

# *Designer for Streamlined Living*

by J. D. RATCLIFF



Whether it's a fly swatter or an ocean liner, it's likely that Henry Dreyfuss had a hand in bringing it up to date

**I**N 1924, HENRY DREYFUSS received as severe a piece of criticism as any artist has ever had to swallow. He was teaching art in a progressive school in New York when a six-year-old expressed glowering disapproval of both Dreyfuss and his works.

Finally the youngster decided the moment had come for action. He ran up, grasped Dreyfuss' hand and sank his teeth into it.

In the 23 years that have elapsed since then, the world has been kinder. Dreyfuss has become a leader of that small band of men who are bringing art to the machine age. As an industrial designer, he has made hundreds of mass-produced items better looking, more efficient. He has designed everything from fly swatters to trans-Atlantic liners. Knowingly or not, we all spend a good part of our daily lives with Dreyfuss creations.

A sampling would include the Big Ben alarm clock, the Hoover vacuum cleaner, Crane plumbing fixtures, General Electric refrigerators, Royal typewriters and the Twentieth Century Limited. Dreyfuss also designed a line of dime-store pots and pans, and the interior of the Perisphere at the New York World's Fair.

It is as difficult to rank industrial designers as it is to rank artists, sculptors, novelists, surgeons, bankers or chiropractors. Yet few people will dispute Dreyfuss' position as one of the three top industrial designers in the U. S.—which is to say the world, since this is strictly an American profession.

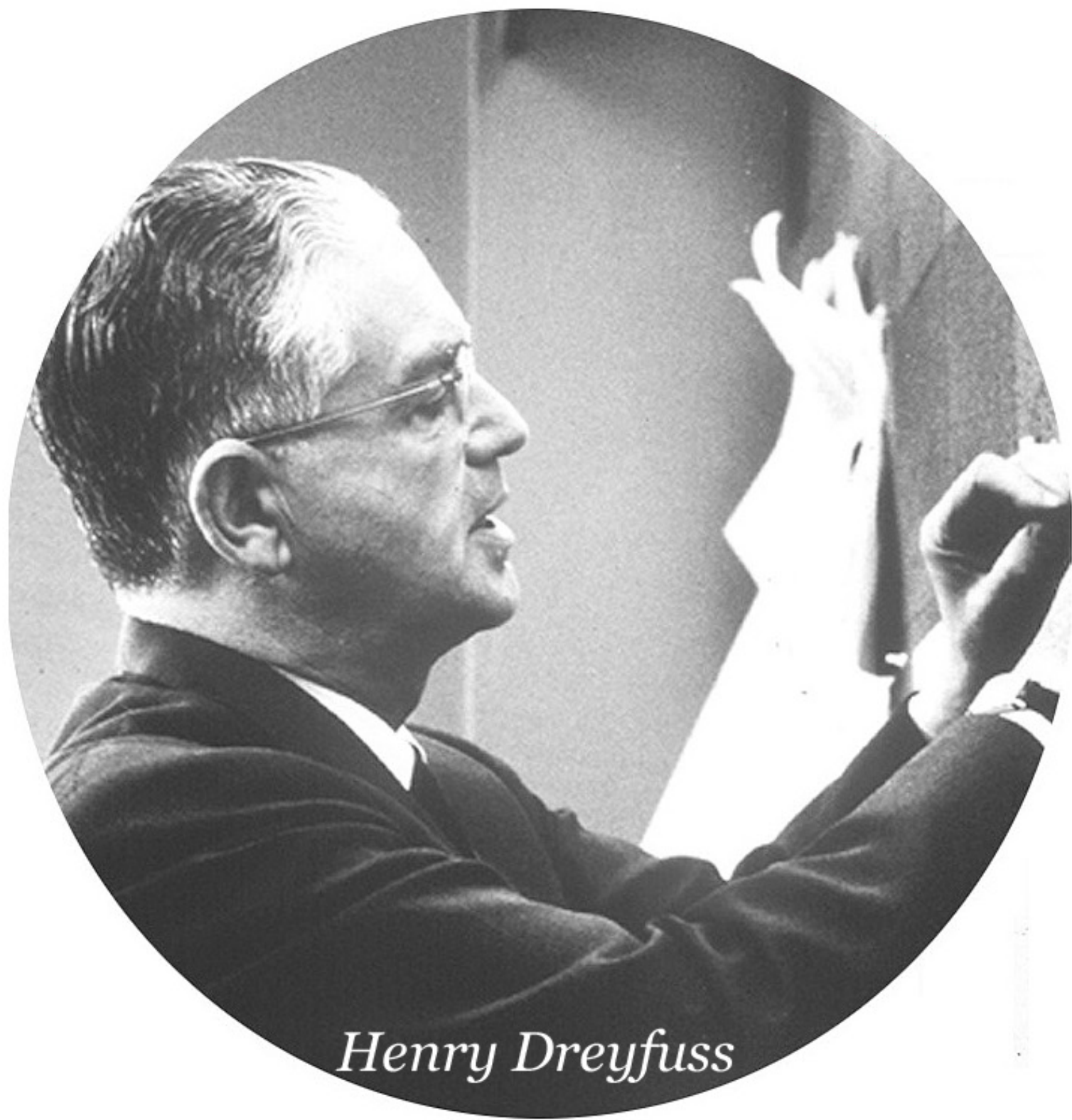
The Germans tackled functional design in the early '20s, producing a few chairs, tables and cabinets, all handmade on a limited scale.

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

*Streamlined Living*

But the idea of bringing art to mass production had never occurred to anyone. Nearly everything produced by industry was a product of engineering evolution—the typewriter looking not unlike the first machine of its kind ever built, cooking utensils being much the same as in Roman times, washing machines resembling hasty weddings of old-fashioned tubs and wringers.

Industrial design was barely getting started when the Depression struck in the 1930s. America's economic collapse may have meant calamity for millions of people, but for the designers it spelled golden opportunity. Savage competition became the rule. To stay in business, a manufacturer had to give his products new utility, new eye-appeal. The industrial designers were ready for the job.



*Henry Dreyfuss*

**I**NDUSTRIAL DESIGN represents a good deal more than drawing a few sketches of what the designer thinks a product should look like. This can be best illustrated by scrutinizing the Big Ben alarm clock. Dreyfuss' first step on this job was to confer with engineers, production men and salesmen. What could the engineers build, what could the production men produce, what could the salesmen sell?

Then Dreyfuss spent weeks hanging around clock counters in various types of stores, listening to customers' comments. Meanwhile he had eight clocks on his bedside table where he could test legibility of clock faces with his own sleep-fogged eyes. Some of the clocks had bells calculated to produce nervous collapse; others had shut-off buttons hard to find; still others had stubby winding keys which wrecked a woman's fingernails.

*Streamlined Living*

In his sketches and models, Dreyfuss corrected these things. But could engineers squeeze clock works into the proposed case? Could production men add the new features without boosting costs? And most important of all, did salesmen think people would buy the new clock? When these questions were answered satisfactorily, the new clock went into production.

Dreyfuss is a hound for detail. In designing a typewriter, he measured the fingers of hundreds of typists. In creating a new chair for plane or train, he doesn't settle for the fact that the chair *seems* comfortable. He hires an orthopedic surgeon to advise.

When he got the job of designing new bedrooms for Statler hotels, he had an old-style bedroom set up in a New York warehouse and lived there for several days. Once he knew what was wrong, he started designing the new room piece by piece.

Recently he did much the same with the "mock-up" of Consolidated's big new 204-passenger plane. To test comfort of seats, beds, wash-room and dining facilities, he locked 85 people in the contraption and kept them there for 24 hours!

In a New York warehouse there are sample staterooms for three trans-Atlantic liners which he is designing for American Export Lines. He harries the staff of his New York office by making them pack trunks and suitcases, move into dummy staterooms, unpack and settle down for long voyages to nowhere. Dreyfuss feels that only such attention to detail can give the answer to questions of space, comfort, convenience and color scheme.

**A**T 43, HENRY DREYFUSS is enormously successful, a fact which he makes every effort to conceal. He could pass better as an English teacher in a small university than

*Streamlined Living*

as an artistic oracle for big business. Yet, his modest and casual exterior is somewhat misleading. He has a quick, incisive mind and can handle his own in rough-and-tumble contract negotiations with any management group.

Of necessity, he leads a hurly-burly life. Both he and his wife—and their three children—like California climate. They have a home in Pasadena. But most of the Dreyfuss business is in New York. This makes him a top transcontinental commuter by plane and train.

His clients represent the Social Register of business. He could, if he wished, have several times this number, but he likes to maintain a doctor-patient relationship with clients, and feels that if there were more of them this might be lost. As it is, they provide enough work to keep 35 people busy in New York and Pasadena. The Bell Telephone Laboratories alone has scores of design jobs a year—for switchboards, chairs for telephone operators, transmitters and such.

Dreyfuss was born in New York City in 1904. After high school and a trip to Europe to develop his flair for art, he got a theatrical job helping Norman Bel Geddes design stage settings. When this was finished, Dreyfuss decided to branch out on his own.

Brashly he wrote a highly critical letter to the manager of the Strand Theater in New York, a movie house which had stage shows as well. A startled letter came back. Did Mr. Dreyfuss—whoever he was—think he could design better stage sets? Dreyfuss hastily replied that he could—for \$50 a week.

Using this opportunity as a springboard, he was hired to do sets for a number of Manhattan plays and musicals. But by 1929, Dreyfuss' interest in the theater had begun to wane. He opened his own office, borrowing the space and furnishing it mostly with card tables. He didn't know a great deal about design, but then, neither did his prospective customers.

At first, business was something less than stimulating. Dreyfuss designed door hinges, cedar chests, nursery furniture and medicine bottles. Business picked up when he was asked to rehabilitate several RKO theaters, and it took a spurt when he modernized the piano for the American Piano Company. His enterprise became a going concern

*Streamlined Living*

when Bell Telephone Laboratories signed for his services.

Since then, the Dreyfuss career has been a pretty monotonous series of successes. The day he opened his office, he set as his goal the designing of a new Twentieth Century Limited for the New York Central. He got the job in 1937.

If the company wanted a new train, Dreyfuss wanted it to be new in every respect. This led him to consider such details as menu cards, wrappings for lump sugar, uniforms for personnel, and even ticket stubs. So far as furnishings of the train itself were concerned, they struck a new high in luxury travel.

In this, as in all jobs, Dreyfuss placed special emphasis on color. In some cases, he believes color should be eye-catching. In others it should be as unobtrusive as possible. In any transport vehicle, he avoids yellows—because he has found that they tend to make people sick. Yellow, however, is all right in the kitchen—as Dreyfuss demonstrated with a line of 10-cent-store pots and pans, which sold by the million.

Color can be used in a hundred subtle ways in the designing business. On trains, for example, pale blues and greens tend to give an air of spaciousness. On planes, Dreyfuss likes earthy browns and greens, since they produce a feeling of earthbound security.

When he was assigned the job of re-designing the General Electric refrigerator, Dreyfuss had little choice as to color. Refrigerators have to be white, to fit any kitchen decorative scheme. But in redesigning the refrigerator, Dreyfuss did the housewife one good turn. He moved machinery from top to bottom of the box, thereby providing her with a place to put the butcher's bill, her pocketbook and unripened bananas.

**E**VEN WITH HIS PASSION for detail, Dreyfuss occasionally overlooks an important point. Thus, when he was demonstrating a washing machine to Sears Roebuck directors in their plush board room, the machine churned up handsome suds and the directors were properly impressed. Then, slightly confused, Dreyfuss threw the wrong lever and emptied the whole thing over an expensive Persian carpet. But the machine was so well liked that the *faux pas* wasn't held against him.

*Streamlined Living*

Probably the simplest piece of work ever to come his way was presented by a fly-swatter manufacturer. Was there, the gentleman wanted to know, any way of adding sex appeal to this humble instrument of destruction? Dreyfuss sketched his idea of what a fly-swatter should be—a plastic-handled affair with concentric target circles on the swatter. There would, he said, be no charge since the sketch had taken only ten minutes of his time.

But the incident caught the usually shrewd Dreyfuss off guard. His idea of what a fly-swatter should be coincided exactly with what the public thought it should be. Millions of the new fly-swatters were sold with no royalties accruing to the Dreyfuss office.

If this job was easy, another one was difficult enough to put gray hairs in the heads of Dreyfuss' staff. During the war, the joint Chiefs of Staff asked Dreyfuss to design the room where most Allied strategy was planned.

Guarded by G-men and marines, Dreyfuss set to work in an abandoned brewery on 10th Avenue in New York City. The room had to have a wall-sized map of the world with symbol pegs that showed the locations of troops, convoys, fighting ships and bombing planes. It also had to have a movie screen for showing films rushed home from fighting fronts, and a soundproof projection booth so the operator couldn't overhear conversations in the room.

When the room, largely built of plywood, was finished, it was trucked to Washington. Dreyfuss was allowed 24 hours to install it in the old U.S. Public Health Service Building, then the home of the joint Chiefs of Staff. Generals aren't the back-patting type, but apparently the room was all they wished for. At least there were no complaints, and the war came to a satisfactory conclusion.

All along, Dreyfuss has been pretty dissatisfied with the shape of things in our mundane world. Right now, he sees a number of jobs to be done in that ephemeral place, the world of tomorrow. On motor cars, for one thing.

Up to now, he contends, all emphasis has been placed on sleek exteriors. He would stress better design for people riding in the car, rather than for the edification of

### *Streamlined Living*

those watching it pass.

The same is true of trains. A good portion of the traveling public regards a train trip as a luxury—and should be treated as luxury lovers, Dreyfuss believes. This means they should have more room, more comfort, more diversions.

In plane travel, emphasis so far has been placed on speed. This tendency, thinks Dreyfuss, is about to end. From now on, people who travel by air will demand speed *plus* comfort. First-class planes will be bigger, roomier, will have bars, public rooms, movies.

The old question—"Whither are we drifting?"—may stump philosophers, but not Henry Dreyfuss. Under his persistent urging we are drifting, as painlessly as possible, into a sleek and functional world. It may not be a better world—but at least he promises it will be a better-looking one.

# Coronet

June, 1947

p. 22



[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)