
RUTH OLDENZIEL

In 1931, an advertisement for the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild in National Geographic invited teenage boys to participate in a model-making contest. It showed a boy offering a girl a miniature version of a “Napoleonic Coach”—an image that had been chosen as the emblem of the Fisher Body Company in 1922 to convey luxury, comfort, and style. The emblem had been modeled on the coaches Napoleon I of France used for his wedding and for his coronation as emperor. Fisher Body, the organizer of the guild, was the world’s largest manufacturer of automobile bodies, which it supplied principally to General Motors. The Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild aimed to train “the coming generation” and to secure “fine craftsmanship” (fig. 1). Intended to appeal to boys of high school and college ages between 12 and 20, the ad portrays the “Fisher boy” as fatherly: mature and responsible, ready to take a bride—a far cry from the boisterous bachelor or daredevil hot-rodder. Opposite the Fisher boy stands a girl, positioned as the passive and grateful but critical recipient of his Napoleonic Coach and suggesting the kind of future that such a gift seems to promise. The illustration implies that the Fisher boy is not only a builder of coaches, but also a builder of families and security as a future husband and bread-winner.

The Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild (1930-68), the organization

DR. OLDENZIEL is associate professor at the Belle van Zuylen Institute, University of Amsterdam and the author of Engendering Engineering (forthcoming). She is indebted to John Jacobus, Roger W. White (curator, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History), and Amy James (archivist, GM Media Archives) for making various primary documents available to her, and to Eileen Boris, John Staudenmaier, and Robert Post for careful and insightful readings of earlier drafts of this article. She thanks Nina Lerman and Arwen Mohun for ongoing conversations on the subject.

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Thousands of boys all over America are completing miniature model Napoleonic coaches in the first year's activity of the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild. These models they will shortly submit in a nationwide competition for four university scholarships of four years each, 98 trips to Detroit, and 882 other valuable awards.

The Fisher Body Corporation sponsored this inspiring movement, believing that this exercise of creative talent, this quickening of the hand of youth, are essential steps toward the development of high ideals—that only by training the coming generation can fine craftsmanship be perpetuated and superior coachcraft be assured.

CADILLAC - LA SALLE - BUICK - OAKLAND - OLDSMOBILE - PONTIAC - CHEVROLET

Fig. 1.—“Fisher Boy Offers Girl His Napoleonic Coach,” National Geographic, June 1931. This advertisement for the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild portrays a boy between the ages of 12 and 20, of eligible age for the contest. (From the Collections of Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, neg. 91.303.2027.)
that sponsored the ad, marks one of the most playful by-products of the very successful partnership between Fisher and cosponsor General Motors (GM). At first glance, the guild invites us to view the world of boys’ toys hidden in attics, basements, barns, and backyards as whimsical, playful, and innocent, but a second reading reveals an intricate web of institutions that defined and maintained a male technical domain. The fascinating but now-forgotten history of the guild suggests that the definition and production of male technical knowledge involved an extraordinary mobilization of organizational, economic, and cultural resources.¹ The guild, “an educational foundation devoted to the development of handiwork and craftsmanship,” directly appealed to boys and relied for recruiting on the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and the public school system.² Girls found themselves excluded as a matter of course.

This explicitly male technical domain came into existence at precisely the same time that “the consumer” became more and more explicitly gendered female, as scholars of consumer culture have argued.³ Through various means such as the “Body by Fisher” ad campaign, GM and the Fisher Body Company aligned their companies with women as their potential consumers.⁴ To consider a single example among many, the same Fisher Body Company that created the Craftsman’s Guild ran an advertisement in Life magazine in 1927 in which we find a different Fisher girl, a flapper whose body sensuously replicates the curves of an automobile (fig. 2).⁵ Seen side by

¹ So far, the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild has not been the subject of any scholarly treatment. John Jacobus generously shared his sustained childhood passion for the guild with the author and has generated most of the primary source material. Unless otherwise noted, all citations of primary source materials pertaining to the guild are to Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild Papers (FBCGP), Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Engineering and Industry, Division of Transportation, donated by Jacobus to the Smithsonian. Jacobus also gave access to his personal collection on the guild.

² Letter W. A. Fisher to Walter S. Carpenter, W. S. Carpenter Papers, Series II Part 2, Box 821, Hagley Museum and Library, Manuscripts.


⁵ For examples of the “Body by Fisher” campaign, see the many advertisements from 1926 through the 1960s in such magazines as Vogue, Life, Saturday Evening Post,
side, these two Fisher promotional campaigns exemplify the complementary ways in which we have come to portray men and women in their stereotypical relationships with the technological world—a world where men design systems and women use them; men engineer bridges and women cross them; men build cars and women ride in them; in short, a world in which men are considered the active producers and women the passive consumers of technology. Both ads point to a specific historical moment in which these roles were being articulated and shaped by GM and the Fisher Body Company. Considered in this light, the exclusion of girls from the Craftsman’s Guild was not so much a culturally determined oversight as it was an expression of the need to shore up male identity boundaries in the new world of expanding consumerism precariously coded as female.

The case study of the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild also suggests that an exclusive focus on women’s supposed failure to enter the field of engineering is insufficient for understanding how our stereotypical notions have come into being; it tends to put the burden of proof entirely on women and to blame them for their supposedly inadequate socialization, their lack of aspiration, and their want of masculine values. It also runs the risk of limiting gender, as an analytical tool for historical research, as merely an issue affecting women. An equally challenging question is why and how boys have come to love things technical, how boys have historically been socialized into technophiles, and how we have come to understand technical things as exclusively belonging to the field of engineering. The focus on the formation of boy culture is not to deny that women often face formidable barriers in entering the male domain of science and engineering; they do. The story of the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild introduces one episode into the institutionalized ways in which boys,


Throughout the years, the success of “Body by Fisher” has been completely identified with the success of the cars which are recognized leaders in their respective price groups.

FIG. 2.—“Fisher Bodies,” *Life*, June 1927. Advertisement for “Body by Fisher” campaign, one example among many created by illustrator McClelland Barclay for the Fisher Body Company. The ad draws semiotic and graphic parallels between the automotive and female bodies. (From the Collections of Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, neg. 64.167.657.531)
male teenagers, and adult men have been channeled into the domain designated as technical.7

This article considers one side of the gendering processes. The most substantial part focuses in detail on the male gendered codes in the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild and its miniature world of model cars to show how from the 1930s to the 1960s the guild helped socialize Fisher boys as technophiles and sought to groom them as technical men ready to take their places as managers or engineers in GM’s corporate world. If the first guild advertisement points to the making of a corporate male identity, the second ad suggests, as the Fisher Body Company explained, that the making of the “technical,” “hard,” and “male” coded world of production has also been produced by and produced its opposite: a world of consumption coded as nontechnical, soft, and female.

Building Model Cars and Male Character

Between the 1920s and 1940s boys’ toys developed into a booming consumer market.8 Wagons, sleds, scooters, bicycles, airplanes started to clutter boys’ rooms, while chemistry and Erector sets were sold because “every boy should be trained for leadership.”9 Girls


also acquired toys from their parents, of course, but theirs were less varied and not aimed to help smooth a career path. Toys were not only intended to amuse and entertain, but also “as socializing mechanisms, as educational devices, and as scaled-down versions of the realities of the larger adult-dominated social world.”

Many toy companies such as the Gilbert Company, the Wolverine Company, and Toy Tinkers, Inc., exploited the new passion, but none of these companies turned play with toys into the totalizing experience that the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild managed to create. Under the auspices of GM, the guild combined the appeal of toys and the model-making tradition with corporate needs for training new personnel while crafting consumers’ tastes.

The annual Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild contest awarded a $5,000 scholarship at an engineering school to the American or Canadian teenage boy who managed to build the best miniature Napoleonic Coach (1931–47) or car (1937–68) (figs. 3 and 4). One recruiting sign in 1930 read: “BOYS! Enroll here in the FISHER BODYCRAFTSMAN’S GUILD. No dues . . . no fees. An opportunity to earn your college education or one of the 980 other wonderful awards” (fig. 5). When the guild was founded in 1930, $5,000 was an average worker’s income for three years and would buy eight Chevrolets or Fords; in 1940 Americans could buy a house for that price.

With a college education perceived as an avenue for upward mobility, young men and their families could gain a great deal from participating in the guild. GM’s investment in the organization was not trivial either: beyond the $20,000 to $100,000 spent on actual awards, the company budgeted at least twenty times more for organizational expenses and publicity each year. Promotional literature boasted that the Guild had the largest membership of any young men’s organization in the United States except for the Boy Scouts of America (established in 1910), and claimed that by 1960 over eight million male teenagers between the ages 12 and 20 had participated in the guild through national, state, and local contests and


12 These figures do not reflect the costs incurred by other organizations, such as the Boy Scouts’ recruitment efforts on behalf of General Motors. Jacobus, p. 206; Arthur Pound, The Turning Wheel: The Story of General Motors Through Twenty-Five Years, 1908–1933 (Garden City, N.Y., 1934), p. 300.
Fig. 3.—Example of Napoleonic Coach model built for the Fisher Body Craftsmen’s Guild contest during the period 1930-47. Built from scratch, each coach demanded an average 960 hours to complete. (GM Media Archives, neg. 20134-1. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
Fig. 4.—A 1962 example of free design model for the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild contest. It took on average 275 hours to complete a model after one’s own design. (GM Media Archives, neg. X42321-28-A10. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
Fig. 5.—Applicant to the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild in 1930 in the Fisher Building in Detroit. The sign behind the woman official reads: “BOYS!!! Enroll here in the FISHER BODY CRAFTSMAN’S GUILD; No Dues . . . No Fees; An opportunity to earn your college education or one of the 980 other wonderful awards. JOIN the Detroit Times Chapter now!” Smaller sign on the desk reads: “For First Instructions in Coach Building see the SUNDAY TIMES.” (GM Media Archives, neg. 19206-2. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
clubs. Whether these figures are trustworthy or not, it is clear that through its recruitment efforts alone the guild influenced numbers of male adolescents much larger than the high school students who actually managed to finish and submit the complicated models each year.\(^{13}\)

If the stakes were high, so were the requirements. The teenage boy who built a miniature coach or car had to be willing to invest an extraordinary amount of time, possess a large measure of patience, and acquire a high level of skill. The guild’s officials apparently realized that a completion of a coach would be extremely challenging without substantial corporate encouragement. Hence, they ensured that replicas would be prominently displayed in department store windows and that color prints and scale drawings were printed in local newspapers and in the guild’s newsletters. To be sure, displays of the Fisher coach served promotional purposes as well. Contest rules demanded that all parts be handmade, which necessitated the ability to build a miniature Napoleonic Coach (measuring 11 × 6 × 8 inches) from scratch, to read complicated patterns, to draft accurately, carve wood painstakingly, work metal, paint, and make upholstery with utmost care (fig. 6). Boys of high school and college ages had to construct functioning mechanical parts: windows that could slide, steps that could be folded away, spoked wheels and cambered axles that could turn, and a working leaf-spring suspension. The interior also needed painstaking attention to evoke the proper royal texture of lush upholstery, silk covers, rabbit fur carpets, and brocade curtains. Harking back to the time-consuming labor of craft traditions, the completion of a miniature Napoleonic Coach to specification demanded an extraordinary amount of dedication and time—about three hours a day for over ten months—not to mention the investment in materials.

The craft theme presented the organization with a full range of medieval symbols tailored to contemporary corporate needs. These were smoothly mixed with the most up-to-date technologies of the time: during the 1930s live radio broadcasts announced the winners to parents, family, friends, and neighbors; after World War II, airplanes carried the boys to GM’s headquarters in Detroit for the fes-

Fig. 6.—Application material for the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild Napoleonic Coach contest: “Scale drawings, contest rules, guide book to parents, membership button and card” (1930). (GM Media Archives, neg. 19206-1. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
tive four-day Fisher Body Convention. Here, GM officials staged events ranging from essay-writing contests to matches in swimming, golfing, and other athletic events in order to foster the boys' competitive spirit (fig. 7). Finally, the teenage boys toured carefully selected industrial sites and GM laboratories that served as windows through which they could view their possible future in the corporation (fig. 8).

The evocation of the medieval theme found its culminating moment during the last day of the convention when the organization offered the contestants a banquet and an initiation rite at a candlelit table against a Gothic backdrop. Clad in medieval costumes, the state finalists entered into the corporate world as apprentices under the blare of trumpets. In 1939 Embury A. Hitchcock, a guild judge and engineering educator, vividly described the spirit of the ritual and showed how the ceremonies marked the transition from apprentice to master craftsman and from boyhood to manhood. He fondly recalled how "the light of flickering candles shows the ornate walls, the heavy-beamed ceilings, and shields and draperies much as they were in the guild halls of Brussels. . . The trumpeteers [sic], dressed in doublets, breeches, and buckled shoes. . . lead the procession of contestants, each man carrying his own coach. After the seating, a casement window on the second floor swings open and a representative of the master workmen of the guild days addresses the group on what is required in the way of long years of service to qualify as a craftsman." Most of all, the guild succeeded in updating the old "corporate" world of medieval guilds to modern times. Hitchcock described how—after the evocation of European guild traditions—the medieval ornaments served as a backdrop for GM's American corporate modernity: "a picture of the modern boy, using power-driven tools in building his coach, shows the contrast between work in the Middle Ages and today."14 By deftly wedding medieval motifs to symbols of the modern age, then, the ritual trumpeted the past and broadcast the future, reaching millions through radio shows, news bulletins, department store displays, photographs, short films, and advertisements.

The Fisher guild did more, however, than just update the medieval values of apprenticeship for the modern corporate world. As the guild's ads suggested, the company sought to create a future generation of corporate workers while also expanding consumer markets. During the guild festivities organizers allotted time for shopping trips in downtown Detroit, suggesting that in the ex-

14Hitchcock, p. 262.
Fig. 7.—Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild contestants who had won in their home states were treated to a four-day Fisher Body Convention where they competed in sports and games. Photograph from 1937. (GM Media Archives, neg. 57632. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
FIG. 8.—Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild contestants, wearing their Guild berets, with corporate officials inside a Fisher Body Plant. Four contestants lift a body top. One worker looks on. (GM Media Archives, neg. 37633-4. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
panding consumer society men were no longer just breadwinners and producers but were also expected to take on new roles as consumers. At the same time, the guild’s advocates and GM officials explicitly encouraged guild winners to seek GM jobs after graduation. During a 1931 radio broadcast announcing that year’s winners, GM President Alfred Sloan Jr. extended “to all you boys the opportunity to become employees of the corporation as soon as your schooling is completed.”¹⁵ In the depths of the Depression, this was a powerful message indeed.

Sloan’s 1931 invitation turned out to be more than a public relations ploy, for it was sustained by the corporation’s active recruitment policy. As many participants later testified, the sumptuous banquet offered the teenagers easy access to key GM officials, and indeed the event was designed to encourage the boys to converse with men held up as successful role models and potential mentors. Local business leaders, GM chief designers and upper management, and the presidents and deans of major engineering colleges all fraternized with the contestants. GM’s attention to the male teenagers went beyond fleeting moments of attention at banquets. By sponsoring an alumni organization, the guild held winners of past contests up as examples to others. Each year all members of this exclusive club were invited back to the banquet as guests of honor, giving GM ample opportunity to monitor their advances as they grew up. The guild newsletter, The Guildsman, printed biographical narratives next to instructions on how to design the miniature coaches and cars. Working together, these narratives and technical instructions advised simultaneously on building perfect models and proper male character.

The corporation’s recruiting efforts paid off handsomely: many of the winners later became chief designers and high-level managers at General Motors and elsewhere in the corporate world. In 1968, for example, 55 percent of the creative design staff at GM had been involved in the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild, while many other former contestants occupied key positions in other large corporations.¹⁶ “These cars,” a design director for Walter Dorwin Teague Associates, Ken Dowd, recalled in 1985, “were truly the beginning of my design career.”¹⁷ The guild, another alumnus remarked, “was very much part of my teenage years. I was a scholarship winner in

¹⁵Raymond Doerr Scrapbook (1931) Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter, Doerr Scrapbook ); Humble, p. 33.
¹⁶Jacobus, p. 207.
1963. . . The Guild and the Soap Box Derby got me started on the road to being an industrial designer."

Over the years, the winners constituted a true fraternity of designers, still voicing deep emotions when recalling the pleasures of joining the guild. Although the story of these winners fails to account for the many who never managed to complete a model or lost the contest, the guild’s carefully planned efforts reached many more teenage boys than those who actually submitted models for the contest. Even those who merely learned about the guild’s existence through friends or at school praised its impact. Carroll Gantz, for example, recently recalled its lasting influence when he wrote, “I was not a participant, but I certainly recollect the program’s introduction in 1948 as inspirational to my career choice.”

The public narratives in the media stressed individual merit and preached “rugged competition,” faithful as they were to the middle-class American ideal of the self-made man, but personal recollections suggest that the efforts were often collaborative. Many of the entrants came from the lower middle classes and from small towns, and building the coaches and models fitted into the family economy and ambitions for upward mobility. After all, college education was the prize, a potential reward difficult to ignore for a teenage boy and his family. In 1930, Raymond Doerr’s father, for instance, allowed his son to postpone entry into the job market after high school gradu-

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18 Ray Peeler to Jacobus, May 6, 1985. For similar reactions and assessments of the guild’s influence on their career paths, see: letters to Jacobus from Raymond Doerr, April 4, 1985; Leo C. Peiffer, April 9, 1985; Bert E. Ray, July 17, 1985; L. W. Jacobs, April 2, 1985; James Garner, February 23, 1985; David Rom, March 6, 1985; Gilbert McArdle, March 20, 1985; Art Russell, undated; Randall Wrington, March 8, 1985; M. B. Antonick, March 4, 1985; James Barnett, undated; David P. Onopa, undated; Albert W. Brown Jr., February 1, 1985; Anthony Simone, undated; Lane Prom, February 8, 1985; Dale Gnage, January 22, 1985. The Soap Box Derby was established in 1934 by GM.

19 The sense of male fellowship can be gleaned from the extensive correspondence between Jacobus and other ex-guildsmen. See Leo C. Peiffer to John Jacobus, April 9, 1985; Jacobus, telephone interview by author, September 28, 1991; Jacobus, conversation with author, August 6, 1996.

20 The records primarily concern winners. Future research will concentrate on the differences and similarities between the winners and the rank-and-file members of the guild. The guild’s organizers were self-conscious about the difference. “Guildsmen are cautioned not to compare their own model cars with the cars in the exhibit. They must keep in mind that the models in the exhibit are some of the best from among the top winners in past Guild competitions and are the products of four, five, even six different attempts at the project.” The Guildsman 4, 4 (1951): p. 3.

21 Carroll M. Gantz to Jacobus, November 13, 1984.
tion. Young Doerr lived off the family’s income for about a year to devote all of his time to the competition. This family decision indeed paid off, because Doerr won the 1931 competition. Other fathers assisted their sons with advice, tools, capital, or skills. Mothers helped with the complicated and elaborate work on the majestic upholstery that adorned the Napoleonic Coach. Myron Webb recalled that his mother “had at one time worked in a millinery shop designing and making hats and did beautiful handiwork. She did the sewing on the inside trim [of the coach].” Brothers assisted by exchanging skills and sharing earlier experiences in the competition. The Pietruska brothers, Richard, Ronald, and Michael, were all national winners, “needless to say we were very proud of our accomplishments, individually and as a family.”

Thus while the contest pushed a masculine identity of autonomy, individuality, and honor in building the cars, actual practices suggest that modelmaking was embedded in the family economy, in which family members shared their talent, capital, and time. Such pooling of family resources is perhaps not surprising given the promise of a scholarship, but it contrasted sharply with the guild’s representations of building proper male character as a lone, individual effort.

These family strategies developed in tandem with GM’s search for personnel. The company sought to socialize male teenagers not only as future corporate employees, but also as breadwinners, and consumers. As one contemporary observer close to the automobile industry remarked, the goal of General Motors’ sponsorship of the guild “was to build good will, rather than to sell automobiles,” but also considered “the boy’s influence in automobile selling ... a very powerful factor.” In another appreciative assessment an advertising trade journal stated that the guild served to whet the boys’ appetite as prospective consumers.

Throughout the Doerr Scrapbook we find evidence of family cooperation in the families of other participants. Michael Pietruska to Jacobus, November 26, 1984. See also “Craftsman Remembered,” in The Arkansas City Traveller, August 16, 1983; Myron Webb to Jacobus, June 18, 1985; David Rom to Jacobus, March 6, 1985; Jacobus interview. In a still broader context, sisters also contributed to this household economy as they went to work to contribute to the family income, allowing their brothers to go to college. Upholstery was also women’s job at Fisher: see “General Motors II: Chevrolet,” Fortune, January 1939, pp. 36–46, 103–4, 107–10; Sidney Fine, Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937 (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1969), p. 156.

Humble (n. 11 above), p. 29.

ment is correct, it is particularly significant that the guild presented the boys in their new consumer roles as knowledgeable producers and builders—a portrayal that stood in marked contrast to the passive roles mapped out for girls in GM’s advertisement campaign “Body by Fisher,” initiated a few years earlier, and the craft’s recruiting literature during this period.

Building Male Institutional Networks

The guild owed its remarkable success to more than the luster of banquets and the promise of substantial scholarships, however important they might have been in motivating the Fisher hopefuls. In an age of increasing marketing sophistication, the guild’s promoters succeeded particularly well because General Motors’s organizational apparatus enabled the company to reach and recruit young men from across the United States and Canada, in a manner so convincing that the contest appeared to be an integral part of the life of the teenage boy and his family. This was due both to GM’s deft mobilization of leading economic, social, and cultural institutions to support the competition and to the intimate organizational parallels between the guild and its corporate parent.

The organizational shape of the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild’s contest closely resembled General Motors’s business organization and followed the company’s strategy of multidivisional management structure in various ways. In Sloan’s formulation of GM’s corporate strategy, the company sought “decentralized operations through coordinated control.” While centralized control played an important role, the guild, like its parent company, invested in local economies and communities around the United States and Canada. By 1933, the guild’s organization had covered over 600 major cities and many more other communities. 25 As is well known, GM’s management approach contrasted with Ford’s hierarchical and centrally organized structure, which sought to integrate production vertically. 26 Ford and GM differed not only in their internal management structure but also in their views on the world outside the confines of their companies. For one thing, Sloan sought to manage the reproduction of skills and the succession of people through calculated and predictable bureaucratic means. Promoting the virtues of the “Organiza-

tion Man’’ as the model of the new corporate worker, Sloan detested idiosyncratic personalities such as Ford’s and Durant’s.27 If the Ford company emphasized vertical and backward integration of production, Sloan’s strategy stood out because it also crafted a consumer framework for GM’s products by seeking to integrate both personnel and consumers forwardly into the organization in a more planned and organic fashion. GM’s sophisticated advertising campaigns, such as the ‘‘Body by Fisher,’’ represented one means of accomplishing that integration. The guild represented another.

The guild also marked an important alliance between the corporation and educational institutions. Its judging system, for example, cemented GM’s collaboration with educators by integrating the school system into its ranks. Teams of judges enlisted from local and national educational elites evaluated the models for faithfulness to the original and level of craftsmanship (fig. 9). On the national level, General Motors recruited a group of judges that reads like a roll call of engineering’s educational elite. In 1937, for example, five presidents of engineering schools and seven deans of engineering colleges participated. An advisory committee included heads of secondary public school systems and leaders in manual arts teaching. These leading educators had ample opportunity to fraternize with GM’s high-level managers and to exchange views with Harley H. Earl, head of the GM Art and Color Section, or Daniel C. Beard, president of the Boy Scouts, while they were in Detroit to judge the many models and participate in the festivities.28

How did a boy get involved in such an institutional mobilization in 1930? How did the guild succeed in becoming such an integral part of the life of the teenager and his family that he would be willing to spend at least three hours a day after school on the guild?29 Based on information supplied by nearly 200 contestants, a composite biography emerges of how a boy got drafted smoothly into the guild and

29 In the 1960s the teenagers needed 275 hours to finish a model of their own design.
FIG. 9.—Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild judge examining 1960 entrants in the free model design contest at the GM Tech Center. (GM Media Archives, neg. X36699-11. Copyright General Motors Corporation, used with permission.)
learned to nurture his passion for cars as if it were his second nature.\textsuperscript{30} There were at least three all-male institutional settings where the teenage boy might be introduced to the guild: the YMCA, which organized local guild chapters, provided the first avenue; the Boy Scouts, which also participated in recruitment and integrated the contest into their merit badge program, was the second; and finally, the high school, where the vocational counselor’s advice to participate often received further endorsement from the high-school principal’s active support, offered a third entryway.\textsuperscript{31} GM secured the sponsorship of high school principals, rewarding that collaboration by presenting a trophy not only to the boy who had won the contest but also to the school he attended.\textsuperscript{32} To further wed these networks with the appropriate educational message, GM arranged for some thirty-two renowned athletes to narrate stories about enduring difficulties and overcoming initial failures on the path to ultimate success. Finally, GM organized promotional teams that visited 1,200 high schools each year. Some even visited the contestants at home.\textsuperscript{33} Once introduced to the guild and encouraged to participate in it, the teenager enrolled by submitting his name to the local Chevrolet, Buick, Oakland, Cadillac, or Oldsmobile dealer in his area well in advance of the deadline; officials calculated that on average seven boys enrolled at each GM dealership throughout the country. After enrolling, they received a membership card, a bronze guild button, a guide for their parents, a detailed manual with plans and instruc-

\textsuperscript{30}This composite is based on biographical information supplied by 200 participants collated from a variety of sources, including Jacobus’s correspondence with a great number of former participants, several issues of The Guildsman, various guild pamphlets describing winners throughout the period between 1930 and 1968, and the rich descriptions contained in local newspaper clippings. In some cases a nearly complete biography emerges; in others only the mere outlines are generated in this manner.

\textsuperscript{31}Doerr Scrapbook: Humble (n. 11 above), p. 29. The exact class background of the guild participants and the role the guild played in their class aspirations remain in question, but some inferences may be drawn on General Motors 1962 statistics on occupations of the fathers of guild entrants, the preponderance of immigrant names and the place of residence in the sample of 200 members collated, and personal conversations with former participants Nil Disco, John Jacobus, Art Mollela, and Rudi Volti. The involvement of the Boy Scouts included more than active recruitment efforts since the organization also helped to formulate the guild’s dress code and chaperoned winners of the state competitions from their home states to Detroit. Pound claimed that the guild was the only boys’ organization sponsored by the Boy Scouts; see Pound, p. 300.


\textsuperscript{33}Doerr Scrapbook.
tions, and a quarterly newsletter called The Guildsman, which coun-
seled them on how to proceed and paraded previous winners who
showed off their successful careers as additional trophies. To cap it
off with a show of personal attention, members of the guild received
greeting cards wishing them a Merry Christmas with the compli-
ments of GM. In some cases the support was much more substantial
than that: GM divisions such as Delco Remy in Anderson, Ind., the
Packard Electric Company, the Mansfield Tool and Die Company,
and the Fisher Body Plant in Hamilton, Ohio, organized local guild
cubs in their own communities under management supervision to
help guide and encourage the boys making their models. James
Barnett recalled that community and industrial support for the guild
program in his hometown of Anderson, Ind., was substantial: “it is
only in retrospect that I can fully appreciate that guidance we
guildsmen received.” The judging system, as has been mentioned
already, brought GM’s corporate management together with the Boy
Scouts, high school teachers, and engineering educators. All these
institutional networks and rituals helped reproduce distinctly male
patterns of paternal mentoring.

The emerging social and economic network extended beyond the
coalition between the corporation and the engineering education
elite to include the active support of the media. More than twenty
national and local newspapers participated in weaving these intricate
social and economic networks together into a seamless web. Among
several newspapers, the Detroit News directly sponsored the guild by
providing weekly instructions on how to plan, design, and build a
model; other newspapers faithfully helped to build suspense by car-
rying accounts of deadlines, events, displays, or announcements of
winners throughout the year. The guild’s advocates structured the
annual cycle of each contest in such a way that reports on the Fisher
Body Craftsman’s Guild appeared in the press monthly and some-
times even weekly.

In other words, the contest was as much about building media
events and suspense as about building models and male character
to which girls had no access. A photograph taken at the annual ban-
quet in 1931 just moments before the winners were announced sym-

34 Geear (n. 13 above), p. 15; Humble, pp. 27, 29.
35 John Rempel, Jr., to Jacobus, August 20, 1986.
36 David O. Burnett to Jacobus, March 10, 1988; Fisher in the News and clippings
(n. 13 above).
37 James Barnett to Jacobus, undated.
38 Doerr Scrapbook; Humble; Skip Geear to Jacobus, April 7, 1992; Herbert Lozier
to Jacobus, August 10, 1984.
bolizes these close parallels most graphically. The photograph shows rows of straight-backed boys identically clad in guild attire: jacket, beret, tie, and pin. Facing the camera with similar expressions of suspense on their faces, each boy clings to his exact miniature replica of the Napoleonic Coach (fig. 10). We can read this 1931 photograph as a perfect rendition of the emerging male corporate ideal. The contest’s demand for exact imitation of the original coach model is neatly replicated in the demand for identical male character, something that would come to symbolize the ideal of the “Organization Man.” As propagated so eloquently by Sloan, GM’s corporate male ideal demanded patience, hard work, and a willingness to conform to the rules and regulations of a large organization, the very antithesis of the behavior associated with unpredictable and colorful personalities.39

Although many of the contest’s features remained the same throughout the years, over time organizers gradually introduced one important change. Until the outbreak of World War II, the contest required that entrants build a miniature replica of the coach featured in the Fisher Body logo, but after the war, the guild’s organizers decided to change this requirement, and began to ask for an original design instead of the faithful imitation (fig. 4). This change occurred neither suddenly nor in straightforward fashion, but reflected the contradictions and challenges General Motors faced. If the “free model” design seemed a radical departure from the straight-jacket of careful imitation of the craft as represented by the 1931 photograph, a closer look at the change also shows continuities between the values at work in the coach and in the free model contests and between the idealized 19th-century culture of production and the 20th-century culture of consumption.40

_The Napoleonic Coach versus the Free Model: (Dis)continuities and Contradictions_

Why would an automotive giant such as GM and a body company such as Fisher sponsor an organization that harked back to the European Middle Ages and their craft traditions? Why would Fisher Body

39 Despite his aversion to colorful personalities, Sloan himself did not fit the character of the Organization Man, as Peter Drucker emphasizes in his introduction to Sloan’s autobiography (n. 26 above); see also Sloan and Boyden Sparkes, _Adventures of a White-Collar Man_ (New York, 1941) and Flink (n. 27 above), p. 232. For contrast: Warren Susman, “Culture Heroes: Ford, Barton, Ruth,” in _Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century_ (New York, 1984): 122–49.

40 Susman, _Culture as History_, Marchand, _Advertising the American Dream_, (n. 3 above).
Fig. 10.—Above: Winners of the 1930 state level contests with their Napoleonic Coaches awaiting the announcement of the four national winners at the banquet against the backdrop of the Brussels Guild. Below: The senior and junior winners. (Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Division of Transportation, neg. 9988.)
go to such extraordinary lengths to instill “craftsmanship” in a younger generation when auto manufacturers changed their production methods so thoroughly? How did the guild fit into the company’s overall strategy? The premium put on skilled craftsmanship and endurance entailed a historic irony. At first glance, the guild’s emphasis on craft seemed at odds with the growing economic trend toward a Fordist mode of mass production that sought to eliminate workers and replace them with machinery.

The Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild celebrated the craft ideal and demanded undivided labor (from the purchase of raw materials through tool-making, design, execution, and finishing) at the same moment that production in the Fisher Body plants moved toward the assembly of parts by semiskilled workers. Because of the extraordinary degree of difficulty, many teenagers who started the process never finished; others negotiated the craft challenge by competing year after year; some competed for as long as eight consecutive years—from age 12, when they were first allowed to join the contest until age 20, when they lost eligibility. The guild’s initial emphasis on craft as a path of male socialization disguised the emasculating nature of corporate America that produced it. The borrowing of guild past attempted to recapture and remake a masculine culture in the context of a 20th-century society looking for new resources. In time, the guild evolved to fulfill the dual purpose—one concerned with the crafty imitation of existing models, the other based on the inspiration of new designs. This tension of near opposites reflected an often uncomfortable transition within the company and the automotive industry as a whole. The guild expressed the contradictions, tensions, and solutions of GM’s conflictual world of corporate culture that the Fisher family confronted as it moved into the corporation. As historian Roland Marchand has shown, many of GM’s corporate strategies during the 1920s not only reflected an “outward quest for prestigious familiarity” but also sought to promote internal loyalty and corporate centralization. The guild and Fisher’s promotional campaigns were no exception.

From a thriving German-American family firm in Detroit during the second half of the 19th century, Fred Fisher and his six brothers swiftly built their company into the world’s largest manufacturer of


automobile bodies when they began to mass-produce closed bodies for various automobile companies during the first two decades of this century. Before the first World War, combustion-engine cars had been mainly associated with utilitarian farmers or upper-class male adventure and racing. Soon thereafter automotive design changed dramatically as manufacturers sought to broaden its appeal and market to include women. Closing the automobile’s body on all sides did just that. The automobile’s closed body moved motoring away from an exclusively sporting, summer, and leisure-time activity to a practical mode of transportation all year round, in all weather conditions. The Fisher brothers simultaneously stepped into and created this new market. “The Fishers kept their eyes on closed car possibilities from the start,” one chronicler of the firm explained the Fishers’ particular need for women as the company’s market niche. “They saw that motoring would remain a summer sport until drivers and owners could be comfortable in the winter months. Women would never be really pleased with the automobile so long as their gowns and hats were at the mercy of wind and weather. After pressing these points on car manufacturers they were at last rewarded . . . for the first ‘big order’ for closed car bodies.” Thanks to the closing of the car’s body, the mass of middle-class and urban women could venture out on the road in all weathers. More importantly perhaps, the car’s body became the selling point of the automobile as a whole, over its technical specifications. The body of the car “is emphasized by thousands of successful automobile salesmen as an introduction

46Pound (n. 12 above), p. 289.
to their selling effort and as an easy and sure way of having the buyer accept the entire car."47 In this technical and marketing transformation of the automobile, the Fisher Body Company played a critically important role as the world's largest producer of closed bodies and became the key company in GM's marketing strategy to beat Ford and other competitors.

Not only was the Fisher firm phenomenally successful in carving out a powerful new niche in the market, it also succeeded in making a smooth transition from a traditional, craft-oriented 19th-century family firm to a 20th-century division of GM, despite rapid changes in product and modes of production this new market strategy entailed. The Fisher brothers, all seven of them, were brought into GM's managerial structure and without exception became leading corporate managers. At first the brothers successfully negotiated for their continuing control within General Motors. Holding onto their craft-inspired past and playing a crucial role in helping to bring about General Motors's success at styling, the Fisher clan moved into GM's managerial command during the 1930s. Fisher Body remained a family firm tightly embedded into the corporate structure; eventually, however, the brothers became the victims of their own success precisely because their very effective incorporation into the corporate structure rendered them obsolete.48

The Fisher Body company's choice of the handmade Napoleonic Coach as its logo illustrates the emblematic ways in which Fisher reworked the discontinuities and contradictions with the corporate world. Fisher Body's Napoleonic Coach did not draw on an old family trademark, but represented an invented tradition. "This symbol" read an announcement in 1922, "will appear, from this time forward, on all finished products of the Fisher Body Corporation [and] records the care which the motor car manufacturer has exercised in providing your car with a body of the very best quality obtainable."49 The imperial coach harked back to an old craft tradition and symbolized comfort and luxury—values believed to appeal to women in particular. Registered in 1922 and officially introduced as a trademark in 1923, the Napoleonic Coach logo began to circulate in the commercial and visual domain in 1926. That year also marked Fisher's incorporation into GM and the surrender of its au-

48 White, "Body by Fisher" and "Fisher Body Corporation."
49 "Fisher Bodies," Saturday Evening Post, June 24, 1922, 37.
tonomy as a coach-making firm.\textsuperscript{50} Ironically, the Napoleonic Coach—symbol and model for the guild—represented the craft tradition that the Fisher family was about to lose to GM. The Napoleonic Coach perhaps breathed nostalgia for a Fisher that was long gone, but in the hands of GM it became less a symbol of the past than a malleable and invented tradition suitable for present and future use.\textsuperscript{51} The trademark proved so successful that the coach became a stand-in for GM’s own logo well into the 1980s. Inside GM, Fisher and its Napoleonic logo mitigated the contradictions between the worlds of craft and of mass production; outside, they carved out a new market. The Fisher slogan “Body by Fisher” in advertisements, featuring the suggestive curves of the female body, sought to convey an image of beauty, elegance, luxury, and craftsmanship associated with European royalty, and held it as a promise to the newly emerging middle classes. Strictly speaking, of course, the European hand-crafted Napoleonic Coach was out of reach for American middle classes, but the emperor’s mass-produced coach by Fisher beckoned consumers to enter its fantasy world through the illusion of a custom-made body—something a Ford could not and would not provide. Most importantly, the emphasis on comfort, luxury, and safety aimed to appeal to women.

However successfully wedded with GM’s market strategy, the contradiction of the Fisher craftsman’s world within a modern world came to a head in the guild’s contest itself. The image of a Napoleonic Coach might have served marketing, public relations, and corporate organization strategies very well indeed, but it failed to fulfill the needs of the participants in the guild, who labored relentlessly at a task far beyond a world available to them. For a few years between 1930 and 1987, the world of the old crafts reigned supreme in the contest. Then, for another ten years, the old world of craft and the modern world of design were brought together in a delicate balance that worked as a compromise for a short time, but after World War II the modernist design ideal triumphed completely.\textsuperscript{52}

The changes in the contest punctuated the shifts in the company and in the fate of the Fisher family firm. The announcement of the free model design in 1937 symbolized the imminent erasure of the Fisher family’s past as coach builders and its direct claim to European lineage. While the Fisher Napoleonic Coach trademark continued to figure prominently in successive decades, the decision of the

\textsuperscript{50}From 1926 until 1984, Fisher was a division of the GM company.
\textsuperscript{51}On the uses of history by major companies see Susman, \textit{Culture as History}, (n. 39 above).
\textsuperscript{52}The annual competition ceased for several years because of the war.
organizers to permit the design of free models announced both the integration of the Fisher family firm into GM’s management structure and the firm’s growing loss of autonomy. For years, the Fisher brothers clung to their belief in the superiority of wood frames that were sheathed in steel and tried to hold onto their tradition of craft in the production of automotive bodies, but they lost out to GM’s increased overall control in 1937. In the same year that the guild adopted the free design competition based on plaster and synthetics, GM eliminated all wooden parts from their cars. That change in policy also marked the growing confidence of General Motors in a new marketing strategy, where women and style occupied center stage, pushing craft knowledge and technical innovations to the background and marketing strategies to the fore.

Many other analogies existed between the requirements in the contest and the manufacturing of automotive bodies. When Harley Earl joined the guild as an official in 1937, it was also the first year the guild allowed the boys to enter a car model after their own design. As the head of GM’s Art and Color Section, Earl stood at the center of the new marketing strategy emphasizing style. Funded by the Fisher Body Division, managers expected Earl “to direct general production body design and to conduct research and development programs in special car designs,” in his newly established department. He pioneered many new techniques in automobile design that made styling an institutionalized and closely coordinated activity and crucial strategy to GM.

The contest’s post World War II requirements squarely reflected the policy shift from the craft tradition of coach building to streamlined design, personified by Earl. While in both versions of the contest (the Napoleonic Coach and the free model), the emphasis fell on building from scratch and using raw materials with no prefabricated parts, the free model mirrored GM’s focus on “style,” one that came to dominate the automotive industry as a whole. The decision to eliminate Fisher’s Napoleonic Coach from the contest

54 Richard Tedlow, New and Improved: The Story of Mass Marketing in America (New York, 1990), chap. 3; Marchand, “The Corporation That Nobody Knew” (n. 4 above) and “The Inward Thrust of Institutional Advertising” (n. 42 above).
55 Flink (n. 27 above), p. 235.
56 The Guildsman explicitly stated that interiors were no longer important but that style was; The Guildsman 5, 1 (1957). In the 1960s, controversy arose over GM’s emphasis on design and styling and would soon become the focus of consumer advocate Ralph Nader’s indictment, Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile (New York, 1965). In it, Nader accused GM of callous negligence in the design and manufacture of the rear-engine Corvair. For further criticism, see: Jeffrey O’Connell’s Safety Last (New York, 1966).
altogether in 1947 effectively consolidated and completed the era-
ure of the Fisher family’s coach-building past. It emphasized style
rather than structure. If the lush and majestic interiors and the
proper mechanical functioning of parts rendered the points essen-
tial for a boy to win the contest in the Napoleonic Coach competi-
tion, in the free-model contest, mechanically accurate movement
had no bearing whatsoever on the outcome. After World War II,
smooth exterior finishing and an eye-pleasing style formed the sole
criteria for winning a scholarship or money award. “I was im-
pressed,” Tristan Walker Metcalfe recalls of a conversation he had
with one of the top designers as a young boy at the guild’s banquet
in the 1950s, “[at] how unimportant the efficiency and performance
were relative to appearance and style, in their attitude then.”
Typical of the ideology of streamlined design, the guild’s instruction
books and newsletters reflected the change and defined bad design
as those models that appeared “slow, boxy, heavy, or square,” and
good design as “graceful, light, fast, flowing,” cultural values that
projected the new design curve of femininity.

The parallels between the boy’s world of model-making and the
internal workings of the corporation did not end here. During the
1950s and 1960s, the contest instruction manuals closely followed
the first twelve months of the planning stages of GM’s celebrated
annual model change: sketching, drawing to scale, making a clay
model, casting a plaster model, and finishing. The manuals recom-
mended that contest entrants use clay modeling as an essential part
of the design process just as GM designers employed the clay model-
ing technique pioneered by Earl to create fluid car lines.

It is hard to say how far GM planned the nexus between the guild
and the corporation, but the linkages forged were powerful indeed.
Providing an easy source of design ideas might not have been the
original intent of the guild’s advocates when the contest was intro-
duced in the 1930s, if only because the Napoleonic Coach did not
lend itself easily to that purpose, but sometime in the 1950s the
guild’s promotional literature cast it as explicit contest policy in no
uncertain terms: “it is possible that a submitted model may include
a design or idea which General Motors Corporation may use at some
time, and it is understood that the Corporation and its licensees are
titled freely to use any such design or ideas.” Furthermore, offi-

57 Tristan Walker Metcalfe to Jacobus, November 25, 1984.
58 For an example, see Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild, “How to Build a Model
Car” (1957), General Motors Research Laboratories, Library Collection, pp. 2–3.
59 Flink, p. 201.
cial officials warned those who participated in the competition that GM retained the right to "freely use, for advertising or publicity, reproductions of likenesses, statements, names and addresses of Guild members and the models or reproductions of models submitted by them."60 The most successful model cars generated enough interest for GM’s Design Department to go to the trouble of buying them, and in some cases displaying them at GM’s headquarters.61 James Garner recalls, for example, that "my 1955 model sports car entry was purchased by G.M., design rights included. It was on display at their headquarters. . . It was in a traveling show throughout the U.S."62 And James Sampson remembers seeing, "in the Fisher Body Office Building in Warren, Mich., storerooms on the lower level [containing] a number of models that they had purchased from Guildsmen," which were then loaned to Sampson when he went on a promotional tour for the guild in 1956.63 Whatever the guild’s initiators had in mind at first, these statements suggest at the very least that the nexus between the contest organization and GM’s design had become unambiguous by the 1950s.

If the guild’s instructions and practices copied or extended the adult world of automotive design, they also revealed major differences with GM and Earl’s Art and Color Section. Styling at GM had become a coordinated, controlled, and institutionalized strategy. Fifty designers were employed in this department alone and worked at the introduction of a new model that took two years of planning. While the guild’s manuals instructed teenagers to make models by themselves—a process including toolmaking, designing, modeling and execution—in Earl’s hands this was no longer left to the "hap-hazard activity of engineers or salesmen as the need for a new model arose," but involved teams of specialists working for over a year.64 In contrast to the adult world—where the actual shaping and manufacturing of automotive bodies shifted from the hands of Fisher Body’s engineers, foremen, and skilled workers to the creativity appropriated by GM designers in the styling department—the boys were instructed to accomplish the same results in seclusion in attics, cel-


lars, and bedrooms at home.\textsuperscript{65} No wonder many teenagers who entered the contest never completed it.

Other organizations tried to emulate the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild, but never attained quite the same success. Ford’s Industrial Arts Awards Program, for instance, sought to establish a similar program through high school industrial arts and vocational education classes in the 1960s, but organizers soon discontinued it due to lack of enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{66} In 1962, the Bank of Dearborn and the Ford Motor Company Design Center established The Greater Dearborn Automotive Design Competition, known as the Thunderbird Design Contest in the period between 1962 and 1971. The distribution of literature, dependent on school cooperation, proved to be a major obstacle because attempts to lure teachers into the program failed. Ford decided to abandon the competition because the “number of participants, public relations and advertising value did not warrant the necessary investment in time, manpower and money.”\textsuperscript{67} These failures show by contrast just how successful the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild had been in aligning the school system to the corporation and how complicated the organization, maintenance, and reproduction of male technical knowledge and skills—all neatly lined up with a particular corporate ideal—actually was.

The success of the partnership between educators and GM during the thirties, forties, and fifties is perhaps best illustrated by the dramatic way in which the guild unceremoniously unraveled in 1968 when the company was forced to terminate the project. Standard promotional procedure had GM officials visit the high schools of the winners, but after John Jacobus won the contest at the state level during the 1960s, he recalled that “when GM came to my high school principal and requested permission to make a presentation to an assembly of 2,000 in my honor, the corporation was turned down.”\textsuperscript{68} Going against well-established expectations, such official neglect would be startling enough for a teenage boy who had spent many spare hours on his model. For another, it announced that the coalition between GM and the educational institutions could no longer be taken for granted. More dramatic signs flagged the ending of the once successful alliance between corporations, educational

\textsuperscript{65}For some insights into the role of foremen and skilled workers in styling of cars on the shop floor at Fisher, see White, “Body by Fisher” (n. 45 above); on the rise of designers over engineers in Earl’s styling department, see “General Motors II: Chevrolet” (n. 22 above), p. 47.

\textsuperscript{66}David L. Lewis to Jacobus, January 10, 1986.

\textsuperscript{67}H. Benson to Jacobus, March 13, 1974.

\textsuperscript{68}Jacobus interview (n. 19 above).
The Fisher Body Craftsmen’s Guild, 1930–1968

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institutions, the teenager, and his family. By the sixties male teenagers no longer projected their future careers into the corporations, as canvassing corporate representatives were shocked to find out. Someone close to the organization remembered that “in the late sixties, [GM’s] presentations at inner-city high schools were not that well-received.” He thought that “often the disillusioned, turned-off young of that era felt little motivation to exercise the kind of self-discipline required for the creativity and craftsmanship it took to win even a college scholarship” and concluded, “I hate to say it, but I think a few of our Field Representatives felt fortunate to escape from some of those school assemblies in one piece—it got that bad.”

By the stark contrast they provide, these examples illustrate the sheer organizational resources, capital, and goodwill that had sustained the guild for over three decades. Even though it had grown to appear quite natural, the values of this corporate, male coalition could no longer be taken for granted by the late 1960s. Other and earlier signs signaled that all was not well in the corporations. Since World War II, for example, the immense popularity of a marginalized subculture of hot-rods and drag racing, where young men with ties to the automobile and aircraft industries souped up and stripped down mass-produced cars and raced them illegally, announced the emergence of an exuberant, youthful male rebellion at a grassroots level. As historian Robert Post characterizes these early racing aficionados, they were “unmarried males, many of them ex-GIs, with plenty of spare dollars, enhanced mechanical skills, an assertive bent, and a love of speed.” One could read their tinkering as a rebellion of sorts against gender roles mapped out by the corporations. Their illegal activities implied a rebellion against the modern corporate male identity of the “Organization Man” promoted by Sloan and by GM and against what they considered the frivolous effeminate designs coming from Detroit.

In the post World War II era, the guild’s introduction of a free design model sought to simultaneously convey and plan consumers’ freedom of expression. In contrast with the young men, who cherished the buoyant grassroots and autodidactic culture of hot rods and drag racing, the guild promoted a sense of individual expression

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69 Humble (n. 11 above), p. 34.
that was essentially corporate and adult-sponsored; it was carefully managed, supervised, and circumscribed from above. Moreover, if hot rods and drag racing emphasized high performance, mechanical ingenuity, exposed interiors, and adventure, GM and the guild merchandised smooth surfaces, lush interiors, convenience and comfort associated with women and family values. Hot-rodders relished stripped-down bodies; GM’s automotive style relied on enhanced car bodies as a marketing strategy. As the advocates of the Fisher free design contest instructed, the car’s body, not its interior, constituted the pièce de résistance in this new design configuration. The miniaturized world of the guild’s free design contest replicated GM’s famed annual model changeover that cosmetically altered the car’s exterior irrespective of interior technical specifications. GM’s emphasis on enhanced bodies, smooth surfaces, and female models had not been a matter of casual choice, but was part and parcel of an elaborate effort to beat Ford’s successful formula of Spartan utilitarianism associated with male virtues of thrift.71 The Fisher firm and its parent company, General Motors, confronted and produced the female-gendered consumer through several institutional means such as their establishment of the Art and Color Department, their engagement of the advertising agency Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, and their recruitment of famed illustrator McClelland Barclay for the Fisher girl campaign, as we have seen. The strategy was so successful that, when Barclay’s Fisher girls appeared for the Fisher Body Company in Life magazine, Motor magazine editor Ray W. Sherman described the change from Fordism to Sloanism as follows: “the automotive business has almost overnight become a feminine business with a feminine market.”72 The strategy of smooth surfaces, convenience, and comfort consciously projected female values, however. As a Fisher advertisement told retailers and other interested readers, “for years Fisher Bodies have been built with feminine tastes in mind.”73 In the new design curve of the automotive bodies that Fisher produced, women and the female body played a prominent if not essential role, as the hot-rodders sensed. The 1927 Life magazine “Body by Fisher” advertisement (fig. 2) encapsulated GM’s and Fisher’s deliberate marketing creation of women as consumers.

71 Meikle (n. 64 above), p. 12.
72 Scharff (n. 3 above), p. 115. On Batten, Barton, Durstine and Osborn, see Sloan, My Years with General Motors (n. 26 above) and Marchand, “The Corporation Nobody Knew” (n. 4 above) and “The Inward Thrust of Institutional Advertising” (n. 42 above). On the Art and Color Section see Meikle. On the subject of Gibson Girls, flappers, and fashion, see Jennifer Craik, The Face of Fashion: Cultural Studies of Fashion (London and New York, 1994).
73 “A Coach for Cinderella,” Literary Digest, February 27, 1932, 25.
However successful, the automotive style as a consumable female-coded product proved to be a precarious enterprise, indeed.74 If women were all surface and cosmetics, the automotive industry’s content and operations, the company insisted, were to be left to men.75 Establishing all-male organizations such as the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild was one of many ways to reestablish firm, strict, exaggerated safeguards against possible female incursions. They helped reestablish clear boundaries between designers and users, men and women, and between producers and consumers. While the corporation sought to tease out women as consumers, it recruited boys through the conduit of the YMCA, the Boy Scouts, and other all-male organizations.

The 1931 National Geographic advertisement (fig. 1) suggests, as has this article, that the playful world of model cars was not merely lighthearted, diverting, and amusing, nor was it inconsequential: it was a very serious business indeed. While Fisher boys found themselves making model cars with a view to an engineering scholarship, the future proposed to girls cast them as receivers—consumers—of what the boys produced. The world of Fisher Body provides us insights into the institutionalized ways in which boys, male teenagers, and adult men were channeled into the domain designated as technical; and conversely, the ways in which girls, female teenagers, and adult women were positioned as consumers, as the seemingly natural antitheses of the productive, masculine domain. If the gentle path to the showroom was open to all, the hard road to the design department demanded manly virtues acquired through boys’ rites of passage, carefully constructed by just such coalitions as the Fisher Body Craftsman’s Guild.

The smooth change from the Napoleonic Coach to the free model showed how the craft ideal could be playfully adapted to the new requirements of mass production in a new phase of the automotive industry and consumerism associated with women’s new role: style was supposed to recapture notions of freedom and individuality in mass-produced and standardized consumer goods. But attempts to remake the past into the future by employing medieval rituals obscured pertinent facts about the present—including the changing representations of masculinity and femininity. The contest recruited boys to make models, casting them as knowledgeable producers, while Fisher girls were groomed to be models for the new consumer.

74 For a general discussion on the precarious nature of the female market for the advertising profession, see Marchand, Advertising the American Dream (n. 3 above), chaps. 1 and 2, and Scharff.
75 “A Coach for Cinderella.”
goods. These seemingly clear-cut roles nevertheless obscured a new truth about gender in the new phase of the consumer society. Boys, and for that matter men, were potential consumers as well, as even the supporters of the guild seemed to have acknowledged. The guild recruited not only at schools but also through automobile showrooms and department stores such as Macy’s and Hudson’s, while the organizers made sure to reserve ample time for contestants to shop in downtown Detroit. As we have seen, an industry trade journal considered the influence of boys in automobile purchasing significant enough to argue that, by way of the guild, General Motors meant to extend goodwill through the recruitment of boys for the model-making contest. By the same token, women and girls entered the buyer’s market not merely as passive actors but as the essential builders of an expanding consumers’ society. Yet in the tales of modern gender mythology told by organizations like the guild, boys’ technophilia, whether as consumer or producer, was born of this role as potential designer.