

Chavant News

*By Gene Bylinsky
Master Crafts in the Information Age
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Factory computers have not wiped out these jobs, which call for artist like skills and dedication.

The Digital Age has not eliminated legions of largely unsung craftspeople who employ digits of another kind: their fingers. The manufacturing jobs these men and women perform can't be automated because they are complex and require human dexterity, patience, and judgment. Neither computer-aided design nor computerized machine tools, for example, have the precision to make steel molds that are to turn out plastic car bumpers or instrument panels. Expert mold finishers must first remove tiny blemishes by hand.

While productivity gains continue to whittle away at total factory employment in the US, many types of craftspeople are in short supply. Some earn \$100,000 a year when they can be found.

SHE SCULPTS SECRET, NEW VEHICLES Barbara Davidson, Daimler Chrysler

Before auto designers roll out their latest creations into a courtyard at Daimler Chrysler's modernistic Michigan headquarters for viewing executives, security guards with binoculars and radiophones scan the skies and the grounds from the rooftops of surrounding buildings. In the courtyard, other guards stand ready to cover the prototype cars at the slightest sign of spies. Chances are good that a lively 50-year-old named Barbara Davidson has worked on most of those vehicles. The sole female among 90 modelers at Chrysler, Davidson appears in the photograph with an older prototype, the only one the company would allow to be shown.

Clay modeling has declined by about one third since the advent of computer-aided design (CAD) and virtual-reality imaging, but the auto companies still need a lot of the models. There's no substitute for seeing and feeling a real-life rendition of a car. Some of these models have seats, doors that open, and wheels that roll. The finish is as shiny as that on production vehicles. And clay is an easy material to add or subtract from if further modifications are called for.

Davidson grew up in Trenton, Mich., near Detroit, where she helped her auto mechanic father in his home garage. As a teenager, she loved working with power tools. "I enjoy working in a messy garage and getting my hands dirty," she says. She also displayed artistic talent, creating sculptures from discarded auto parts and prize-winning pottery. That experience, along with the study of auto modeling in college, helped her get a job 14 years ago at Chrysler as an industrial sculptor, as she is officially known.

The reddish-brown modeling clay comes out of a nozzle, and Davidson molds it with her hands on a wood, Styrofoam, and aluminum framework of a car model. She also uses table saws, handsaws, sanders, grinders, and power wrenches. "It's not all glamorous," she says. "Sometimes I lie on the floor and wallow in clay." Building a preliminary design takes about 2 ½ weeks but refinements can take up to a year. Says Davidson: "The satisfaction comes when you see a model you've worked on at the International Auto Show."

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