



# Bill Mitchell brings style to GM with a capital "S"

By Leo Levine

It was Alfred P. Sloan Jr., the *eminence* *grise* of American industry, he was the one who said it. And because he did, and because he also happened to build this largest of all profit-making institutions, the head man at the General Motors Styling Center has a small block of wood, on which is mounted a silver plate. On it are Alfred P.'s words:

"I'm sure we all realize how much appearance has to do with sales; with all cars fairly good mechanically it is a dominating proposition and in a product such as ours, where the individual appeal is so great, it means a tremendous influence on our future prosperity." — July, 8, 1926

So downstairs, in the middle of all that chrome and glass and marble and greenery

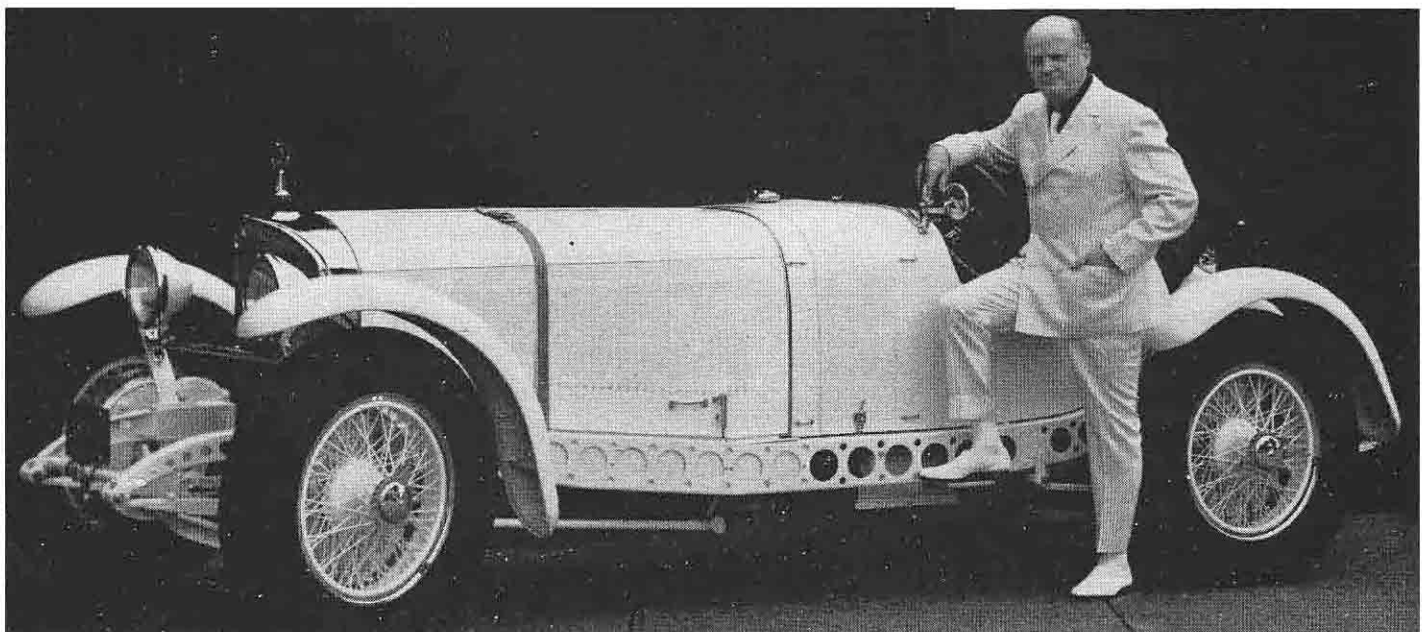
and shimmering pools and all the rest of the ultra-ultra there is a quasi-Gothic portrait of Sloan, just as a reminder to everyone that this is a place of business and don't let all those Hollywood-style trappings fool you.

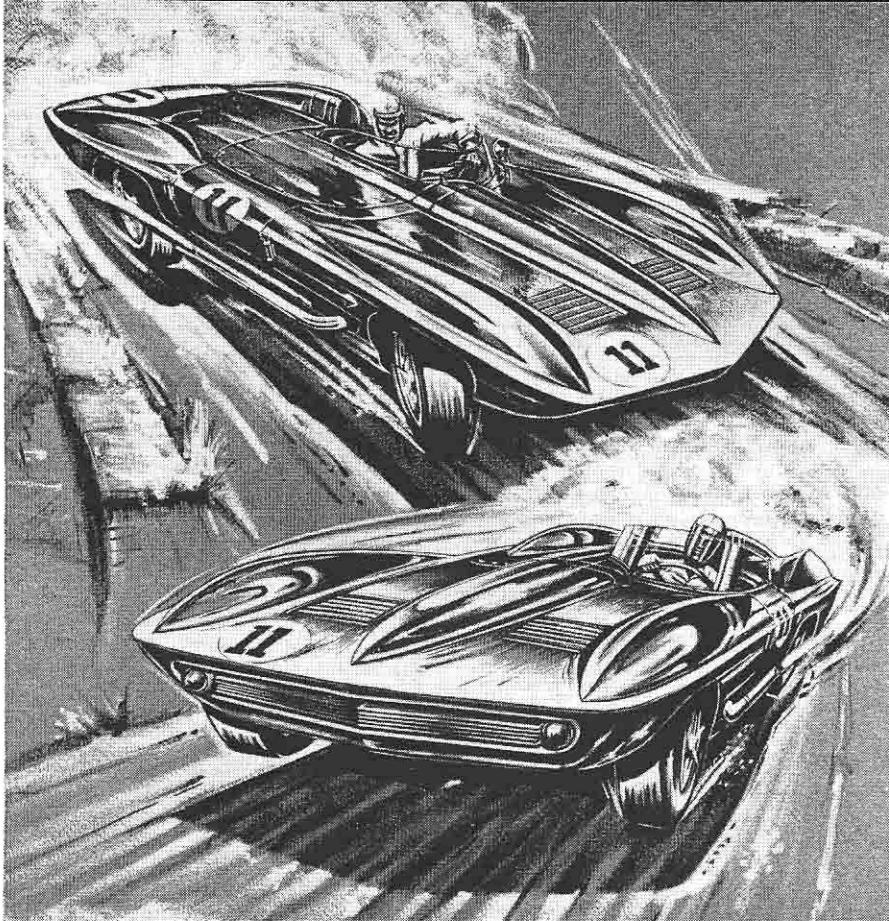
Upstairs it is the same, except that you have to read between the lines, as it were, to find the spirit of Mr. Sloan. Upstairs is Bill Mitchell's office, almost large enough for Green Bay to practice in without disturbing any of the furniture, with Muzak coming from behind the curtains, and with a free-form, laminated-wood desk — not just the top; the laminations continue down the front as the curves descend toward the floor and also drift away along a wall until they terminate at a point somewhere near the Oshkosh city limits. It looks as if it would have been cheaper had they made it out of dollar bills.

If you happen to be a large corporation, like, say, General Motors, it is always good to have a guy like Mitchell on the premises, and if he wants one of those fancy desks for his office, well, that's all *right, too*.

The principal reason for it being advantageous to employ Mitchell is that he is very good at what he does, which is being the world's most influential stylist of consumer products. Last year alone, almost 7,000,000 cars, trucks and buses were manufactured according to the styling ideas of his staff. (Add to this number at least twice as many refrigerators and other household appliances, plus railroad trains, earth-moving equipment and lord knows what else.) No other man has the responsibility for the esthetic appeal of so many varied consumer products, a great percentage of which are purchased over those of their competitors because of the way they *look* rather than for any marked functional superiority.

To achieve this mass appeal, Mitchell has a 1700-man staff in Detroit, plus





At Elkhart Lake the original Corvette Sting Ray, with Dick Thompson at the wheel, made an impressive subject for the sketch pad . . . of William L. Mitchell, the car's owner. Sting Ray, with Mitchell "Touch" was an instant sales success.

styling groups in Europe, Australia, South Africa and other places. (At GM, even though the various divisions are in charge of their products, they are all designed out of a central office.)

And before you sniff and start to argue that Mitchell can't hold a candle to some of the more exotic Italians, don't forget that *they* don't have to deal with big and bulky humpers, or with large-size front license plates, and that *they* don't have to design a car that can be produced cheaply. They also don't have to contend with a market that demands an annual model change, or with the problem of designing (for example) Chevelles, Tempests, Buick Specials and Olds F85s on the same basic body, and doing it every year.

If you think Mitchell isn't the guy who is doing it, that he is too busy looking pretty or sitting in that fancy office or shaking hands at the Paris auto show, you're kidding yourself. There may be several thousand employees in Styling, but he's the boss, and if he doesn't think it will have consumer appeal, it never gets shown to management. ("Now take some of those creative boys we have over in the studios . . . they can be prolific as hell, knock the stuff out just like that, one after another . . ." and then he pauses for a moment and smiles, ever so slightly . . . "But they don't know which one to pick up." Mitchell, obviously, does, and whereas he made his reputation on the strength of his individual talent,

he maintains it by virtue of his taste and experience.)

As a final factor, don't forget that when one of the Italians gets a good idea, he more or less just goes ahead and builds it, shows it at the Turin exhibition, magazines like this one take pretty pictures of it, and you wonder why Detroit can't do the same. The reasons are those already mentioned, plus the fact that the Italian doesn't have to sell his design to a lot of finance-oriented vice presidents and sales managers who still think Farina is something you eat for breakfast. Mitchell's

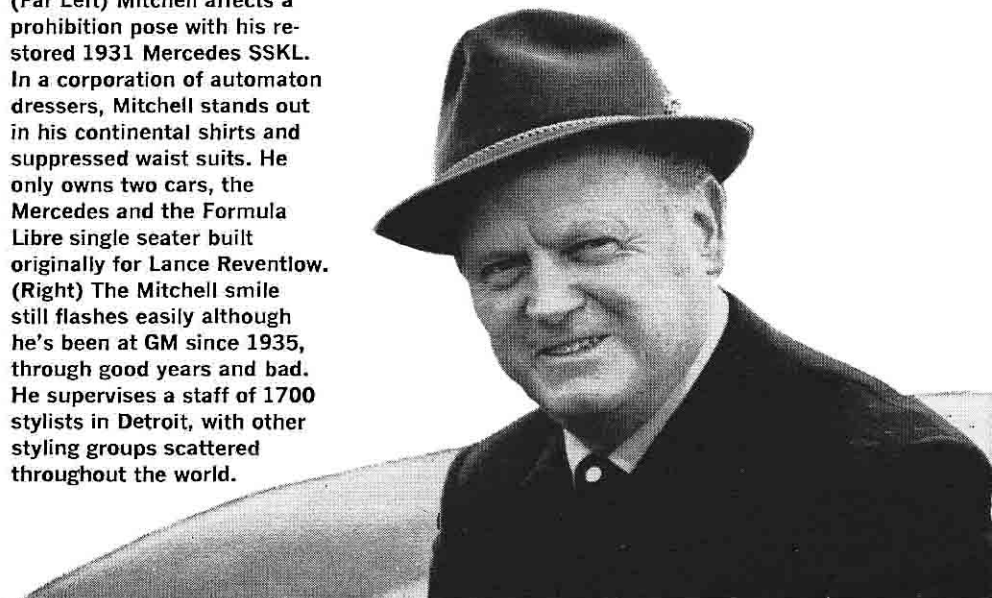
**(Far Left) Mitchell affects a prohibition pose with his restored 1931 Mercedes SSKL. In a corporation of automaton dressers, Mitchell stands out in his continental shirts and suppressed waist suits. He only owns two cars, the Mercedes and the Formula Libre single seater built originally for Lance Reventlow. (Right) The Mitchell smile still flashes easily although he's been at GM since 1935, through good years and bad. He supervises a staff of 1700 stylists in Detroit, with other styling groups scattered throughout the world.**

ideas — or better said, those of the styling staff — have to be approved before they become production realities.

(As a good corporation man — large companies are essentially political organizations, and one must be a politician to prosper in this atmosphere — Mitchell tends to minimize the job of getting his ideas through GM's innumerable committees. "Years ago design was something that was shoved down an engineer's throat, but today it's a different story; all the general managers know that design sells . . . but what it comes down to is that I've got to make it so they like it. You can't *sell* a design. When they first come to look it's better if you keep your mouth shut . . . It's just like when I go to an art exhibit and there's a painting there and I don't like it, and a fellow says 'Oh, yes, but you don't understand the sun and here's what he was thinking, and . . . well I don't give a damn, I don't like it, and I don't want a brochure to tell me what he was doing. A car's the same way.")

Mitchell is something of an anomaly in a corporation that has gone to certain lengths to keep itself faceless — dressed, figuratively, in three-button banker's grey with short haircuts and rimless glasses. Mitchell is the visible one, the dandy with the mod shirts and the pinched waists, with the double-breasted vests and the little feather in his velour hats. And they fit him; it is not an affectation. (Even John DeLorean, The Bright Young Man at GM, prefers the darker shades. When Mitchell shows up in a *black* suit, there's *something* about it that's different.)

Mitchell has a genuine love for cars, and there are times when this can be a refreshing thing in Detroit. (The only two he owns are a Mercedes SSKL of 1931 vintage, and the Formula Libre single seater originally built for Lance Reventlow.) There are executives at GM who rose from the foundry, or from finance, or from engineering or a dozen



# Bill Mitchell

other mundane places, but Mitchell got his start in an almost-Horatio Alger manner. He was the kid who liked to draw automobiles, and he drew them so well that one day he came to the attention of The Great Man of the styling business, and the next thing everyone knew young Bill was making a mark for himself at GM — still drawing cars, but in a better place.

It started, more or less, at the Pocantico Hills estate of the Collier family, hard by the Rockefeller place in the upper part of New York's Westchester County, where Barron Collier's boys staged little races on the family property. The Colliers were rich; even in the Depression days of the mid-1930s they had two chauffeurs and enough space on the grounds to build a road circuit of eleven turns and 0.7 miles so the boys and their friends could pass the time.

Mitchell was a 22-year-old illustrator working in the Collier advertising agency in New York, and sprinkled around the walls were his drawings of cars. The boys saw them and asked Bill to come up and sketch their races. ("I'll never forget the first time . . . I took the train out to Tarrytown . . . they picked me up, and I can hear the car coming yet . . . it was an Auburn 12 that they took to the Alpine Trials and brought home fifth, and that big baby was all specially done; the windshield was just about so high, and they had an American flag painted on the hood and louvers all down the sides — Zumbach did the work — and I could hear this thing coming down the hill. . . ." His eyes light up as the phantom growl of an exhaust seems to come in over the Muzak.)

In 1935 someone else saw Mitchell's drawings and that someone had a friend in Detroit, Harley Earl, the father of modern automotive styling, and he suggested Mitchell send Earl some of his drawings. By December of that year Mitchell was Earl's boy, and 23 years later, when



**Mitchell designed the original ARCA emblem, showing a Le Mans Bentley head-on. ARCA was the forerunner of SCCA.**

he had such triumphs as the 1938 Cadillac 60 Special and the 1941 Fleetwood well behind him, Mitchell took over when the *doyen* of the industry retired.

He's been there ever since, through the horrors that were such things as the 1959 Chevrolet, and through such triumphs as the 1964-65 Pontiac Grand Prix, both models of the Corvair (which ironically, may be the best styling jobs ever to come out of Detroit), the early Rivieras, the Corvette Sting Ray and a lot of others, so many that you lose count. Somehow, through all the politics and the committees, Mitchell has managed to design The Look That Sells.

How does he know when a design is a good one? "You never know, until the car is on the road . . . You can put it in a room and bring in a survey group or anything you want, but a car is a motion product, you have to see it on the road." In other words, you don't know until it is too late to do anything about it.

And is research any aid in finding what the public wants? "Boss Kettering said all you have to do is submit an idea to a committee and they'll see 90 percent wrongness and ten percent rightness, because not one in 10,000 has imagination. Most people don't like change. If we brought a group of average people in and showed them a design and they said,

'Oh, that's nice, I like it,' then I'd know it was no good. It's got to be controversial to a great degree . . . You've got to reach out."

Big cars, or long and low cars, are easy to design, Mitchell says, but small cars present problems. ("It's like tailoring a dwarf.") He should know, because his staff has just completed the design of the new GM small car, which is scheduled for introduction in mid-1970, and which — along with the mid-1969 Mini-Ford — will show Detroit if it can cut the market penetration of the imports. Here Mitchell becomes a bit subjective, saying "You can't use the thinking of Europe when you design over here."

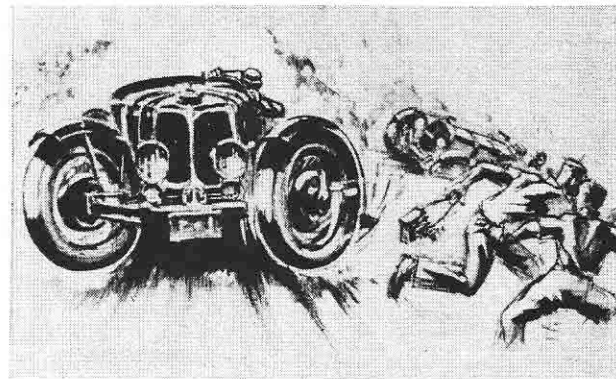
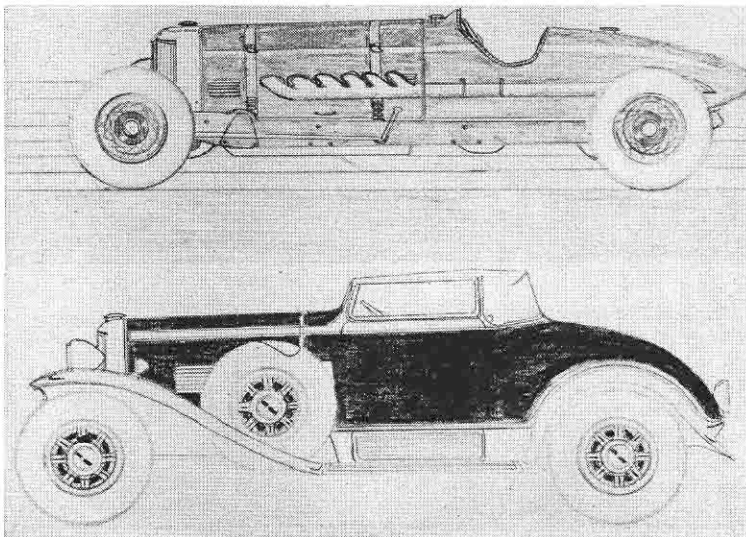
Interestingly, the import that sold better than 500,000 copies here last year, the Volkswagen, is anything but a model of either good or American design. In certain cases, whether the designers like it or not, other qualities outweigh looks.

If the new GM car can do something about the VW it will be a landmark effort. And if it doesn't, the stockholders will get maybe \$1.50 per share less, and there will still be other things to design. Right now Mitchell has an idea for a hot personal car, ". . . a four-passenger Corvette . . . the guy that wants this car, he doesn't *want* all that luggage room, he's not going to drive it to California . . . there's a good 100,000 buyers out there who want the kind of car I'm talking about."

And downstairs in Mitchell's building you know there are a couple of guys sketching away, and when they're finished they'll show him what they've got, all five or six or ten treatments of the thing, and Collier's former illustrator, Harley's boy, will reach over and pick up the right one.

The night after, if you sneak past the security guards and watch that picture of Alfred P. Sloan very carefully, you might just see him crack a smile. Because good design is good business. Don't forget it. Mitchell hasn't.

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(Left) Genius usually shows its quality at an early age, and Mitchell was no exception. These comprehensive sketches were done when he was only twelve years old. (Above) A Mitchell tribute to the Colliers, for whom he worked as an illustrator at the age of 22, shows a Willys special in a 1934 race.