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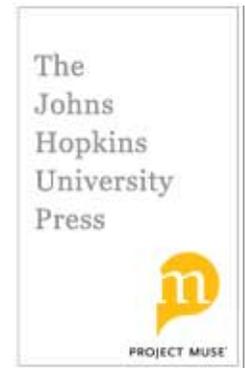
Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture (review)

Martina Blum

Technology and Culture, Volume 45, Number 4, October 2004, pp. 854-855
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2004.0161>



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management staffs directly determined how offices were planned. Both improved enclosures and mechanical systems then allowed space planning to expand beyond traditional depths determined by accessibility to natural light and air.

In this elegantly edited and crafted book, readers will find much useful information in addition to the text itself. An index of names and the extensive endnotes are valuable to those for whom this book will inspire further study, and there are sure to be many. Though the diagrams are often too small, the detailed comparative tables summarizing several chapters are very useful.

There are many other books that focus on some of the topics presented here. The strength of this book lies in the breadth and depth of the analysis. After all, the development of the modern high-rise building is dependent on careful integration of mutually dependent systems. All buildings need structure, enclosure, and mechanical systems, but high-rises demand truly integrated designs in order to be successful, or even feasible.

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Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture.

By Glenn Porter. Wilmington, Del.: Hagley Museum and Library, 2003.
Pp. 172. \$29.95

Raymond Loewy is an icon. Born in 1893, he left his native France after World War I to become one of the leading figures of American industrial design in the twentieth century. Among his best-known works are the Coldspot refrigerator for Sears Roebuck and streamlined locomotives for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Surprisingly, Loewy and his work have not attracted much scholarly attention. While he is mentioned in almost every design history, only a few monographs focus on him. This makes *Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture* a welcome addition to the literature. The author, Glenn Porter, is the former director of the Hagley Museum and Library and is well known for his work in economic history. His book, the catalog that accompanied an exhibition at the Hagley in 2002–2003, is based on material that has only recently been added to the museum's collection. It would have benefited from a sketch of the scope of these archival sources, which will be accessible for research in early 2005.

Porter describes *Raymond Loewy: Designs for a Consumer Culture* as an “extended interpretative essay with illustrations.” It covers, more or less chronologically, Loewy's early years, his breakthrough in the 1930s, and his and his several firms' relationships with various clients and projects in later years. But Porter intended to write neither a biography of the man nor a

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history of the Loewy organization. Rather, he aimed to place Loewy and his works “in the wider context of design’s role in the consumer society of the twentieth century.” For Porter, industrial design is the motor of consumer capitalism, the link between mass production and mass consumption, and Loewy played a key role in developing it.

The book offers insights into Loewy’s design process and his acquisition strategies. Porter also elaborates on Loewy’s work with companies like the Pennsylvania Railroad, from 1934 to 1953, and Studebaker, from 1947 to 1960. He details the interaction between consultant-designers and business executives and the often obscure channels of communication and authority. He shows how Loewy’s name became a hallmark after World War II, although his personal contributions to the design of products often remained obscure even as his business flourished. Loewy did not even show much interest in some very successful work, such as store and supermarket design, which was directed by his partner William Snaith. *Air Force 1*, *Sky-lab*, Concorde, and a consultancy with the Soviet Union were among the prestigious projects of the 1960s. By that time, however, Loewy’s various firms had already begun to decline. In 1977 the last, Loewy International, went bankrupt. Nine years later its founder died, at age ninety-three.

Porter highlights the ambivalence of Loewy’s work and of industrial design in general, which has been held responsible for opening the floodgates of extravagance and improvidence. Loewy obviously did not stand for elitist Bauhaus aesthetics. The great admiration for his streamlining notwithstanding, Loewy’s work has often been criticized as superficial. But he did embrace a moral responsibility within design. Simplicity was his aesthetic creed, his mission “to rid the world of ugly, badly conceived things.”

This ideal, however, was compromised by Loewy’s belief that the designer had a fundamental ethical responsibility to clients to create commercially successful products. Acknowledging that responsibility, he developed the MAYA principle—the Most Advanced Yet Acceptable design. At the beginning of his career, Loewy supported the idealistic view that industrial design could educate the consumer and also contribute to beneficial social planning along the optimistically technocratic lines of the 1939 world’s fair in New York. Eventually he understood that this was a delusion, and in the 1970s he came to deplore the misuse of design by the commercial system.

Porter’s book confirms Loewy’s important role for twentieth-century consumer society. That he and his design work shaped American lives and attitudes is uncontested. Nevertheless, it remains desirable to view Loewy’s work from a consumer perspective as well.

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