

## Chavant News

*By Henry J. Holcomb (Inquirer Staff Writer)*

*Automakers Prefer clay to Computers for Design / Sculptors edge our software*

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For more than a half-century, eccentric artists working with clay and handmade tools have played a key role in designing cars of the future. But over the last decade, the big automakers have assumed - incorrectly, it turns out - that these artisans would soon be replaced by computer wizardry.

Now, with scores of artists hired in the auto industry's design heyday ready to retire, the automakers have decided that they will need clay modelers for many more years, if not forever. This set off a scramble for clay modelers that has brought the Ford Motor Co. to the Art Institute of Philadelphia for help in reviving what was thought to be a dying art.

The company has assigned a master modeler to be a mentor at the Philadelphia school - and its affiliate schools in Seattle, Pittsburgh, Denver, and Fort Lauderdale, Fla. These artists will make frequent visits to the classroom, to teach and revive interest in the craft.

The realization that this ancient skill still has a place in the high-tech world did not come easily to an industry that has come to rely heavily on computers and automation. But carmakers gradually discovered that computers are not a good fit in this phase of the creative process.

The machines, for example, give unfriendly retorts when temperamental designers come up with ideas that will not work. In contrast, "We love what we do.... We know where the company is going, and we want to help it achieve its goal," said Bill Harris, master modeler at the Ford design center in Dearborn, Mich. "We work with designers. We craft models that show why an idea won't work, and we help solve problems," Harris said.

Sometimes this means working long hours, seven or more days at a stretch, "and working with deadlines imposed by people who have no idea what we do. ... We have our high-stress moments," Harris said. Modelers are paid well; the best earn more than \$100,000 a year, plus big discounts on new cars and trucks, Harris said. In addition to being friendlier to the creative process than computers, clay artisans are faster. "If the CEO comes in and says, 'I don't like that hood,' a modeler can fix it in a half-day," Harris said, reshaping a clay model in a Philadelphia classroom this week. Making a similar change would take weeks using computer-aided design software,

Harris said. In the drive to come up with new shapes of cars and trucks for a hotly competitive marketplace, the industry has found that something that you can walk around and actually touch works better than virtual-reality computer demonstrations. The clay models even look real. "We've had senior managers forget they're looking at a clay model, and pull a handle off trying to open a door," Harris said. Some of the artists' work is on concept cars that merely "push people's thinking,"

Harris said. But mostly they work - using skills it took years to develop - on trying out and refining ideas for specific types of cars and trucks. Harris is working on the model year 2003 Ford F-150 pickup truck. "Most of us are car nuts," Harris digressed in his talk with the Art Institute students, adding that his current love, a Ford F-350 truck with an oversize cab and a diesel engine, is "the best thing I've ever driven."

Artists such as Harris craft full-scale models of whole car and truck exteriors, as well as dashboards and other interior parts. Most new cars and trucks take 40 months to get from idea to a dealer showroom, and the clay modelers are intimately involved with the first 18 months of that process, working in huge, top-secret studios. "We often work directly with the chief executive and top vice presidents," Harris said. They also work with 16-year-olds, brought in to look at models of future cars that will be hitting showrooms when they reach car-buying age.

Don LaJeunesse, who designs custom-made furniture, among other things, is teaching the clay-modeling

course at the Art Institute of Philadelphia - the school in the blue Art Deco building on Chestnut Street in Center City. The building looks like an old radio because it was built in 1928 for the city's CBS radio station. LaJeunesse said Ford flew him to its design center for training and was donating the expertise of its craftsmen and tons of clay to help restore interest in "a dying art that is enjoying a resurgence."

He and Harris say at least 60 firms will soon be hiring clay modelers. These include car companies and the Harley-Davidson Motor Co., as well as makers of other products. More of these companies are realizing, Harris said, that it is smart to invest in the work of clay modelers "before you put billions of dollars into building a production line."

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