers (including giant suppliers like U.S. Steel, Alcoa, Container Corp. of America) that responded to FORTUNE's survey. But the corporation with a captive staff will usually continue to employ an independent design office as well.

In most cases, it will be to handle

*continued page 204*



## Profile of an Exposure Expert

Do you drill for offshore oil on Lake Maracaibo—or for gaspipes on Main Street? Do you import raw sugar from the West Indies—or do you can salmon in the great Northwest?

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## Industrial Design continued

overload work or to undertake assignments with which the staff is unfamiliar, like designing a completely new line of products. But an increasingly important reason, explains one corporation design executive, is to avoid "incestuous design." The great advantage of a company design department is that its members can work intimately with the firm's engineers, market specialists, and product planners. The great peril is that many big manufacturers (as the same executive puts it) "are chicken about innovation." In firms where the design department ranks lower than engineering and manufacturing, proposals for genuine design improvements can be vetoed by production men concerned about retooling costs, or by sales departments which tend to feel that the safest design strategy is to copy the competition. The result, all too often, is that great arrays of products—refrigerators, electric frying pans, etc.—look so much alike that many designers are convinced their biggest single challenge today is to redesign them in such a way that customers will again be able to tell one from another.

Many big and middle-sized companies, therefore, are using outside designers, (1) to assist them in long-range product planning, and (2) to provide their executives with the extra degree of confidence necessary to push the new designs into production. At General Electric's major-appliance division, for example, design manager Art BeeVar, with over thirty designers on his staff, retains two top independent designers—Richard Latham of Chicago and George Nelson of New York—to play this double role. Latham and Nelson do no day-to-day design work for G.E.; their job is to help BeeVar and his staff "visualize," on the basis of advanced engineering developments, a variety of potential products—e.g., a glass-topped kitchen range—that the company might be able to put on the market several years hence.

### The Latham heresy

Latham is admired by his fellow practitioners for his get-up-and-go. But where he could be leading the industry is something many of them are not so sure they like. In the four years since he and two other ex-Loewyites formed the Chicago design office of Latham, Tyler, Jensen, the Latham group has devoted much of its efforts to helping manufacturers do forward product planning—a situation that ideally requires

clients to maintain an internal staff to do routine design work. For many manufacturers, obviously, the expense is prohibitive: by and large, Latham points out, most small companies will find it cheaper to buy design services from an outside firm than to maintain their own staffs. On the other hand, a medium-sized manufacturing company (\$10 million and over) producing a diversified line of products will be well advised to hire an internal staff, especially if it is headed by a first-rate design chief. The annual cost will be about equal to hiring one of the smaller design firms to handle the same work; with good design managers available for between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year, the total cost of maintaining a two-man staff plus a part-time secretary, including overhead, might come to \$50,000 a year, or about \$12 a man-hour. And there will be the added advantage of having design integrated into the production process.

The Latham group, accordingly, actively seeks out manufacturers of diversified product lines—and those in need of diversification—and tries to persuade them to set up a planning group to investigate new product and service opportunities, and equally important, to set up their own design departments, which Latham will help select and organize. When this is done, Latham and his partners concentrate on sitting in with the planning committee and helping it envision, usually with elaborate mock-ups and other visual aids, the nature and shape of the firm's future products.

### The non-total service

The Latham group now serves about half of its twenty-four regular clients in this special capacity. Interestingly, the firm does not offer its clients a total service. The partners insist that their scope is limited to helping the manufacturer plan, design, and display his products. If he needs such services as architecture or motivational research, they encourage him to call in a specialist.

To most independent designers, who privately condemn the development of the internal staff as a "threat to creative design," the Latham doctrine is rank heresy—an understandable position since they want to do all the work themselves. For better or for worse, a flamboyant era will come to an end if Latham's doctrine becomes the new orthodoxy: after starting out a single generation ago as an entrepreneur, the industrial designer will finally have become just a part of corporate structure. **END**