

Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild Getting Ready for Next Reunion

By Gerald Scott

One of GM's great 20th century design heritage institutions is being recalled yet again here in the 21st century.

The institution is the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild, which GM ran from the 1930s into the late 1960s.

The Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild was a national auto design competition sponsored by the then-Fisher Body Division of General Motors.

This competition was for teenagers to compete for college scholarships by designing and building scale-model "dream cars."

Held from the 1930s into the 1960s, it helped identify and nurture a whole generation of designers and design executives.

Of note, the Craftsman's Guild participants, now retirees in their 60s, 70s and 80s, are hosting a national reunion in Scottsdale, Ariz., in January.

The group had earlier reunions at the GM Tech Center in Warren in 2004 and then at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in 2008.

"What's important about our group's legacy is that 40 to 50 GM designers made their way into this business through this competition," said GM retiree Ron Will, who won the event in 1961 and then served as a designer in the Corvette studio in Warren from 1967 to 1976.

Will says that the scale-model cars that his cohorts designed, especially those from the 1940s and 1950s, have become collectors' items seemingly as valuable as the work and memories of the veteran designers themselves.

By coincidence, Will, of Arizona, is visiting Michigan this week so he can research the Fisher Guild scale-model cars owned by the GM Heritage Center in Sterling Heights.

If not for two books by alumnus John Jacobus in recent years about the competition, much of this valuable design history might've been lost to GM's larger heritage.

But with the two books, and the reunions held every four years now, the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild legacy looks both rich and safe.

Said Will, "The last time I was there (at the GM Heritage Center), I saw that they had an entire wall full of the old 1/24th plastic scale dealer models that dealers used to give away to prospective buyers back in the 1950s and 1960s.

"I have not seen their Guild models. GM would often buy the winning models of the Guildsmen and then use them around the country to promote the Guild.

"One of the old Futurama busses was used for this purpose. Unfortunately, most of those models have disappeared over the years. One of them showed up on eBay recently. We think most of them were tossed out after the Guild ended in 1968. I am very curious to see what models they do have."

Those who participated in the Guild scale-model building competitions speak highly of the experience - whether they ever won first place or not and whether they went on to design at GM or not.

But make no mistake about it, this was a major recruiting tool used by GM to identify and promote young designers across the country in that era.

The most famous alumni of the Guild competitions was the late Chuck Jordan, who ascended to become GM vice president of Design at the peak of his career in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, in Arizona, organizers have quite an itinerary for the Guild participants to enjoy in Scottsdale Jan. 17-20, 2013.

The Guildsmen will be showing off their scale models at the Scottsdale International Auto Museum on Jan. 18-19, where more than 100 models are scheduled to be on display.



The Guildsmen's upcoming reunion will be held in Arizona.



In 2004, the first-ever Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild reunion was held at the Design Dome.



Participants in the RenCen Tenants' ride-and-drive function take new GM cars for short test drives.

RenCen Tenants Test Drive GM Cars

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"There's a whole variety of (GM) people here, we have folks from OnStar, then from design, engineering, manufacturing, UAW representation.

"It's kind of a cross-function of the family out here as the face of the company. So we're excited to have them test-drive our products."

Indeed, GM and other automakers have found that their own employees, whether designers in studios, scientists in labs or assembly line workers, all typically do enjoy interacting with the public - and the public with them.

GM has its own employees work the major half-dozen national auto shows in this fashion, with GM employees working at facilities in metro Detroit on hand to explain the cars at the Detroit auto show, for example. UAW-GM employees from GM Hamtramck Assembly Center often are at the Detroit show to explain the particulars of the Volt to a lay audience of visitors, for example.

Now this practice of personal employee-engagement was being applied to the GM RenCen Tenants' ride-and-drive. UAW-GM employee

Dave Downen, for example, works in maintenance/HVAC at the Vehicle Engineering Center in Warren, but he's also qualified as a Volt product specialist and he helped chaperone this event as well.

"It's very enjoyable to showcase what we have," Downen said. "It's a great program. I'm considered a Volt subject matter expert. I don't know everything about the Volt, but I do know a lot about it and I can usually answer any question.

"I had the opportunity to drive one over the shutdown, for about a week-and-a-half and I love the vehicle. In fact, I'm thinking about buying one now because I had so much drive time with it. It's just a fun vehicle to drive and I didn't put a drop of gas in it during the two weeks."

So, GM did this for both the feedback from the tenants about the car, as well as a soft sales pitch for those thinking of buying.

GM Vehicle Advocate Program had a big tent in the parking lots immediately east of the RenCen proper and there all of the tenants gathered to kick the tires and go for short drives around downtown Detroit.

Said Stachowicz, "We have

a supplier discount available for anyone who doesn't already get the GM discount, so if you're a tenant, or from Blue Cross, or one of the shops in the building, we have a little business card that we give our guests (for the supplier discount on a purchase).

"We have 15 different models from all the brands but the hottest new ones are the Cadillac XTS which we just received on Friday, and of course the Volt, Camaro, Sonic, Lacrosse, Verano, so there's a great variety today. Especially the XTS, our newest launch and built here (in North America) at Oshawa, I believe, lots of interest in that one."

Said Ryan Charlton of Urban Science, a car dealer consulting tenant at the RenCen, "The Q system they have in the Cadillac is just incredible. I mean, the awareness to the driver on all elements is really going to help with safety.

"I like high-performance, quality and precision and Cadillac has really picked up its game."

Also, it might be noted, the attendees of the Federally Employed Women (FEW) conference at the RenCen test-drove these same cars as well.

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