

Unique Corvette designs on display at Scarab Club

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(Photo: Larry Shinoda)

More than 100 rare paintings, drawings and scale models in a unique display at the Scarab Club in Midtown Detroit illustrate the intersection of fine art and automotive design through the history of America's greatest sports car, the Chevrolet Corvette.

The free exhibition is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see a sketch by Harley Earl, the man who created the concept of automotive design and led GM styling department from its inception as the "color and trim" department to its peak as a global trendsetter and the driving force behind countless classics.

Designer Robert Cumberford — now a columnist for Automobile magazine — saved the sketch after a meeting with Earl. A letter from him describes a 1955 conversation that led to the sketch as Cumberford worked to transform the Oldsmobile Golden Rocket concept car into a production design for the 1958 Corvette.

"American Dreaming: Corvette 7 Generations and Beyond" also includes a 1960 painting by designer Larry Shinoda — the automotive equivalent of getting a look at an unknown Van Gogh trial run for "Starry Night."

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The majority of the cars in the exhibition never made it to production, though. Automakers normally destroy designs they don't make, but artists occasionally save favorite works from the shredder. Being caught with a rolled watercolor up your sleeve could cost a designer their job, so relatively few survive today, said Royal Oak artist Robert Edwards, who's working on a documentary about Detroit car design.

"This is Detroit art," Edwards said. "If you were anywhere on Earth and you saw these, you'd think of Detroit."

The exhibition includes several scale models, including two made for Bill Mitchell, who became GM's second design chief when Earl retired in 1958. A model of the legendary Stingray Racer is driven by a replica of Mitchell himself, wearing old-style goggles and helmet.

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A model of the Stingray Racer has a tiny version of GM design chief Bill Mitchell, the car's internal champion, at the wheel. (Photo: Mark Phelan/Detroit Free Press)

Retired GM designer Bill Porter opened the exhibit by becoming the latest artist invited to sign one of the ceiling beams in the club's second-story drawing room. The tradition began when the club opened its current location on Farnsworth Street in 1928. Porter, who led the design of cars including the 1968 Pontiac GTO, '70 Firebird, '73 Trans Am and '95 Buick Riviera, joins signatories that include Diego Rivera, John Dos Passos and Isamu Noguchi.

Founded 100 years ago, the Scarab Club has a record 420 members this year. They include artists, architects, designers and people who appreciate art and the role it plays in Detroit's history.

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The Corvette Art exhibition at the Scarab Club. (Photo: Mark Phelan, Detroit Free Press)

"Our doors are open," Scarab Club Executive Director Ashley Hennen said, standing before a fireplace in the spacious room. "This is a good spot to sit, write, study or relax.

"It's a community for people who enjoy contemporary art."

The club is a nonprofit. Entrance to the exhibition is free, but donations are welcome. Copies of the exhibition poster, which includes a wild-looking Corvette concept in front of a 1950s-style jet fighter, and the exhibition catalog are for sale at the club. Membership starts at \$120 a year, with discounts available for students and faculty.

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The poster and catalogue for the show are available from the Scarab Club (Photo: Mark Phelan/Detroit Free Press)

"American Dreaming: Corvette 7 Generations and Beyond"

Through Feb. 18

12-5 p.m.

Wednesday-Sunday

The Scarab Club

217 Farnsworth St.

Detroit.

Free Admission, donations welcome

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