

Wanted: More Women in Automotive Design

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2016

Although we may have 'come a long way, baby' over the past half century, statistics indicate that women still have some inroads to make in terms of becoming equal contributors to the automotive industry. The 2014 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that women hold about 25 percent of jobs in the motor vehicle and parts industry. When you focus specifically on automotive design, it's said that 30 percent of the BMW's global design staff and 20 percent of GM's are women. But, deeper examination indicates that women have been limited to color palettes and interiors with a serious lack of involvement in exterior design.

The slowly shifting paradigm

The good news is that women are making progress in the industry. Among the [2015 Automotive News 100 Top Women in Automotive](#), 73 have executive in their title, up from 63 five years ago and there are six CEOs among automakers and suppliers, up from two in 2010.

The truth is that women have always played a significant, though under represented, role in automotive. This began as early as 1888 with Berta Benz who, after taking a road trip in a prototype vehicle, told her husband exactly what design changes were needed to make the car more reliable. In 1903, Mary Anderson invented a windshield wiper to improve safety while driving in rain, sleet, and snow. By 1923, more than 175 patents were granted to women for inventions related to automobiles, traffic signals, and turn indicators.

But, when it comes to automotive design, especially the exterior of the vehicle, women have been kept at arm's length from participating in the club. Harley Earl was the first automotive designer to recognize the unique perspective that women can bring, yet his Damsels of Design contributions were focused mostly on interiors, colors and fabrics.

Then the 21st century seemed to bring more promise for female designers. It was in 2000 that Anne Asensio was hired away from Renault, where she was recognized for her role in the Scenic mini-van, by General Motors and appointed executive director of advanced design. But, not until 2005 when Volvo assembled an all-female design team, was there an acknowledged understanding of the unique perspective that women bring to design. At this point, Asensio had already demonstrated the female viewpoint as, among other design features, she was responsible for putting cupholders in the back seat of the Renault Scenic.

Since then, there has been a slow, but influential, increase of women in the automotive design space. Among others, this includes Kerrin Liang of Hyundai, Michelle Christensen -- design lead for the super sexy Acura NSX, Christine Park of Cadillac and Liz Wetzel, who became GM's first female vehicle designer in 1997 and is currently overseeing the design of the new Buick Avenir.

Although women bring a new perspective to the industry, the focus should not be about male vs. female design, but rather good design that fulfills the consumer desire. And, given that, according to a 2014 Frost & Sullivan study, women clearly influence 80 percent of buying decisions – it's important that the female mindset be understood. Some areas where women have revealed different demands than males are storage capacity, ease of getting in and out of the vehicle (when men regularly wear dresses and high heels, they will understand this), good visibility, personalization of the vehicle, high reliability and minimal maintenance.

Says Asensio, "The reason I got the job at GM was not that I am a woman, but that I am basically a good designer. Yet, women do make a difference to car design. We need more women in the product development process. It's not just designing for women, there must be design by women."

Changing perceptions

In this business, it has often been thought that to be a car designer you have to be a 'car nut' or a gearhead obsessed with the mechanical, macho world of cars. The reality is that it's more about an interest in using creative talents to develop a useful solution. Keith Nagara, director of the Transportation Design program at Lawrence Technological University (LTU) likens this to thinking like Leonard DaVinci.

He adds that the lack of females in design is rooted in a lack of knowledge, as well as a systemic misunderstanding, about industrial design across our culture. For example, it's been cited that Acura designer Christensen had designed prom dresses in high school. She didn't even know car design was a career until her second year of community college.

Says Nagara, "We often hear from visiting high school students that they had no idea a program like this exists. The counselors don't realize that automotive design is a separate discipline from automotive engineering – it's seen as a subset and this perception then becomes reality."

Nagara also says that it's critical for females in the industry to mentor young women interested in the field. He is always on the lookout for women to partner with LTU's program and help the female students better plan their future.

When helping recruit female students to the LTU Design program, Taylor Manuilow, a designer at Ford and mentor at LTU, shared, "[I saw myself interested in everything but cars](#) – fashion, painting, sculpture, furniture. Then I realized automotive design had to do with a lot more than just cars."

Women's success in the industry also has to do with navigating this traditionally male-dominated field. Asensio notes that although women do have to play within the rules the men have set, they also have to change the rules. To accomplish this, she offers these words of wisdom, "Be yourself - don't try to be a man."

To hear more about Anne Asensio's background and industry viewpoints, watch this Robb Report interview conducted during the 2016 North American International Auto Show where Anne was one of only three female judges out of 32 for the [EyesOn Design](#) competition, co-sponsored by Dassault Systemes.