

Finding Ron Hill:

My Unexpected Conversations with the Designer of the Late-Model Corvair



By Jeff Johnston

Vintage Photography by GM Media Archive and Ron Hill

Contemporary Photos by Greg Goyo Vargas

Car owner: Ali Shahidi

Growing up in the 1970s, I sketched and dreamed for years after finding a book about car design in my small-town Michigan library. It could have been a first step to an auto design career —

had I not been told my math skills were lacking.

But great car designs will always catch my eye, so when I inherited my friend's 1965 Corsa convertible last year, I recognized it as a work of art

and wondered about the artist.

The '65 Corvair — first of the model's second and final generation — dazzled. *Car and Driver* called it "the most beautiful car to appear in this country since before World War

II." *Automobile Quarterly* said, "From any angle, the Corvair is faultless." And auto journalist Peter Robinson looked back for *Motor Trend* in 2006 and said, "The 1965 Corvair was Ron Hill's masterpiece."

Now, most of us can name plenty of painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, and creators of many kinds. Car designers, though, tend to be little known even though we see their work every day. I knew big names like Earl, Mitchell, and Exner, but Ron Hill was a mystery to me. I wanted to know more.

"Then he asked if I knew Ron was alive and well. You could've knocked me over. Turns out Ron wasn't yet 30 when he redesigned the Corvair. And now, at 91, he was kicking back in southern California."

-Jeff Johnston

I figured an experienced designer in mid-career in the early '60s would be over 100 today — unlikely to still be with us. But I could still do some research for my own enlightenment.

In March 2025, I called archivist Robert Dirig at Ron's alma mater, the prestigious ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, California. He told me Ron had not only designed for General Motors but was a department chair at ArtCenter for 15 years. Sure, he could look up some biogra-



Ron Hill (left) was just 20 years old when he started at GM Styling in 1954 and was responsible for the design of the rear end treatment for the 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz. His tenure at General Motors was long and varied, having worked for all divisions except Olds and also had assignments at some of the foreign subsidiaries, such as Opel, Vauxhall and GM Brazil. With Hill is the legendary Cadillac studio design chief Ed Glowacke, who was responsible for Cadillac's leading edge styling in the 1950s.

phical info for me.

Then he asked if I knew Ron was alive and well. You could've knocked me over. Turns out Ron wasn't yet 30 when he redesigned the Corvair. And at 91, he was kicking back in Southern California.

Bob Dirig didn't know how to reach Ron but knew his son was also an ArtCenter graduate and automotive designer. That was the clue I needed. I found a Jason Hill who worked in auto design in California, sent a note, and crossed my fingers.

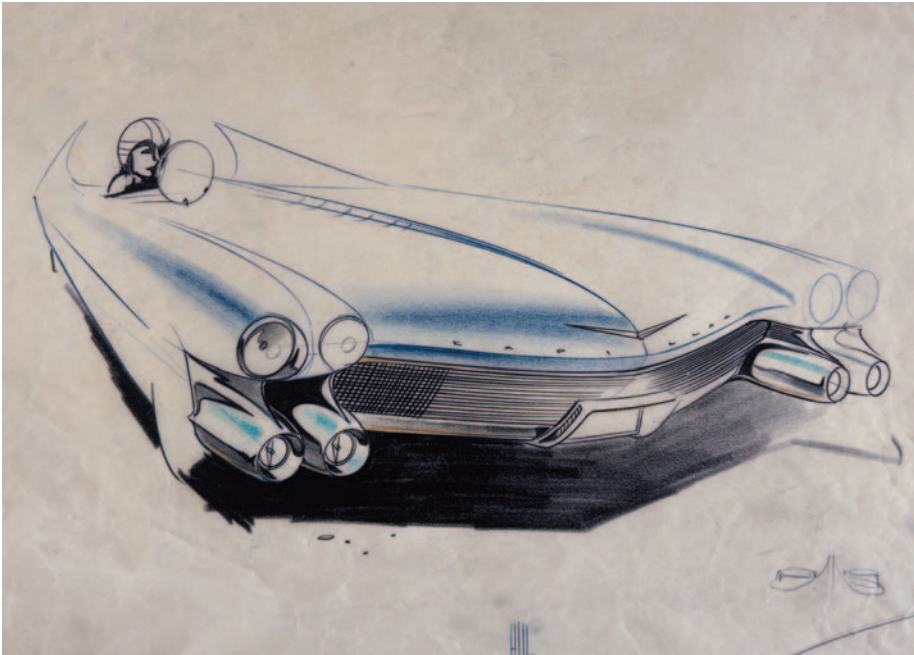
Hours later, Jason emailed back. Bingo! When we talked, Jason said his dad was a little hard of hearing but otherwise up for a video chat or two.

I learned Ron got his start like many of his fellow designers: as a teenager winning a scholarship from the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild model car design competition. General Motors hired him in 1954. Over three decades, he designed for every GM car brand but Oldsmobile, plus foreign subsidiaries Opel, Vauxhall, and GM of Brazil.

Ron called himself simply "a person of the times," but Jason called him extraordinary.

"He was very young and very talented," Jason said of his dad's start at 20. "He was identified as such right away. He was the youngest to get a studio at the time." He said Ron got

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This racy, finned monoposto rendering was penned by Hill when he was at Cadillac. Note the “monacle” windshield and 1960-style turn signals in the bumperettes.

the “maverick assignments” because he didn’t play office politics and could effect new designs without fear. Example: putting the tachometer out on the hood of the ‘67 GTO, a

famously quirky option GM patented under Ron’s name.

Jason remembers Ron describing his Corvaire design: the body side with that single horizontal crease, the pro-

portions reflecting the rear engine, the placement of the cabin — and the front end without a grille, which was a tough sell to management. There was an aeronautic influence and an emphasis on cleaner surfaces.

“If you look at the early ‘60s Chevys, and you took a body cross section, there’s lots of sculpture, lots of highlight and shadow,” he said. “Now comes the (new) Corvaire, and it’s very sheer, very clean, with a singular break in the surface, so your volumes are very pure.”

European road racing was another inspiration. “Everybody wanted to go fast,” Jason said, “and the Italians were doing it with the most style.” Ron interjected: “The most panache!”

Ron knows panache. He styled fabulously finned Cadillacs in the ‘50s, cheated the wind in advanced aerodynamics in the ‘70s, and sketched out the mid-engine ‘84 Pontiac Fiero before moving on to lead ArtCenter’s industrial and transportation design departments until 2000. And back in 1962, when GM brass saw Ron’s Italian-influenced drawings for the next Corvaire, they stopped looking at any others.

On April 17 and May 5, 2025, I spoke with Ron on video from his California apartment. Highlights of our conversations appear below, lightly edited for readability.

Oh, and when I thought to ask if designing had required a lot of math, he said, “No. Absolutely not.” Damn.

On Beginnings

CC: Did cars turn your head early on?



Ron as a young designer at his drawing board.

Hill: Yeah, it was the hot rod era, and cars were very ubiquitous (in Southern California). My first car was a '34 Ford five-window. It was a flat-head with Cyclone heads.

CC: Tell me about building your model for the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild.

Hill: Well, somehow I heard about this, and I thought, "Oh, wow, that's a chance to win a toolbox!" And that was great. So I entered, and I won. Amazingly enough.

CC: Did you get the toolbox?

Hill: I did not. But I won a \$4,000 scholarship. Which was \$50 grand in today's dollars.

CC: How did you decide on Art Center?

Hill: ArtCenter was about the only game in town at that time. It wasn't specifically automotive; it was general design. I still have pictures of some of the cars I designed there.

CC: I noticed one is rear-engined, which, given your later work on the Corvaire, caught my eye. That's a pretty unconventional layout. Is there a reason you were thinking that way at the time?

Hill: The Volkswagen was really on the scene, and it was very influential.

CC: So you graduated from ArtCenter and went straight to General Motors. Did you apply anywhere else?



This clay model, photographed on April 10, 1962, retained some key Corvaire design traits, such as the shark nose, horizontal crease, hardtop style, clean lines: This full-scale clay mock-up from 1962 has many design hallmarks of the production LM Corvaire.

Hill: I wanted to go to General Motors because, of course, I won the scholarship.

of people fighting about the situation — manufacturing people, as well.

On Cadillac

CC: One of your first designs was for the '57 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz.

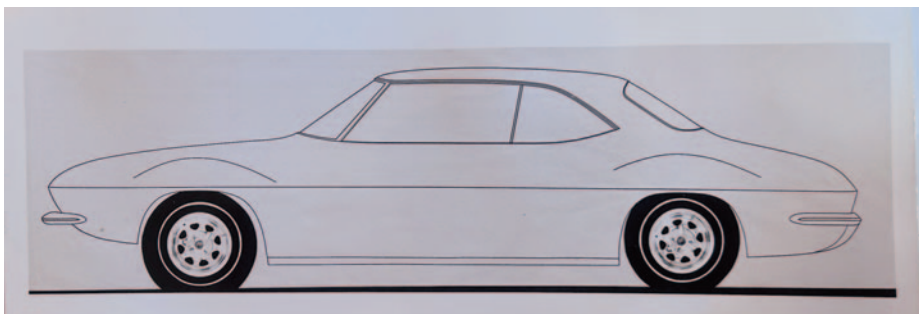
CC: There was controversy over that design?

Hill: Oh, yeah. There were a lot of different influences. But, you know, ultimately it did win the day.

Hill: I pushed the fins inboard because everything was flat like cardboard, and I got tired of that and wanted to do some *form*. But there was a lot of drama going on because

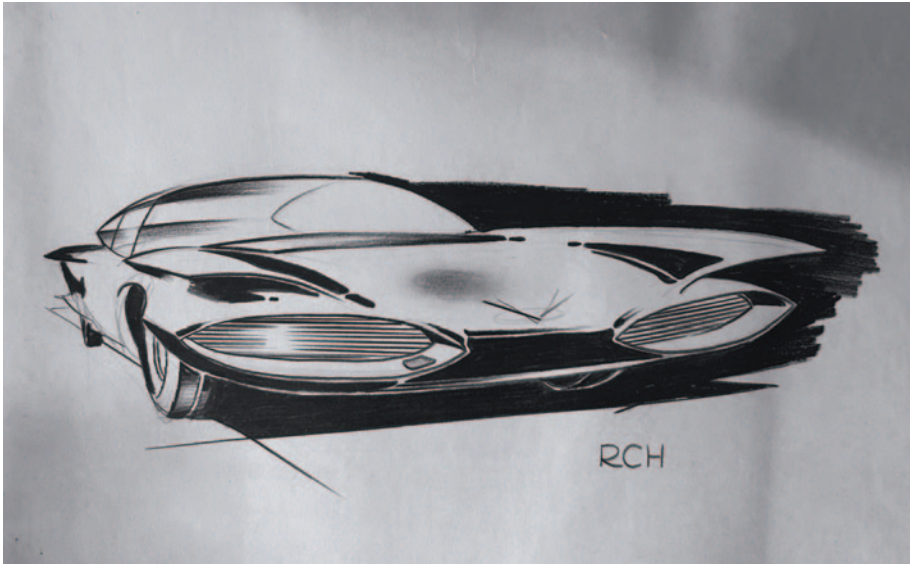
CC: A big success for you as a young designer?

Hill: It was very gratifying.



Ron's LM coupe design as of April 12, 1962 hints at the eventual '65 production vehicle. Neil Madler, head of GM Photography, took this photo of a full-scale "tape drawing" on a studio wall. Note the added contours above the wheelwells not seen in the clay model.

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One of Ron's early sketches looks like it could have predicted TV's Batmobile.



Working at GM subsidiary Opel in West Germany in 1968, Ron (in glasses) looks over a scale model with Opel design leader Chuck Jordan (left) and GM Vice President of Design Bill Mitchell.



A comparison shot, also taken on April 10, 1962 shows the full-size clay Corvair based on Ron's design led by an EM sedan and trailed by what appears to be a version of Chevrolet's XP-849 concept — never shown publicly by GM but considered as a possible future Corvair design alternative.

On Corvair

CC: The '65 Corvair gets attention even today for being beautiful with lovely lines. People call it timeless. You get the credit as the designer on that.

Hill: I had strong input, but I wasn't the sole designer, of course.

CC: As I understand, they tried to get a grille — or a fake grille — onto that car.

Hill: Yeah, they wanted a face.

CC: You didn't want it?

Hill: No, I thought it was correct that the face was without a grille.

CC: What sets that design apart or made it special in your mind?

Hill: The fact that it was rear engine. And that manifested itself in the lines, the design, the bulk of the body being biased rearward. I'm proud that I was able to do it.

CC: You know, '65 was a big change for all GM designs, especially

Chevy. Do you remember that being part of the assignment — saying, “We want to go big with a new look?”

Hill: I don't remember that it was articulated, but it probably was on the minds of people.

CC: Was it on your mind when you were looking at a blank sheet of paper?

Hill: It was certainly important. Of course, we were influenced by the Italians.

CC: Was there a moment when you thought, “Bang, this is it! We’ve got a winner here!”?

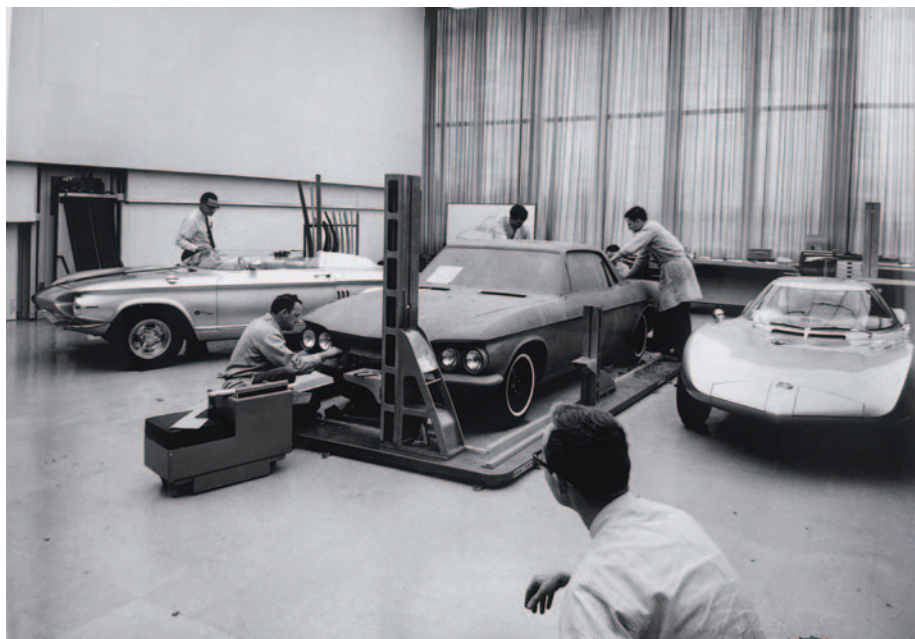
Hill: No, you're never quite that positive, because it's always a give and take and kind of a battle, if you will, to see what will come forth and be the correct answer.

CC: Is there a favorite feature when you look at that car today?

Hill: I kinda look at it as a whole. I think it's a pretty successful design from a complete statement.

CC: The first-generation Corvair is handsome but not especially sporty except for its size. For the redesign, were you thinking sports car?

Hill: I can't recall. You know, that's responding to the needs of the moment. I imagine it's just the way they were marketing it.



Ron (foreground) looks on as clay craftsmen shape his LM design on August 26, 1962. Sharing the studio space are the Corvair Super Spyder (left) and Monza GT concepts.

CC: GM decided in '65 to stop development on the Corvair. Did you know that at the time, and were you disappointed to think that would be the last generation of the Corvair?

Hill: As I recall, I think so. I think it was a bit of a disappointment.



Another shot taken that same day shows the clay model being worked on. The basic proportions are there at this point, though the roofline is only part way through its evolutionary process, eventually taking a contour that calls to mind the full-sized '61-'62 bubbletops. Other details are taking shape but it will be several months before the final design is locked in for production.

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CC: These cars, they're still out there. What do you think when you see one on the road today?

Hill: Well, I think they look rather nice. Something to be proud of, yeah.



This full-size fiberglass model was photographed on January 25, 1963 and is very close to the final production, though several details and features are different from what rolled into the showrooms, including the shape of the rear window corners, the cooling louvers between the rear glass and decklid, as well the license plate recess and the rear valance and vent grilles. Lower rocker trim also varied from the final production version.

CC: Did you ever own a Corvair?

Hill: Yes, I had a Spyder. [Probably a short-term company car; Ron drove a new one every three months.]

On Designing

CC: Is a car's design mostly the work of one person, or is it more of a team effort?

Hill: Usually a team effort, but usually there's a strong someone, or two or three strong influencers.

CC: What did you do in the studio when working on a project?

Hill: We were usually doing conceptual sketches. It was a fluid process, not a one-step kind of thing. There were five or six people in the studio.

CC: Did it feel collaborative, or was there some good-natured competition?

Hill: Oh, yeah, I would say exactly that. Yeah, the competition.

CC: Do you remember how it felt to come up with solutions no one else had thought of?

Hill: It was somewhat rewarding, but it's all part of the job.

CC: A lot of designers were doing their "part of the job," but not many were coming up with designs like the Corvair, so I think some credit is due there. Are there ideas you remember fondly that did not

make it to production?

Hill: I'm sure there were. I just can't specifically recall them. I think there's too many to count. Aero (aerodynamics) work was really significant, in my opinion. There are only three ways to make a vehicle efficient: Reduce weight, reduce friction—moving parts and bearings and that sort of thing—and aero. And aero was, in my opinion, very helpful and significant.

CC: I looked at the Aero 2000 and the Aero 2002 (two of Ron's experimental designs). Do you remember anything guiding the shape of those cars besides just your creative vision? Were there principles you had to learn about how aerodynamics worked?

Hill: It's a little bit of a black art. There are some solid theories: speed, velocity, basic principles. The engineers come and say, "We're gonna add this, and it's gonna do this," and then it does the opposite. You can kind of iterate through what works and what doesn't. And then watch the engineers when the result doesn't match their prediction. That's always fun.

CC: The hood-mounted tach on the GTO is kind of legendary. Do you recall how that came to be?

Hill: Pontiac was getting a really cluttered instrument panel. One of the ideas was to put the tach in the inside header, up in the upper lefthand corner. And I said, "Well, why not put it out on the hood?" There were a few people saying, "Oh, what are you



going to do when it when it freezes" and everything. Well, run the car for about five minutes, and you're going to have no problem.

CC: Sure, it's right over the engine, right?

Hill: Exactly.

CC: The '84 Fiero was a special car, too. How do you feel about it as your swan song for GM?

Hill: I like that car. You know, I was very fond of that. I thought that was a very nice design.

CC: How would you describe Ron Hill, the designer?

Hill: Well, I like to think of myself as

being a person of the times, responding to all the influences.

CC: Looking at today's cars, do you have favorite designs?

Hill: Oh, boy. I mean, obviously the Lambos (Lamborghinis) are pretty darn good.

CC: Do you still look at cars with a designer's eye?

Hill: Oh, yeah. You can't help it.

Editor's note: The author also wrote about Ron Hill's career and the 1965 Corvair design in an article for *Collectible Automobile* magazine's April, 2026 edition. 