

Ron Hill's Vision and the 1965 Corvair: Unmatched From Any Angle

by Jeff Johnston

Collectible Automobile® and Ron Hill go way back. Then editor-at-large Chris Poole interviewed Mr. Hill for a Personality Profile that ran in our August 1993 issue. In addition, the retired GM designer was generous enough to discuss the Pontiac Fiero in the April 1994 issue and the 1955-56 Cadillacs a couple issues later in August 1994.

Now, Jeff Johnston, a former journalist and graphic artist, who also owns a 1965 Corvair convertible, interviewed Mr. Hill, his son, and another designer for the story that you are about to read. Yes, it is another Ron Hill profile of sorts, but not exactly. We will let Jeff tell the story, and we hope that you enjoy reading it as much as we did.

Ron Hill just wanted to win a toolbox. Instead, entering a model car competition as a teen in 1950 drove him toward the forefront of automotive design in Detroit.

He bookended three decades of styling for General Motors with jet-tail fins for a 1957 Cadillac and a wedge profile for the 1984 Pontiac Fiero. In between, he designed GTOs, Firebirds, Monte Carlos, Camaros, Buicks, experimentals, and more.

And before age 30, he penned a design so clean and elegant, so pure of form, that *Car and Driver* hailed it as "the most beautiful car to appear in this country since before World War II." The car that captured the magazine's heart was the 1965 Chevrolet Corvair. Aficionados still praise the looks of the more-than-60-year-old car as timeless and peerless.

"Nothing GM did that standout year approached the 1965 Corvair for chic simplicity," Auto journalist Peter Robinson wrote for *Motor Trend* in 2006, describing "a beautifully cohesive look that's (mostly) only possible if designed by a single hand. The 1965 Corvair was Ron Hill's masterpiece."

Ron, 92 and enjoying life in his native southern California, receives such praise with grace. "That's a very nice thought," he says with a smile.

For more than 30 years, GM's Fisher Body Division invited teens to imagine the vehicles of tomorrow and build them from scratch in 1/12 scale as part of the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild. From coast to coast, magazines advertised the annual contest and its thousands of dollars in scholarships and prizes to dreamers like young Ron.

"I thought, 'Oh, wow! That's a chance to win a toolbox,'" he recalled. Already a



builder of wooden model boats, Ron began carving and shaping his car. When he entered it in the contest's junior division at age 15, opportunity kicked down the door with the top prize of \$4000 for school—equivalent to \$53,000 today.

The prize put Ron on the road to a two-year degree from California's respected

ArtCenter College of Design, then to Michigan, where he signed on with GM Design in 1954 at age 20. The Guild competition was a de facto on-ramp to GM's styling department. By the late Fifties, more than one-third of the company's designers were contest alumni.

Ron joined the Cadillac studio work-

ing on the elite Eldorado Biarritz for 1957. With production three years away, the car existed only on paper, and the small team of designers had a problem. Their working sketches sported Cadillac's trademark tail fins along with an elegantly rounded rear fender and trunk line. In flat profile drawings, the two features clashed.

But Ron thought in three dimensions. Why not move those fins inboard by a few inches to embrace the sexy fender curve instead of creating a boring slab side? "I was really tired of the flat cardboard school of design," he said. "I wanted to do some form." He had to fight for it, because those fins would present a production challenge.

In the end, the car rolled off the line

with the tail just as he had drawn it. "Yeah. Exactly," he said. "It was very gratifying." It was the first of Ron's visions to grace the American road.

In those days, the journey from drawing board to assembly line took about a year of artwork followed by two years of engineering and tooling. Management would supply a written brief, and the designers would face their blank canvases and unleash their imaginations.

You never knew what might emerge as a promising look, or from whom. The team would hash it out and make its case to the suits, who frequently had their own ideas. Things could get messy.

"Oh, yeah, there was constant battles going on," Ron recalled. He said a designer needed to be in tune with the assign-

ment and the times, absorbing influences and understanding market needs and tastes—but also, as hockey great Wayne Gretzky might say, looking not to where the puck was now but where it would be in three years.

By the late Fifties, Detroit was nervously eyeing competition from small imports. The Corvair was Chevrolet's answer. It rolled out October 2, 1959, as a basic economy sedan—albeit with an unconventional air-cooled rear engine like its rival Volkswagen Beetle.

GM took note when drivers found the car nimble and fun. In '62, the company added a sporty convertible and a turbocharged Spyder model to the lineup, targeting enthusiasts more than penny-pinching commuters.

The same year, GM tasked Ron—now assigned to Chevrolet's Advanced Studio 4 in the Warren Technical Center—with designing the car's second generation for 1965.

Over at Ford and Chrysler, designers of the compact Falcon and Valiant were taking cues from their companies' full-size cars. Ron found his muse for the new Corvair overseas, in the shapely machines hugging the roads of Germany, England, and Italy.

Especially Italy. Marques like Ferrari, OSCA, Alfa Romeo, Fiat, and Maserati were building cars suited to road racing and wearing a new aesthetic—low, airy, smooth, slim, rounded—that seemed to objectify speed.

"Everyone wanted to go fast, and the Italians were doing it with the most style," said Ron's son, Jason Hill, a designer in his own right who created the Carrera GT concept for Porsche. "The most panache," Ron interjected.

Ron clean-sheeted a lean and muscular Corvair, a pillar-less hardtop with a crease along the front and sides, a front end sans grille, and round taillights set into a scooped-out rear panel. Fenders swelled up and out over the wheels in homage to Chevrolet's forthcoming 1963 Corvette Sting Ray.

The rear engine "manifested itself in the lines, the design, the bulk being biased rearward," Ron said. Seeing sculpturally as always, he produced a full-scale line drawing in tape showing the car not from the side as was typical but from an angle that emphasized its low stance and shapely fenders.

The look was a revelation, worlds away



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1. Ron Hill takes up his airbrush under the watch of fellow GM designer Chuck Jordan. 2. The model Ron built for the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild competition. 3. Whether or two wheels of four, Ron took to the road at an early age. 4. Ron celebrates his graduation and shows off his diploma from ArtCenter College of Design.

from the massive, ornamented American cars of just a few years earlier. The suits liked what they saw—though they insisted that, like any other car, it needed a front grille.

“They wanted a face,” he said. “I thought it was correct that the face was without a grille.” Ron’s vision won out.

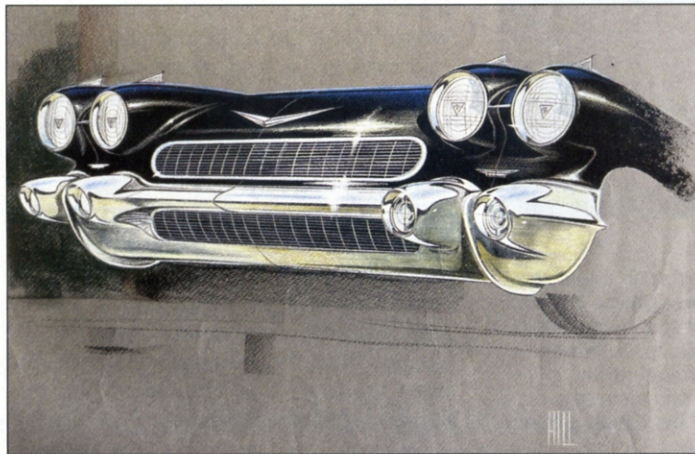
He never assumed he had a slam dunk, though. “It’s always a give and take and kind of a battle, if you will, to see what will come forth and be the correct answer,” he said. “But of course there is no correct answer.”

Except maybe this time. Ron had nailed the moment when the market would shift to favor clean and simple over chromed and cluttered. Fellow designer Leo Pruneau later told *Motor Trend* Ron’s proposal was the only one Design Director Ed Glowacke and VP Bill Mitchell ever considered.

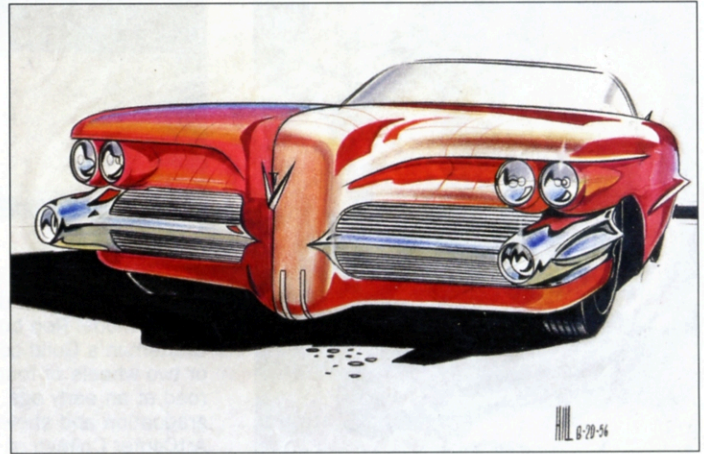
The Italian sporting influence ran deep enough that GM named the Corvair’s new performance version “Corsa,” Italian for “race.” When Chevy unveiled the car September 24, 1964, Mitchell publicly called it “as new as any new car can be.”

Even the jaded automotive press was wowed, as *Car and Driver* confessed in October: “When the pictures of the ’65 Corvair arrived in our offices, the man who opened the envelope actually let out a great shout of delight and amazement on first seeing the car, and in thirty seconds the whole staff was charging around, each wanting to be the first to show somebody else, each wanting the vicarious kick of hearing that characteristic war-whoop from the first-time viewer.”

Derek Jenkins grew up in southern California “car heaven” in the Eighties, smit-



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ten with air-cooled rear-engine Porsches and Volkswagens from overseas. "And then I found out about the Corvair. And I'm like, 'Damn, that's really cool,' you know?"

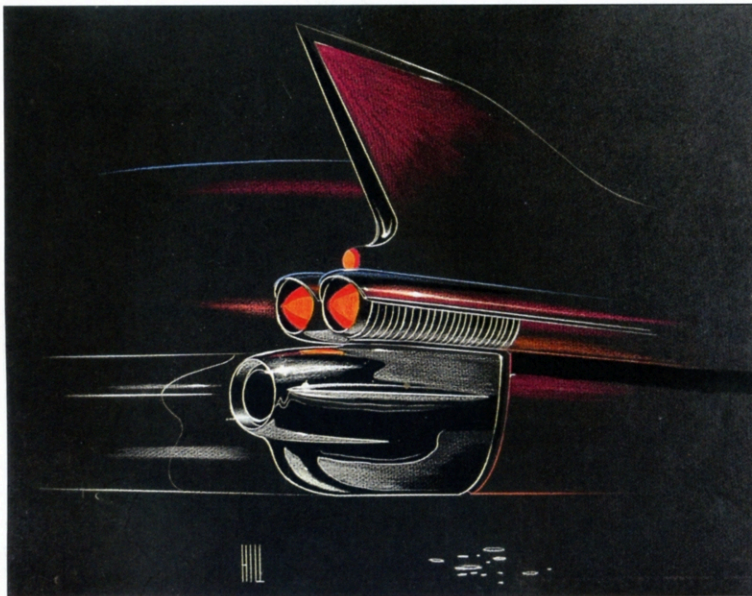
Jenkins is senior vice president of design and brand at California EV startup Lucid Motors. Porsche, VW, Audi, and Mazda are also on his résumé. His favorite car designs all hail from Europe—the Porsche 911 and 928, the Lamborghini Countach, the Lotus Esprit—with one

classic exception from Detroit. You guessed it. "When we're talking about American cars, the (late-model) Corvair is probably number one," he said.

So, from a designer's eye, just what is it about Ron Hill's Corvair? It starts with the silhouette. Bucking the long-hood, short-deck trend, the Corvair has balance. "It has that super unique proportion," Jenkins said, "a kind of equal length at front and rear end, and a really low cabin."

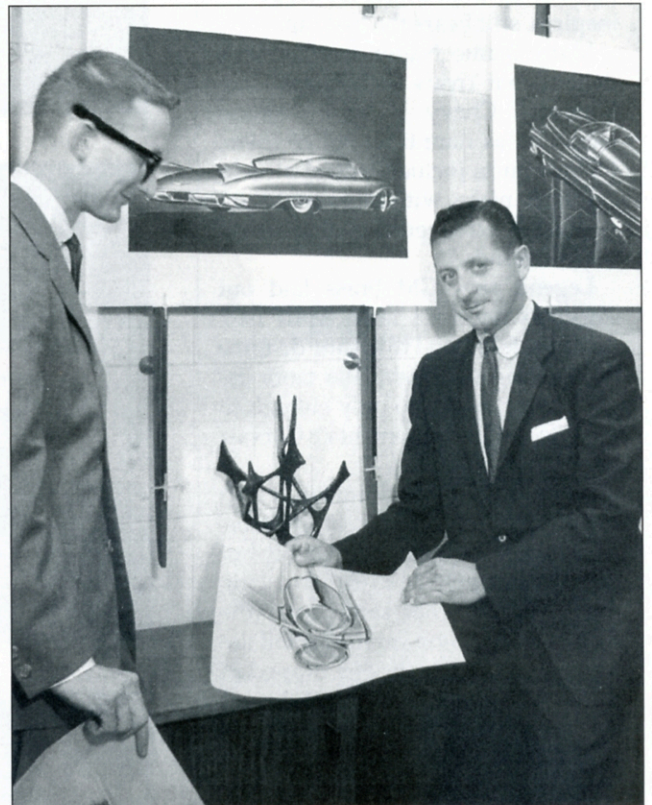
Its clean lines are nothing like the chromed swoops and frills of the previous decade. "That, to me, is just a much more modern approach to design, one that I appreciate greatly. I tend to be more about authenticity and cleanliness and the degree of minimalism that is still bold through simplicity versus bold through addition and complexity."

It's like music. "A good song, it's got a nice melody, it's got a good beat. That doesn't mean it needs to be layered with



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1. This design wouldn't look out of place in a Buck Rogers comic. 2. An undated Cadillac front-end study. 3. The "vee" emblem says Cadillac, but this 1956 sketch gives Pontiac vibes. 4. Ron's sketch points the way to the tail fins of the 1958 Cadillac De Ville. 5, 6. Ron, left, shows a Fifties Cadillac taillight study to GM Design Director Ed Glowacke (5). On the wall at left is a rendering by Ron of his inboard tail fin design for the 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz—his first design approved for production (6).



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The Car With the Rollover Reputation

Unsafe At Any Speed, Ralph Nader's 1965 exposé on lax auto safety standards, shadows any Corvair story. Nader called out the early-model Corvair for unpredictable handling and a purported rollover risk. GM fixed the car's suspension shortcomings before Nader's book even came out, but the Corvair, for all the love it inspires, still bears the bad rap.

Many blame Nader for Corvair's demise, but rivals with names like Mustang, Chevy II, and Camaro were just as daunting. All of them, GM products included, competed in Corvair's niche, with more traditional engine arrangements that eased buyers' minds.

Legend says GM brass laid out Corvair's fate in a terse April 1965 memo, while Ron Hill's tour de force design was still fresh: "No more development work. Do only enough to meet federal requirements." Corvair was frozen in place.

In an era of often dramatic restyling of cars each model year, the Corvair would remain handsome but essentially unchanged for five long years—during that same span the Chevy II used *three* very different designs. Strong sales in 1965 slipped in '66 then plunged. A mere 6000 were sold in 1969, Corvair's final year.

Sad to see it go, Ron is always happy to see one today. "I think they look rather nice," he said. "That's something to be proud of. Yeah."

Jeff Johnston

complexity to be memorable or catchy. Sometimes simplicity and clarity is what draws your attention."

Then there's unity, "the ability to walk around a vehicle and see that there's resolution and harmony from all the different views." An industry photographer reportedly said the late-model Corvair stood alone in being impossible to shoot from a bad angle.

And let's not forget timelessness. "You have a similar-size hood-to-trunk ratio, which in many ways is more like a modern vehicle architecture. That, combined



with the low height, is just a very modern kind of statement. I can even relate that to Lucid. As we've transitioned to electrification, we made it a point that the cabin sits more central to the vehicle to maximize the occupant space, and then

you have a short hood and a short trunk just for cargo reasons. There's something very modern and, in a way, almost futuristic about that."

What about that fake grille management requested? Would that have been a



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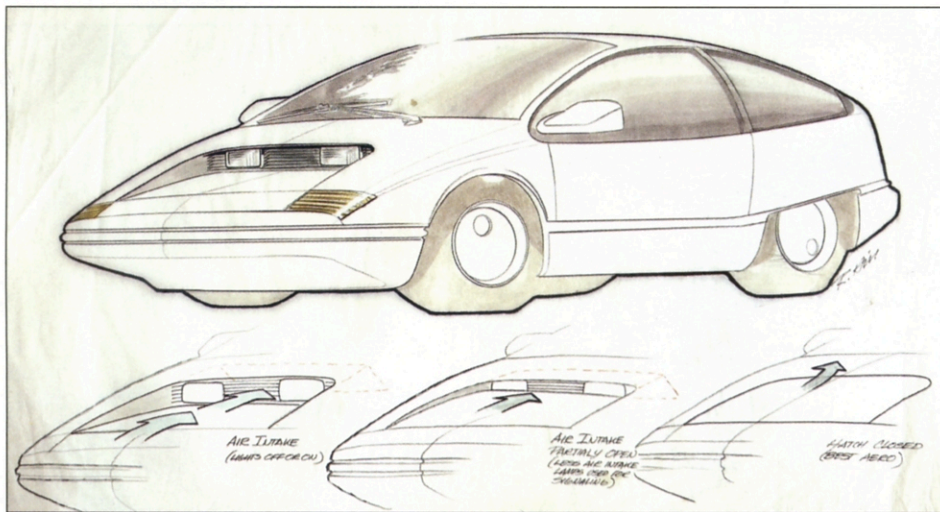
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1. A preproduction Corvair in the studio features a front bumper and headlight treatment different from the production car. 2. A publicity still for the 1965 Corvair shows its graceful lines. 3. Ron, in 2025 at 91 years, with one of his most celebrated designs: the late-model Chevrolet Corvair, produced from 1965-69. (Owner: Ali Shahidi) 4, 5. Ron's Pontiac hood-mounted tach debuted in 1967. 6. An aerodynamics study by Ron features an adjustable air intake.

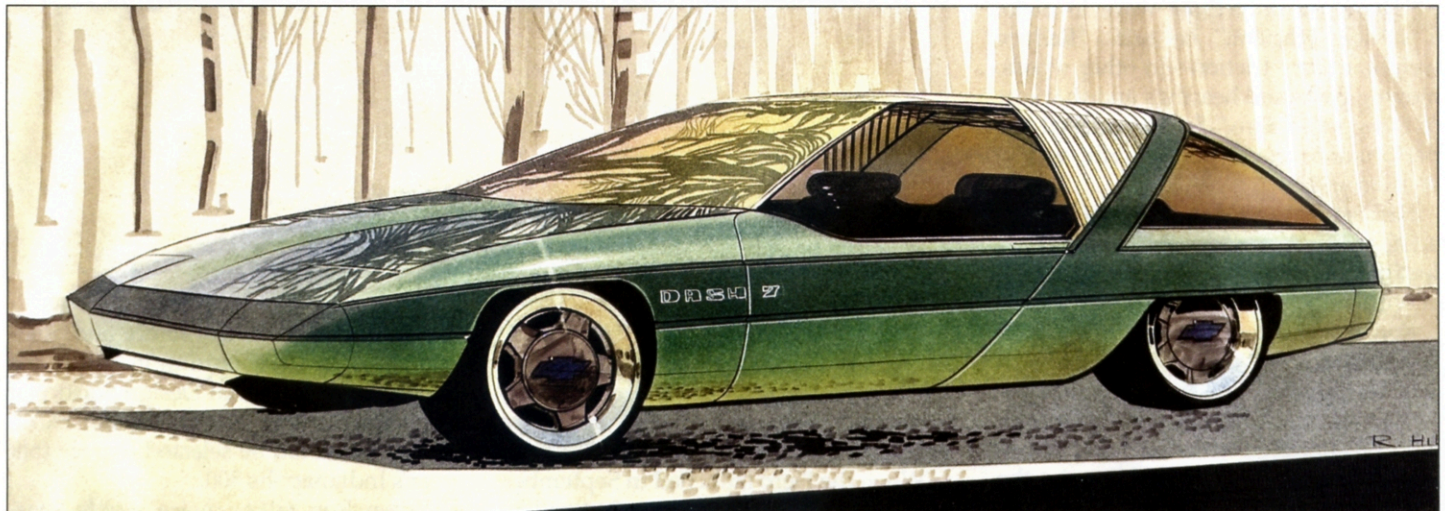
bad move? "One hundred percent," Jenkins said. "Yeah, I think Ron fought the good fight. That grille would have been a tragic mistake."

After the Corvair, Ron moved on to Pontiac, where designers for the 1967 GTO couldn't find space in the muscle car's busy dashboard for a tachometer. "One of the ideas that came up was to put the tach in the header, up in the upper left-hand corner," he recalled. "And I said, 'Well, why not put it out on the hood?'" Damned if they didn't take his suggestion.

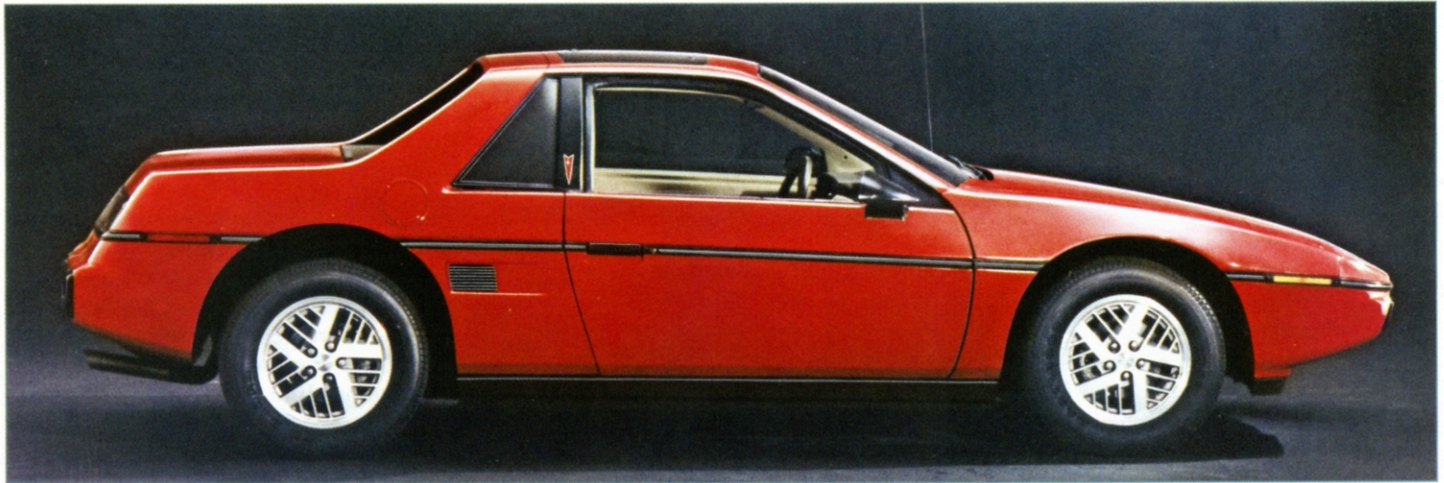
"There was a few people saying, 'Oh, what are you going to do when it freezes?'" Ron remembers. He just pointed to the 400-cubic-inch heat source beneath the hood. "Run the car for about five minutes, and you're going to have no problem." The hood tach became a memorable option for GTOs and Pontiac Firebirds from '67-'72. Ron says GM even included his name on its patent.



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kle like tasteful chrome: Juxtaposition. Ruminant. Cadre. Precursor. Panache. Words suited to a stylist and scholar. It was 1985 when academia came calling. His alma mater, ArtCenter College of Design, recruited him to lead its industrial design department. He retired from ArtCenter as chair of transportation design in 2000.

Interviewed that year for the school's 70th anniversary, Ron mused to *Collectible Automobile*® that anyone can learn to paint and draw, "but what if they don't have anything to say?" He wanted students who were not content with the designs of the day.

"Any designer we turn out of here we would hope would be so dissatisfied with the present state of products, whether they be automobiles or sewing machines, that they would want to change that," he said. "That's what we're looking for: people who believe that there are better ways and more attractive ways to do things."

Personal experience taught him "it's no more difficult to design something that's appealing and creatively new than it is to do something that's humdrum."

Today, Ron savors daily strolls for fitness and plein air watercolor painting for fulfillment: scenes of a pier, a beach, a cityscape, ever-changing Newport Back Bay near his home. "I relax," he said. "I walk at least a mile every day in the morning. I think it's the best possible natural exercise."

Days of judging the world-class Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance are past, but he takes in the occasional car show. "It's kind of fun to go and see the scene of the crime."



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"We Go in Comfort"

A favorite tale from Ron's time in Germany with GM's Opel subsidiary concerns a friendly rendezvous with counterparts at Porsche. It happened around 1969-70, when Porsche meant small sports cars and GM meant huge highway cruisers.

The last thing Ron and his colleagues expected was for the Germans to arrive in a full-size, wide-track, American-made land yacht. "We invited Porsche—said we weren't competitors, so why don't you come and have a fraternal visit? So, we were waiting out on the autobahn, and pretty soon, this Pontiac Bonneville pulled up. And we said, 'What's this?!' And they said, 'Oh, we go in comfort! We don't go in those little dinky cars.' I'm serious. This is a true story!"

Jeff Johnston

1. An early rendering by Ron set the design theme for the innovative mid-engined Pontiac Fiero, his last production design before he departed General Motors, for his alma mater, ArtCenter College of Design. 2. Ron sketched out a plan for the 1984 Pontiac Fiero's unique plastic body panels. 3. The two-seat Pontiac Fiero entered production as a 1984 model. 4. Ron enjoys talking about design and cars on a beautiful day in southern California.

Jason Hill said he often sees his dad's legacy on display—even if anonymously—at such events. "We took him to the Father's Day car show at a local place, and there were two of the '57 Biarritzes and one Corvair there," he told me.

And sometimes when out on the Pacific Coast Highway, they'll spot, say, a 1958 Cadillac—the kind of car that turned heads back in the day and is even more extraordinary to see on the road today. Ron, who designed its wheel covers, takes these encounters in stride. "He's like, 'Oh, yeah, I worked on that car,'" Jason said with a laugh.

Jason—one of four close relatives who followed Ron into automotive design—has designed for not only Porsche, but also the Smart car at Mercedes-Benz, Samsung Motors, and solar startup Aptera. He calls his dad "a designer's designer and educator" whose experience and wisdom has elevated the art and craft of others.

Ron speaks positively about those who carry automotive design forward today. He doesn't pick favorite vehicles—well, maybe Lamborghini—but is happy to see the field he advanced rolling onward. "I think things have evolved and are evolving, and that's good."