

Meadow Brook - 30th Annual



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Concours d'Elegance

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY, ROCHESTER, MICHIGAN

THE ART THAT moves us

The William L. "Bill" Mitchell Era



1961 Chevrolet Corvette Mako Shark

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and Brian Baker

William L. "Bill" Mitchell succeeded Harley Earl in December, 1958 as General Motors' second styling vice president and ruled the world of auto design through his retirement in 1977. Mitchell was born to style. He was flamboyant, gregarious, and unforgettable. "I never drew a car sitting still," he liked to say. "Every car I've ever drawn, I drew as if it were in motion."

During Mitchell's reign, GM was unquestionably the world's leader in automotive design; in 1965, 62 percent of the cars and trucks sold in America were penned by GM stylists. "I don't believe in surveys and asking people what they want," he contended. "Good taste comes from experience. Good design sells. You lead when you believe in yourself."

Many of Mitchell's best and most significant concept cars were born in his secret "Studio X" hidden deep in the basement of the Warren, Mich. GM Design Center, where access was usually limited to just one hand-picked designer, one engineer and one sculptor. Throughout his 19 years as styling VP, he rotated his favorite designers, sculptors, and engineers through Studio X, where they could explore his design visions unmolested by corporate executives, divisional general managers and others who would interfere. Among these were the 1959 Corvette Sting Ray racer, the 1961 Corvette Mako Shark I and the 1969 Corvette Manta Ray.

1959 Stingray Special Racer

Mitchell's first Studio X design was his Stingray Special race car. As a competent Corvette-based racer, he funded its efforts out of his own pocket. Much more importantly, it introduced the folded-crease styling that would become the trademark of his 1960s designs and marked the beginning of the path to his revolutionary 1963 production Corvette Stingray.

1961 Chevrolet Mako Shark I

While deep-sea fishing on vacation in Bimini, Mitchell caught a Mako shark. He had it mounted for his office and challenged Studio X to create a shark-inspired Corvette concept painted to match its intriguing gradient color scheme. They tried twice but could not satisfy him. On their third try, they stole the shark from his office and painted it to match the car. Powered by a rare race-tuned 427 cid ZL1 aluminum V8 with side pipes, the Mako shakes a building when it's started inside. It is the embodiment of Mitchell: loud, flamboyant and unforgettable.

1969 Corvette Manta Ray

A flashier-still 1965 Mako Shark II previewed the flamboyant-fendered, Coke-bottle-waisted 1968 production Corvette. Re-fashioned for 1969 into the Manta Ray concept, with a paint scheme matching the original Mako Shark's, it became one of Mitchell's favorite design models for his own personal transportation.

These memorable Corvette concepts will be displayed in a first-ever "Bill Mitchell Concepts" class as one of four honoring General Motors' 100th anniversary at the 2008 Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance. Completing the circle will be the rear-engine Monza SS and Monza GT from 1962, the mid-engine

Chevrolet Astro I, II and III from 1967-69 and a pair of sport-luxury Buick Riviera concepts, the 1963 Silver Arrow I and 1971 Silver Arrow III.

Chevrolet Corvair Monza GT and SS

Mitchell loved the design possibilities offered by the air-cooled, rear-engine Corvair's component set, especially not having a big lump of an engine up front. The Monza GT's unique features include a one-piece canopy that pivots upward for access to its silver interior. The SS's five-inch-high windscreen sweeps around the cockpit, and its rear targa wing includes a built-in roll bar. Developed in 1962, both slippery shapes reflect substantial wind-tunnel testing.

Chevrolet Astro 1, Astro II and Astro III

A 1967 study allowing designers to explore the boundaries between beauty and low-drag forms, Astro I is the lowest concept model ever created by GM Design -- less than three feet high. A touch of a flush release pad causes the canopy to rise electrically. Once inside, occupants are lowered to a reclining position with another button.

By contrast, the 1968 Astro II is a much more practical mid-engine sports car. A collaboration between GM Design and GM Research, it was one of many mid-engine concepts designed with future Corvettes in mind.

The radical 1969 Astro III is a two-passenger experimental

car resembling an executive jet aircraft, even down to its "tricycle" wheel arrangement...though it actually has four wheels, with the front pair close together under its nose. Gas turbine powered, it was envisioned as a high-performance vehicle suited for future restricted access or system-controlled highways. The power canopy moves forward and upward for entry, and rear vision is provided by closed-circuit TV with a screen on the center console.

Buick Riviera Silver Arrow I and Silver Arrow III

As soon as production of the ground-breaking 1963 Buick Riviera began, Mitchell grabbed one off the assembly line, converted it into a show vehicle and drove it regularly. Among other modifications, its roof is lowered more than two inches and its interior is trimmed in a special silver leather.

Based on the new for 1971 "Boattail" Riviera, Silver Arrow III marked the beginning of Mitchell's fascination with reviving classic prewar proportions. Beyond a lowered roofline, its design features include high-level warning lights doubling as secondary turn signals, redesigned bumpers and quarter windows, a plush silver leather interior and real wire wheels.

We hope you enjoy the rich design heritage of General Motors and the exceptional group of William Mitchell concept classics exhibited today at the 30th annual Meadow Brook Concours provided through the courtesy of General Motors Heritage Center. ■

1962 Chevrolet Monza SS and GT



1963 Buick Silver Arrow I



1968 Chevrolet Astro II

