

STORYTELLING *with* SHEETMETAL

BY JUDITH MURPHY

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The Mustang Concept Car © The Ford Motor Company

**J Mays gets paid
for doing
what most kids
would do for
nothing
—designing the
automobiles of
his dreams.**

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Some people's work is shielded from public view. The efforts of others can become highly visible. The artistry of J Mays falls into that second category. You see his automobile designs every day, wherever there are automobiles, perhaps in your own garage.

Mays, Ford Motor Company's vice president for design, has created 75 designs for different vehicle brands, including Volkswagen's New Beetle and the Ford Explorer, the perennially top-selling SUV in the United States and Canada. His work-on-wheels also is visible in cars manufactured by Volvo, Mazda, Lincoln, Mercury, Land Rover, Jaguar and Aston Martin, including a favorite he describes as a "12-cylinder, \$228,000 car made of aluminum, magnesium and 'unsubstantium'."

The designer is an Oklahoma native, having grown up in Maysville, the town founded by his great-great-grandfather. Mays himself is named for his grandfather—his first name is indeed J—without a period.

He attended the University of Oklahoma from 1972 to 1976, first majoring in art, then switching to journalism. "I was social chairman of my fraternity, Delta Tau Delta," Mays says. "I probably spent more time planning parties than going to class." Perhaps recognizing that Mays was not fulfilled by the then-available programs at OU, a friend suggested that he might wish to check out the design programs at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

"When I found out that a grown man could get paid for drawing cars, that was a revelation!" Mays says. He transferred to the Pasadena program and was graduated in 1980.

"The year I graduated, the price of oil doubled, and car sales plummeted." Finding a job in his field required relocating to Europe. He landed at Audi AG in Ingolstadt, Germany. In 1983, he transferred to BMW AG in Munich, before returning to Audi as senior designer in 1984. Moving back to the United States in 1989, he became chief designer in Volkswagen of America's Design Center in Simi Valley, California. In that post, his responsibilities included the design and branding of the Volkswagen Concept 1, which later became the New Beetle. He returned to Germany in 1993 as Audi's design director, responsible for design strategy, development and execution. He moved with his wife, Jodi, and son, Morgan, to Michigan when he joined Ford in October 1997.

At Ford, he is credited with a significant role in the design for 65 models that will appear within the next five years with the imprint of Ford, Lincoln and Mercury. They range from pickup trucks to two-seater sports cars, including the Mustang of the future and the Ford GT40, which resembles a race car.

Earlier this year, Mays met in Oklahoma City with Mustang owners and collectors as part of Ford's 100th Anniversary Celebration. He also used the occasion to unveil a Mustang concept car, which is scheduled to appear in dealers' showrooms next year. "This Mustang,

continued

■ J Mays, Ford's vice president for design, left OU to follow a dream and found his dream job.

or something very similar, will appear in the summer of 2004," he says. The vehicle he revealed was a sleek, red, two-seater sports car with aerodynamic curves, a brushed metal dashboard and wheels, and a honeycomb grill that hinted at the unusual grill pattern of the first generation of Mustangs that hit the roads in 1964.

For Mays, design is a visual language, and creating cars is a form of communication. "Design allows you to communicate in a way that tells a story," he says. "A filmmaker does it with celluloid. I do it with sheet metal."

The foundation of his approach to storytelling is trying to tap into "the emotional worlds" of the eventual customers for his creations. For example, he notes, "The Beetle capitalizes on the simplest form, the pure circle." The shape denotes warmth and simplicity, he claims, like another noteworthy American icon that can be drawn with three circles, Mickey Mouse. In contrast, he cites the Ford F350 Tonka Truck as "tough, powerful and

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"Design allows

huge, with the stance of a bulldog." (The vehicle was shown as a concept truck in 2002 car shows with manufacturing slated for the 2005 model year. The Tonka also was featured in Toby Keith's video for "Who's Your Daddy?")

Many of Mays' designs seem to tap into the collective memories of earlier decades, an approach that has been labeled "retrofuturism."

He categorizes the 1950s as an age of "unlimited optimism. As a society, we were obsessed with the future. The original Thunderbird (1955) used jet plane imagery." In reintroducing the T-Bird for 2002, Mays used "visual cues" from the original, without recycling the design from a half-century before. "We recreated the optimism of that era

without remaking an old car," he says.

Mays condenses the decade of the 1960s into one word: rebellion, as demonstrated by drugs, riots and Woodstock. He does not think it is a coincidence that the period gave birth to a

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■ Ford's J Mays says design for the all-new Forty-Nine custom coupe concept car took its inspiration from the 1949 model that was a post-WWII sensation, as well as from the elegance of great Italian designs, such as Ghia.

new kind of vehicle, the Muscle Car. "That was the most rebellious possible product. The whole point of a Muscle Car was to put the largest possible engine in the smallest possible car, just to scare the heck out of your mother."

Of the 1970s, Mays says with deadpan humor, "We have no recollection."

The 1980s brought a search for "status" to society, according to Mays, with the result that "we saw three new luxury brands from Japan, and the BMW became the ultimate Yuppie machine."

The keyword for the 1990s was "lifestyle," he continues. Sport Utility Vehicles became commonplace.

"Cars are part of—and help us stretch—our collective memories. It has to do with what's important at certain times of our lives. I want to make a connection to the American psyche."

It is in talk of the future that Mays reveals his greatest excitement. Making clear that he intends to leave his mark on the American psyche of the 21st century, he already has created 16 concept cars in addition to the 65 models scheduled for future manufacturing by the Ford family, plus sports cars for Volvo and Jaguar. "My personal agenda is to bring a V-8, rear-drive, family sedan back to America."

Another probability for Mays' future—make that a sure thing—is that he will continue to accumulate honors. His career to date was the subject of an exhibition called "Retrofuturism:

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The Car Design of J Mays" at the Museum of Contemporary Art at The Geffen Contemporary in Los Angeles in late 2002. Also in 2002, he received both the annual Harvard Design School's Excellence in Design Award and the Don Kubly Professional Attainment Award from the Art Center College of Design.

He also will continue to look back, from time to time, for inspiration and new stories to tell. "There's a lot of gold to mine," he says. "Stay tuned. I've got a barnburner coming. You'll like it!"