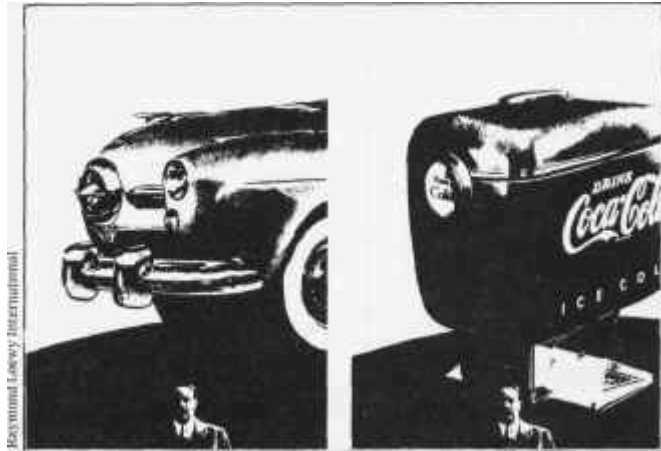


Rick Poynor on the king of consumer curves

## Sign Of The Time



The opening of 'Raymond Loewy: Pioneer Of American Industrial Design' at the Design Museum on 27 March could not have been better timed. After the never-had-it-so-good years of the 1980s, British designers spent the first year of the new decade in the doldrums. Staff were laid off in hundreds, share prices plummeted, and one of the country's most successful design empires, the Michael Peters Group, was put in the hands of the receivers.

So Loewy, the first hero of industrial design, will provide the embattled design establishment with a much needed tonic. Loewy didn't run for cover after the Wall Street Crash: he expanded his company. The exhibition will also act as a timely reminder of an age when the word 'designer' had a more optimistic and visionary ring. Loewy made manufacturers a promise his successors have been repeating ever since: 'Between two products equal in price, function and quality, the better-looking one will outsell the other.' By and large he delivered the goods.

Loewy loved America even before he arrived there from Paris in 1919. In the course of his 50-year career he put his name with unerring accuracy to designs which became icons of the new consumer society, both for America and the world: the Coldspot refrigerator, the Lucky Strike packet, the Greyhound bus, the Coca-Cola bottle (which Loewy slimmed down). Loewy had an ail-American genius for self-promotion, that few designers have matched. By 1949 he had been canonised with a *Time* magazine cover - the first

given to a designer - in which a montage of Loewy designed planes, trains and automobiles whirls around his meticulously-coiffeured head. 'He streamlines the sales curve', says the legend underneath.

Loewy's brash, unapologetic commercialism has always been at the heart of criticisms of his work. To those schooled in the aesthetically-demanding Bauhaus tradition, or the 'morality of objects' preached by the academy of design in Ulm, Loewy and his colleagues' energetic exercises in science-fiction streamlining represented vulgar, exploitative and cynical styling for the masses. What, after all, did an aerodynamic 'teardrop' shape have to do with an entirely static pencil sharpener? But Loewy, urbane, worldly but no moralist, saw his task rather differently. For him, the goal of design was simply to provide the American public with uncomplicated good taste - 'the most advanced yet acceptable design' - at a reasonable price.

Paradoxically, since the heroic years of the 1930s, when Loewy, Walter Dorwin Teague, Henry Dreyfuss and others defined their profession, the processes of industrial design have become increasingly anonymous and impenetrable to a wider public. It was the designers of fashionable interiors and furniture, rather than everyday industrial objects, who became 'names' in the 1980s. If the Loewy exhibition, by concentrating on a charismatic commercial innovator, helps to redirect attention to the products and meanings of material culture, it will have performed a real service.♦