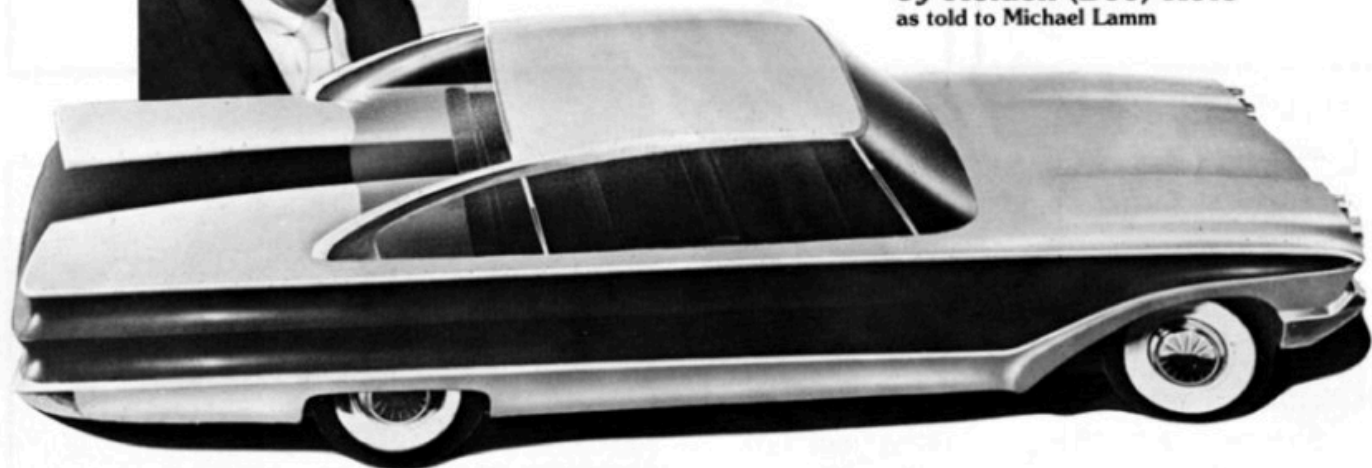




LIVING WITH STYLE

PART II

by Holden (Bob) Koto
as told to Michael Lamm



Last issue, you'll recall, we published Part I of Bob Koto's autobiography, bringing him from high school days through his career with Briggs/LeBaron, Hudson, and Loewy Studios. Koto was the designer of the 1936 and 1949 Fords, was influential in designing the first Lincoln Zephyr, and also had a strong hand in the 1953 Studebaker Starliner coupe.

This second and final installment takes Koto from Loewy Studios, which he left in 1955, through his association with the Ford Motor Co., and to his retirement in 1968.

As I mentioned before, I was offered this job at Ford, but it wasn't nearly as good as the position I had with Raymond Loewy. It was like starting all over again—less salary and back on the drawingboard. At Loewy I'd had my own office and a staff of about 35 people.

Well, I wasn't too happy under those circumstances, and I hoped to get a better job. I went to see Virgil Exner, who'd moved from Studebaker to Chrysler, and Exner had an opening—a pretty good position. This was in late 1955. I got back to Ford and told George Walker's administrative manager, Mr. Brink, about the Chrysler opening, and he got hold of Walker, and between them they decided I should stay at Ford.

They gave me a much better job; in fact, I soon became head of the Mercury pre-production studio. Before that I'd been involved with the big Edsel—the one made from the Mercury—and the problem on that Edsel was what to do with the character lines of that car. My job was to develop the character line and work it into the front end. Which I did, and it turned out fine.

At any rate, as head of the Mercury pre-production studio I had my own studio, with about six designers and a pool of modelers. It was a great opportunity—great challenge—lots of fun. I did mostly 1/10-scale models, just to establish a theme, and from there we would go to full-sized clays.

When I was offered that studio in Feb. 1957, Gene Bordinat called me into his office and told me, "Your predecessor here made two models a year—just two. I would like to have you make six. I know you can't do that, but it's your goal." It turned out that one year I made 22 full-sized models, and most of them were Mercurys.

The 1957 Mercury theme—I always felt it was a good theme, where the concave ridge runs through the body, working into the tail lights. We did a great many models reflecting that theme. But the car wasn't selling well in 1957-58, and they decided to drop that theme, so we developed a lot of others.

Maybe I should explain how the pre-production studios worked—how Ford organized its various design studios at that time. It's different today,

but then—in the late 1950s and through most of the '60s—there was a Ford studio and a Lincoln-Mercury studio, and each had what we called a pre-production studio. The main function of Pre-Production was to design all-new full-sized models to develop new themes. Often, though, detail designs such as front ends would emanate from our studio. Example: The original plan for the 1962 Mercury was for very minor changes. Our pre-production studio, though, had come up with an all-new 1964 theme. After management saw the '64 proposal, they decided to use that front-end design for the 1962 Merc, and our studio worked that out.

There was also an advanced styling studio and a special products studio, later called Special Projects. Now all these studios were in a sort of competition constantly. And each—Special Products, Advanced, Pre-Production, Ford, and Lincoln-Mercury—would sometimes have one or two full-sized clay or fiberglass models of new cars to show to management. So there was always a tremendous number of ideas to be picked from for each division. Our Mercury pre-production studio was very successful in these competitions, by and large.

Now at these showings, most of the full-sized models were clay, covered with Di Noc and foil over the bumpers and trim. Some, though, were fiberglass, and we called those "see-through" models, because the window areas were open, and many times there were seats and instrument panels inside. A few mockups were combinations—clay on the bottom and fiberglass uppers.

Each studio, of course, wanted its designs to be accepted by management in these shows. It was mostly a matter of pride, but it also involved bonuses. The company paid a bonus each year around Christmas, and Gene Bordinat would consider what you had done in awarding your bonus. For a long while, I wasn't on the bonus roll. And then when I did get on, the company had a bad year, so they didn't pay a bonus. One fellow working for me made more money that year than I did, because he got overtime, which I didn't get.

Anyway, Merc pre-production work included not only Mercurys but also Lincolns, Comets, Cougars, and sometimes the Ford lines. I believe we worked on all of them except the T-Bird.

At one point we were working on a Lincoln for 1967. We'd just finished the full-sized clay and had it in the courtyard to study it for highlights. This was for our own benefit and to make further improvements. It wasn't intended to be in a showing for top management, but somehow Mr. Henry Ford II spotted this clay and liked it. So that became the all-new Lincoln for 1967, and all further Lincoln designs weren't shown to top management.



Bob Koto became chief stylist in Mercury's pre-production studio in Feb. 1956 and worked up many studies with concave side motif.



Models in 1/10th scale were photographed and airbrushed like this one, which shows rear treatment similar to 1959 Buick and Chevrolet.



Study pursues 1957 Merc theme. Drawings on wall give alternatives.



Koto's surface mastery allowed subtle switch from concave to convex.

This was sort of a disappointment to me—even though our model did get into production with minor changes—because we had another design that many of us thought was a lot better.

Another odd thing happened about that time. I'd done a full-sized clay for the 1966 Comet. Everybody liked it, and it was approved, but it didn't become the Comet at all. It ended up being the 1966 Falcon instead.

After my assignment in the Lincoln-Mercury pre-production studio, I got moved to the corporate projects studio. That was in Sept. 1963, and Corporate Projects wasn't nearly as much fun at first. I had a drawingboard and a little corner closed off where I could make small scale models, and although it was on the same salary and prestige level, it didn't feel like a good job. It did, though, give me a great opportunity, because we had even more different projects to work on.

For instance, I did a GT-40. This version was also mid-engined but it wasn't the car that finally ended up in racing. The one I worked on was shipped to England, and I thought for a while that it was going to go into production. But then they discontinued it and did the GT-40 version just for racing. That was entirely different from my design.

We also did production work at Special Projects. I did models for the Thunderbird, Ford, Taunus, etc. The Taunus—the German Ford with the V-4 and front-wheel drive—was picked from three models that were sent to Germany.

This Corporate Projects assignment was just sort of a step to my position at Lincoln-Mercury Studio as executive stylist of Lincoln and Comet styling. That was in the Lincoln production studio—a big studio with a lot of people. I got there in Nov. 1964, I recall, and I finally did get a little office in there. It was the first private office I'd had since I left Raymond Loewy.

This new job meant a lot of meetings and working with engineers and product planners and die models. Shows—we had shows so often that they almost got to be a headache sometimes. The salary was better, but again, it wasn't as much fun. Sometimes we'd have as many as three shows a week.

My last position before I retired in Apr. 1968 was executive stylist for the Comet-Cougar-Montego studio.

People sometimes ask me which of all the jobs I've had in my life—which I like best. I suppose the most interesting and the most fun was when I went to England for Loewy. I had my whole family there. The fun was working with the Englishmen, with Sir William Rootes particularly; also with Lord Lord and Mr. Harrington, the managing director. That was very nice. Lord Lord said that he was so impressed with the work I'd done on the Austin—he pointed to the one they'd been working on for two years and said, "Look at what you've done in four months." He was so amazed, and I guess he must have told Loewy, because Loewy was



The 1/10th clays were (and still are) modeled against a mirror so only half needs to be done. Note camera reflected in background.



Koto's 1964 Comet styling exploration became the basis for Falcon that year. Comet shared body shell but had squarer front profile.

Living With Style *continued*



By this time, Bob was head stylist in Lincoln-Mercury pre-production studio. This crisp Merc was one among many stillborn designs.



Shows were held outdoors for management to view proposals. Squared headlights became a fad for a time. Di Noc covers windows.



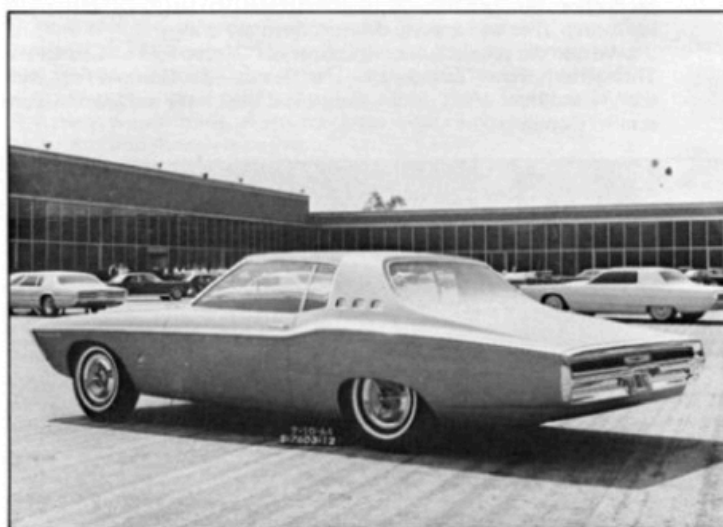
Study became basis for revised 1967 Continental. It was shown to Henry Ford II, who liked it immediately. Later Koto's staff did...



...this updated rendition, which Bob liked better, but it was never shown Mr. Ford because he'd already decided to go with earlier one.



Plans to sophisticate Comet gave rise to more opulent treatments, as revealed in see-through fiberglass mockup with its full interior.



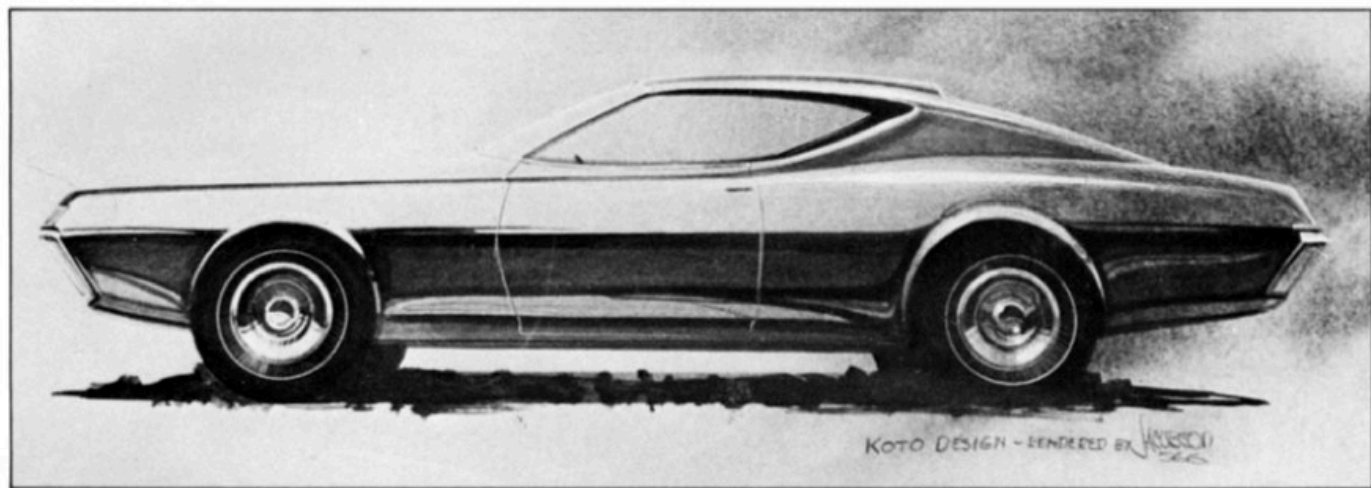
During Koto's days at Corporate Projects, he became involved with Thunderbird proposals as well as the GT-40, Taurus, and Ford cars.



One of Bob's favorite driving cars was Pinin Farina's Alfa showster, which Bob bought in England and brought back to this country.



Sleek Mercury coupe proposal for 1967-68 was one of Koto's last in his capacity as executive stylist for the Lincoln-Comet studio.



Among Koto's personal styling favorites, this proposed Cougar stands above such illustrious designs as 1949 Ford, '53 Stude, and '36 Zephyr.

happy, too. But doggone it, they didn't come out with the job. But that was probably the most gratifying, living there in England. The English people were just great to us.

We lived in a hotel, and I had a chauffeur pick me up and drive me about 18 miles each way. I'd have my car, the Farina Alfa, weekends.

But it was also very interesting working for Ralph Roberts at Briggs in the 1930s. I liked Ralph very much. And I enjoyed working at Briggs immensely. It was just pure fun. I remember Ralph used to kid me. "I don't know why we pay you," he'd say, "you like your work so much."

And of all my designs, the one I like best isn't the 1949 Ford, not by a long shot, and not even my work on the 1953 Studebaker coupe. I guess it would have to be the first job I did in Mercury's pre-production studio. It never got produced, of course, but it's still my favorite.

The design business has changed tremendously since I started way back in 1933. At that time, one man could do a whole car. Like Phil Wright did the 1935 Ford just from sketches, and it went right to full-sized wood. That could never happen now. It could never possibly happen. Today only parts of any design get in. Bits and pieces. Like my job with Hudson, where I was mostly doing ornamentation—the banana design for the grille. They say that today cars are designed by committees, and they're somewhat right. I don't mean to say today's cars are bad, but I'll bet the men doing them don't have as much fun as we did 30-40 years ago. □



On the eve of retirement from Ford Motor Co., Koto poses with new 1968 Montego. Bob and his wife, Mildred, now live in Florida.

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