

Steve Jobs The Next Raymond Loewy

By Applelinks Contributing Editor - Charles W. Moore.

In one of the more interesting commentaries about Apple's new iMac among the dozens that have sprouted in the online and print tech press since Monday, Michael S. Malone, Editor at Large for Forbes ASAP, suggests that Steve Jobs has become the Raymond Loewy of computer design, and that he may be turning Apple into the Studebaker of PC makers.

Malone, who is presumably a business technocrat by philosophical bent, since he writes for Forbes, did not mean the Jobs/Loewy we comparison as a compliment, and certainly not the Studebaker/Apple analogy. He shows where he's coming from with the comment: "For Windows users, there is the joy of poking fun at obsessed, humorless Apple fanatics as they pay too much for underequipped machines that never have enough software." However, there are a lot worse people to be compared with than Raymond Loewy, who was arguably the greatest American industrial designer of the 20th century.

As for Studebaker, it may not have been the best-managed automaker, especially toward the last, but it didn't offend by being boring. My family drove Studebakers during the middle years of the last century, our last one, a mint-green 1952 Land Cruiser four-door model, identical except for color to the one that appears below, died from terminal rust somewhere around 1960.

I remember it well and fondly, the family bus of my young childhood. The last Studebaker I was close-up and personal with was a 1966 model that belonged to a housemate back in 1972, one of the last ones built, in Hamilton Ontario, after Studebaker shut down its historic South Bend Indiana plant, and fled to Canada. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Raymond Loewy was not, as Michael Malone casts him, the head of Studebaker, or even a Studebaker employee, but rather ran his own industrial design firm to which Studebaker subcontracted most of its styling and body design work from 1938 through 1955, and then again from 1961 until the end. "My association with Studebaker started in 1938 and lasted until 1962," Loewy wrote in his autobiography *Never Leave Well Enough Alone*, in which he also stated, "The keynote of my work was simplification."

Automobile design was actually just a sideline for Loewy, who was the best-known industrial designer in America from the 1930's to the 1960's, and something of a Renaissance man whose design office styled everything from household appliances to railway locomotives such as the S-1 Steam locomotive for the Pennsylvania Railroad and the GG1 electric locomotive,

to aircraft, to cigarette and soda cracker packaging. The famous Lucky Strike cigarette package bullseye logo was his, as were the 1929 Gestetner document duplicating machine, the big red Coca-Cola soda fountain dispensers of the 1960's,

Coke can logos, the U.S. Post Office logo, art-deco chrome furniture, the Shell and Exxon logos, the 1947 line of Hallicrafter radio receivers, the Greyhound bus, and even Air Force 1.

When President John F. Kennedy decided his new Boeing 707 aircraft, the original Air Force 1, needed a distinctive look, he called on Raymond Loewy to come up with a new design, which turned out to be the blue and white color scheme that has more or less carried to this day. "United States of America" was emblazoned on the side of the fuselage. An American flag was painted on the tail, and because this would be the president's aircraft, a presidential seal was added on both sides of the nose.

Like Steve Jobs this week, Raymond Loewy appeared on the cover of Time Magazine, this instance on the October 31, 1949, issue.

It was said of Loewy that he was the only American who could cross the country in a car, a bus, a train, or an airplane, all of his own design. I don't doubt for a minute that were he alive today (he died in 1986), he would be designing computers, and they would likely be very much as ground-breaking and convention-busting as the new iMac that Steve Jobs unveiled this week.

Now, some might point out that Mr. Jobs is not really a designer by profession or training at all, but rather a visionary conceptualizer, and that Apple's chief designer, Jonathan Ive, actually does all the Mac design heavy lifting these days. True enough, but the same was sometimes said of Loewy, some of whose designer employees accused him of taking credit for their work. However, most considered working with him a privilege. To be sure, Loewy would be more comfortable in a drawing office, or whatever the digital equivalent is these days, than Steve Jobs is, but the analogy is still apt. Jobs told Time magazine that his inspiration for the new iMac's form factor came from looking at the sunflowers in his wife's vegetable garden.

Loewy was a generalist and a polymath of the sort that may well be extinct now in this era of extreme specialization.

Steve Jobs' range is of course far narrower than Loewy's was, but in the context of the IT world, he is also a generalist, with his interest in movies and photography as well as computers.

The original, compact Mac was an elegant piece of design work on which Jobs had a strong influence -- a clean, elegant, classic look that hasn't diminished in its attractiveness with the passage of nearly two decades. After Jobs was pushed out of Apple in 1985, Mac styling, with rare exceptions, became bland and boring, much as virtually all Wintel PCs are. Some of those Macs were plug-ugly; others just mediocre and derivative.

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1996, Mac styling recovered its panache, first with the WallStreet PowerBook, followed by the iMac, and then the Yosemite/Yikes/Sawtooth/Quicksilver series of Power Mac towers, and the more recent designs.

Loewy's most famous design paradigm was MAYA -- "Most Advanced Yet Acceptable." Any design that drastically departed from the accepted norm would amount to a risk to the company, so theoretically, the MAYA stage is finding the limit that society will place on your design in recognition that even though a design may be considered advanced, it may not be popularly accepted. That would certainly seem to apply to Steve Jobs design philosophy as well. Both men push(ed) the envelope of what the public would embrace, and occasionally push(ed) it a bit too far, perhaps, as with Loewy's 1950 and '51 "airplane nose" Studies, and Jobs' Cube.

Loewy, who was a French emigre who had began his career as a graphic artist for corporate advertising, had already made a name for himself in the industrial design field by the late 30's when he became associated with Studebaker, which took advantage of his high public profile and promoted him in their advertising. The arms-length relationship Studebaker had with Raymond Loewy Associates also paid off for the company immediately following World War II, since the American automakers had agreed not to expend wartime resources designing consumer products. Studebaker was part of the war effort too of course, but since Loewy's firm was an independent entity, he was under no such restriction, and thus was able to have a refreshed, modern design ready for launch in 1946 as a '47 model, two years before Studebaker's competitors like Ford and Chevrolet got their first true post-war models out the factory gate in 1949.

The 1947 Studebaker created the standard for auto design that would be followed by virtually all U.S. car designers during the 50's late 40's and the 1950's; an envelope body with the fender lines merged into the passenger, engine, and baggage compartments, a turret top, and a lower, wider stance than pre-war models had.

That design evolved into the aforementioned "airplane nose" styling of the 1950-51 models, which were daringly different, but not especially well-received by the public (Loewy's Cube?).

Studebaker reverted to a more conventional front end styling for the 1952 model.

But the '52 Studie was really just a lame-duck stopgap model in anticipation of what may have been Raymond Loewy's finest automotive design, the 1953 Studebaker Starliner, or "Starlight Coupe," which more than a few critics have called the best-looking automobile of the 20th century, and which is frequently included in lists of the 10 most beautiful cars ever. The Museum of Modern Art acclaimed it as not just a superb piece of automotive industrial design, but as "a work of art."

Breaking with contemporary convention again, Loewy's South Bend, Indiana, design team, headed by Robert E. Bourke, drew a low-slung, very clean, two-door hardtop with minimal and tastefully applied chrome accents. The nose retained a vestige of Loewy's airplane-nose motif, but much more subtle, and a one-piece, wrap-around rear window made for a light and airy greenhouse. It was a distinctly American car -- not a derivative knockoff of what the Italians were doing at the time, but years ahead of its U.S. competitors' styling efforts. It made the cover of Time magazine too.

Unfortunately, Studebaker management fumbled the Starliner's marketing, turning it into a fiasco. A more conservative and somewhat homely-looking four-door sedan was also commissioned, and the company tooled up for about an 80/20 percentage split of sedan/coupe production. As it turned out, sales demand went more like 60/40, with buyers blown away by the beautiful two-door model. Production lines were hastily reconfigured to crank out more coupes; workmanship and reliability suffered; and ironically, the 1953 model marked the real beginning of Studebaker's agonizing descent into oblivion. Looking for a scapegoat, the company's management led by Jim Nance fired Loewy's design firm in 1955.

Michael Malone suggests that the new iMac might prove a similar sort of watershed for Apple. I'm inclined to think not. There is no reason to anticipate the sort of production problems with the iMac that plagued Studebaker in the early 1950's, and Steve Jobs, visionary or not, is a lot smarter marketing strategist than those Studebaker execs were (Malone concedes Jobs' marketing savvy).

It's interesting, though, that Jobs has mused about the new iMac design being timeless enough to last perhaps ten years. Loewy's Starliner Coupe design actually stayed in production for 12 years, metamorphosing into the sporty Studebaker Hawk which was sold in a bewildering array of variants (Hawk, Flight Hawk, Power Hawk, Sky Hawk, Golden Hawk, Silver Hawk, and Gran Turismo Hawk), with Mercedes Benz-like stand-up grilles (Studebaker was the North American distributor for Mercedes in the late 50's and early 60's), and unfortunately, in 1957, contemporaneously trendy tail fins grafted onto Loewy and Bourke's beautiful original lines.

With or without the fins, the Hawk was a striking looking car, especially the early ones and the Gran Turismo Hawk of 1962-64 that had a squared-off tail section and added a formal roofline that again would be copied by Studebaker's erstwhile competitors -- 10-20 years later.

There was also even a Packard Hawk version of the coupe, with a hideous fiberglass front clip grafted on, that was sold for the 1957 and 1958 model years, after Studebaker sealed its fate by buying failed luxury car manufacturer Packard in 1954. However none of the Hawks matched the sublimely tasteful simplicity of the Starlight Coupe.

However, Raymond Loewy had one more crack at saving Studebaker, much as Steve Jobs did at saving Apple when he returned from exile in 1996. Unlike Jobs, Loewy failed, but no fault to him.

In February, 1961, Sherwood Egbert was named president of Studebaker, taking on the challenging task of stopping the bleeding. On March 9th 1961, Egbert contacted Raymond Loewy, invited him back, and offered him a commission to design a new, four-passenger sports car, which they wanted ready to unveil by April, 1962, incredibly short notice in an industry where the customary gestation period for new design was more like three to four years. However, the new car would use a spruced-up version of the corporate Studebaker chassis that dated back to the 1947 model, and the company's off-the-shelf engines.

Loewy and his design team of John Ebstein, Robert Andrews and Tom Kellogg immediately began working night and day in a rented house at Palm Springs, California, and had a one-eighth scale clay model readied in just three weeks, whose shape was approved with only a few alterations suggested by Sherwood Egbert. A full size clay model was completed by April 27th -- barely 40 days since Loewy and his team began work.

The wedge-shaped Avanti, as it was called, was even more radically avant-garde than the Starliner Coupe had been. It was an incredibly clean design for the time, with almost no chrome; indeed it had no grille. There were knife-edge fenders, an asymmetrical accent bulge down the driver's side of the hood, a wasp waisted or "Coke-bottle" form factor that was copied by most U.S. manufacturers later in the decade, aircraft-type overhead controls, and a wraparound a rear window reminiscent of the Starliner.

Unfortunately, it was too late. The Avanti was even more plagued with production and teething problems than the

Starliner had been. The fiberglass body plant workers went on strike. Orders were canceled by more and more frustrated would-be buyers. Studebaker's automotive operations were running at barely half the break-even point. In October, 1963, Studebaker packed it in, and the South Bend production lines were stopped. The Lark sedan continued in production in Canada for another two years, with Chevrolet engines but the Avanti and the Hawk were terminated.

The fiberglass body of the Avanti was years, even decades ahead of its time, and it proved it by surviving Studebaker's demise to be revived and remain in limited production for the better part of the next 30 years. The Avanti, rather than Lee Iacocca's Ford Mustang, which it preceded by two years, was really the first American pony-car; the Mustang was an Avanti copy-cat. The Avanti still looked good in 1991, when production of the original model (so to speak) finally ceased.

And the original Avanti design lives on 40 years later in the new Avanti that is being produced in Georgia, updated for the new century by former Loewy associate Tom Kellogg, who was part of that team that produced the 40 day wonder back in 1961.

The Avanti was and is a truly timeless design, as, I think, the new iMac will prove to be.

So if I were Steve Jobs, I would be flattered at being compared to Raymond Loewy, but I think Michael Malone's analogy holds much less water comparing Apple to Studebaker. Jobs, as I noted above, is a much more canny and shrewd marketer than Sherwood Egbert and the rest of the Studebaker board were back in the 50's and 60's, and unlike Loewy vis a vis Studebaker, Jobs really is head of Apple.

Also, the Mac is a cutting age product. An analogy to the Avanti would be more accurate if Apple had superimposed the Aqua interface on top of the old Mac OS core, not the robust BSD UNIX. Apple is truly innovative, as the iPod, iTunes, iPhoto, and of course the Mac OS and Mac hardware exemplify. Studebaker was already playing catch-up and steadily falling behind engineering-wise by the mid-'50's.

However, there are some legitimate parallels. Studebaker aficionados were a tenaciously loyal lot, and the core constituency held the faith to the end. Studebaker had simply fallen too far behind by 1962 to attract new converts, or even to keep non-enthusiast owners coming back at trade-in time.

Apple isn't in that sort of shape, at least yet, but its market share has been pretty much stagnant for the past three or four years, and that is cause for concern. One hopes that the new iMac will prove enough of a consumer draw to add a point or two to Apple's market share, but the price, although it is well-justified by content and value, is going to be an inhibition to mass adoption.

I like the new machine. I'm no longer a desktop computer guy, which I proved to myself by buying a Cube last spring, but this iMac is a desktop that appeals to many of the same things that make me a PowerBook fan (it's manufactured by Quanta of Taiwan; the same firm that supplies the Titanium PowerBook) -- an LCD monitor, relatively small size and weight (10 lbs. less than the Cube when you factor in the monitor and power brick), and relative self-containedness. However, you are still tethered to an AC outlet.

It's impossible not to compare this iMac to the Cube. Aesthetically, I think the Cube was much more elegant than the iMac's half-sphere CPU idea, at least the CPU part of the Cube. That elegance was diminished substantially by the necessity of a tangle of cables, an external monitor, external speakers with an external amplifier, and especially that homely hulk of a power supply brick, all of which made the Cube look like it was hooked up to life support. Not only that, but you had to upend the Cube in order to hook that life-support up. The Cube really didn't live up to Loewy's MAYA paradigm.

Apple has done a lot better job of addressing these issues with the new iMac. The display is of course integrated with the CPU, and in a quite wonderful way. The power supply is now internal, and there is an internal speaker, although the high-end model does still come with Cube-type Apple Pro satellite units.

The value is there too. An 800 MHz iMac, including the 15 in. monitor and a Superdrive sells for the same price as a 450 MHz Cube with no monitor and just a DVD-ROM drive did 18 months ago. The lack of internal expansion potential is a shortcoming, but so it was with a Cube, and that's really another issue anyway. If you want PCI and extra RAM slots, you can buy a Power Mac tower, which is another Jobs-influenced design that I think Loewy would have approved of.

The operative question at this juncture is, will the iMac meet the MAYA test with consumers? We'll just have to wait and see.

Charles W. Moore - cwmoore@applelinks.com

Further Reading - [New Raymond Loewy Film Made On Macs and Raymond Loewy's Custom Cadillac](#)

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