

A Life's Design

The Life and Work of Industrial Designer
Charles Harrison



AN EYE FOR EVERYDAY ESTHETICS

A few years ago, I attended the opening of the new public library in Evanston, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. The event featured the unveiling of a commissioned sculpture by internationally renowned artist Richard Hunt, who was one of my fellow students at The School of Art Institute of Chicago during the early 1950s.

As I stood near the refreshments waiting to speak with Richard after the ceremony, I spotted something remarkable. The director of the Center was in earshot, so I said to her, "If I had known you guys were going to display my artwork here, I would have autographed it."

"You have a piece of work here?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "Right over there—that garbage can."

"Oh, is that your can?" she replied. "If we had known that, we would have cleaned it up!"

As it turns out, she had attended art school in Detroit and knew about industrial design.

I designed the can in the mid-1960s, while working for Sears, Roebuck and Company. Looking back at my career, it was one of the most significant and innovative products I ever created. When that can hit the market, it did so with the biggest bang you never heard—everyone was using it, but few people paid close attention to it.



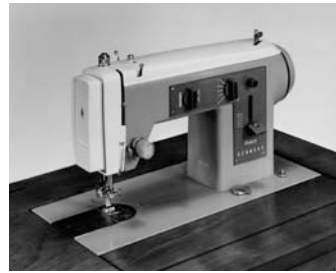
ABOVE: Prior to 1966, garbage cans were made of metal. For the most part, they were either old 55-gallon drums or 20- or 30-gallon round galvanized cans. Not only did they rust, but, on garbage pickup day, they made a noisy racket in neighborhoods all over America! Also, as they were hit by cars and banged around, they looked worse and worse.

This first of its kind, plastic garbage container was designed for Sears in 1966 and has been used by more people world-wide than any other product I designed. Because it was necessary to ship large numbers of containers, I designed them so they could nest inside each other. If the 30-gallon cans were shipped separately, 20 or 30 of them would probably fill up an entire trailer truck, but since they nested together, the same truck could carry several hundred.

Throughout my career as an industrial designer, which included 33 years at Sears, 85 percent of my effort went into designing consumer products to improve people's everyday quality of life.

I designed everything from binoculars to baby cribs,

televisions to toothbrushes and almost everything in between, including a lot of sewing machines. In fact, someone who had heard about my work once said, "You designed all those sewing machines? Well, you must be the Michael Jordan of sewing machine design!"

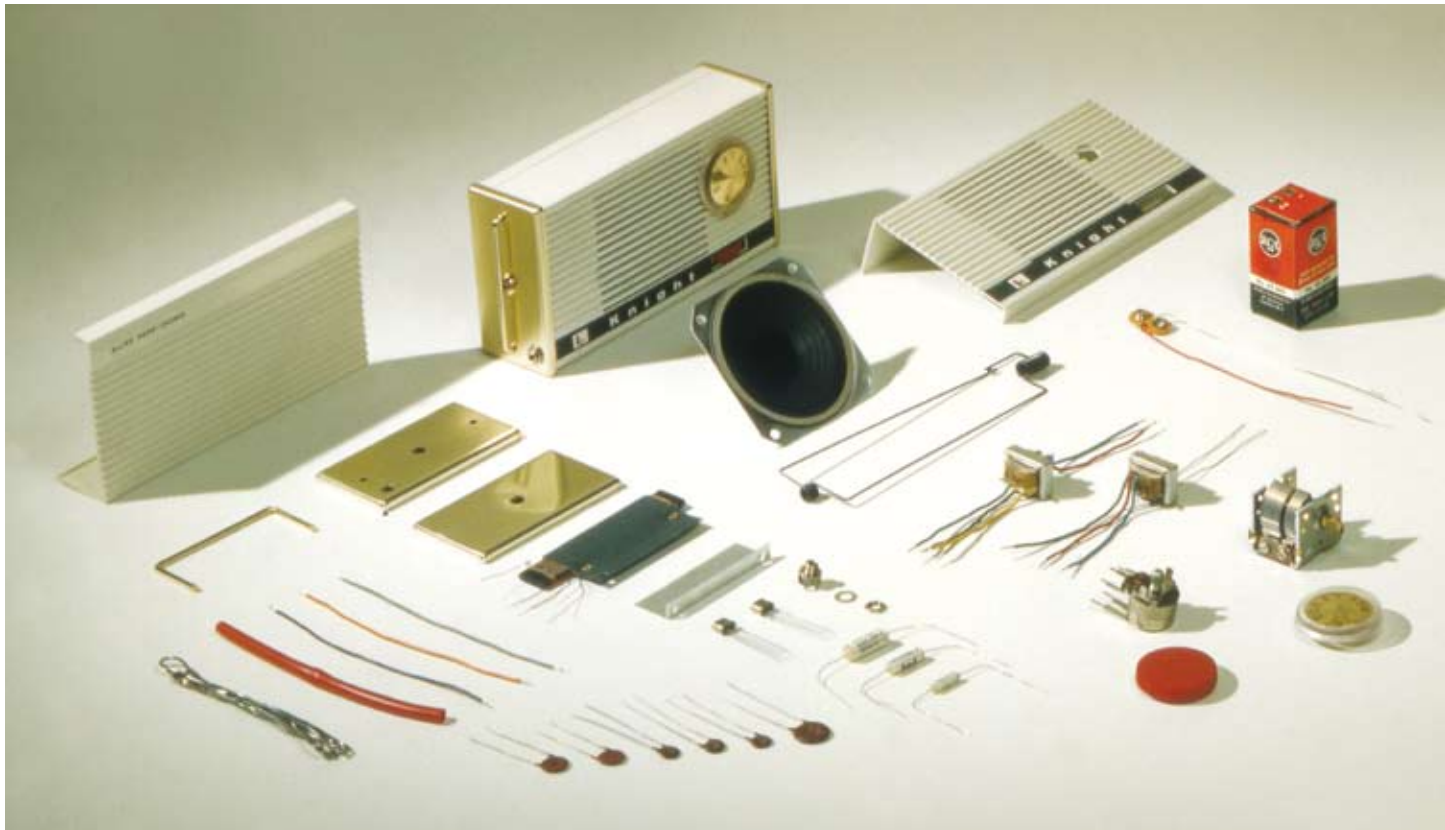


From sand-casted iron to injection-molded plastic, I designed 8-12 sewing machines every year, for about 12 years.



STARTING MY DESIGN CAREER

AM/FM table radios for Allied Radio Co. and Western Auto Supply. The units used plastic enclosures with plastic grilles. Below is a display of all the parts used in manufacturing one of the radios. (1957)





The electric trivet was an inexpensive decorative table item made of cast iron and designed for Williams Electric Company of Ypsilanti, Michigan. The central part was the heating element, but this was one of many decorative forms we created based on food and other forms. (1957)



Butter dishes, my first mass-produced product, a low-end housewares product made of injection molded polyethylene, designed to be attractive enough to be pleasant on a table setting. Designed for Victory Manufacturing Company. (1957)



This measuring cup, made of polyethylene for flexibility and damage resistance, was one of my earliest plastic designs. The cup was transparent to allow the user to see its contents. (1957)



Flexible plastic pails with lids made of injection molded polyethylene. The lids had an integrated hinge that developed during the molding process. (1957)



In 1961, Sears finally did come through. I got a call from Carl Bjorncrantz, saying, "Well, Chuck, we can hire you now." I said, "Thanks, but I have a good job," which was true. I was doing a lot of interesting work, a lot of home appliances, electronics and other products, all over the board. Carl said, "At least come out and talk to us." In the interview room, I remembered all the nights I had to work at Podall's and how the business was small and fluctuated, and I thought that I could use a less volatile ride. Meanwhile, Janet had become pregnant a couple of times, but we weren't successful in having children for quite a long time. We lost three. So it wasn't easy for either of us, especially Janet.

Carl offered me a job. As it turned out, I was the first black executive Sears ever hired in headquarters. They had porters and a couple of guys in the cafeteria and maybe a stock room guy—but there were no black secretaries and no other black person on what they called the checklist level of employment, which was the executive level. During my interviews, I had to take a battery of psychological and interest tests that Sears used to fit people into various levels of their corporation. I also was grilled by four members of personnel.

In the end, I got the job, and was happy to be at Sears. I enjoyed it, although I encountered a lot of racism, which came from every direction. Fortunately, by this time I



This portable television was the first Japanese-made black and white TV to enter the U.S. marketplace. It was simple and clean in appearance, with only basic features, and was marketed to the low end of the price range. The TV had very good quality and dependability, which helped reinforce the image of the Silvertone (Sears' private label) brand. (1963)

knew how to handle it, from college in San Francisco to the military and in the workplace. At Sears, most of the racism came from people in the company like buyers and sales managers. My fellow design workers, by and large, were accepting. In fact, I think they were relieved after they found out I wasn't going to destroy their positions. I had by this time developed a strong reputation around Chicago as a capable designer.

The transition of moving from a small firm to a big corporation proved to be smooth in terms of performing industrial design. In fact, I was probably head and shoulders above most of the designers at Sears in terms of my ability to do the work. I had a rougher time figuring out how to weave my way through the corporate stuff, the bureaucracy, and learning how to play the game—which I don't think I ever really learned. People in corporate America are really not any brighter than people in small

companies—in fact, in many cases, they don't think at all. They just do their little part of what they're supposed to do, and they don't go beyond it. So I wasn't in awe of the competition there, at any level. If anything, I had some disdain for some of it, because they flaunted their power and their positions, even though there was so much mediocrity.

Initially, I went to work as a designer and over time was promoted to group manager in the design section. My design activity was centered on consumer products. I designed all major kitchen appliances, lamps, wall systems, casual and upholstered furniture, stereo systems, executive chairs, electric manicure sets, leaf and grass blowers, fish tanks, luggage, toys, toilets, camping gear like tents, and exercise equipment.

I also designed a screw-in adapter for a circular fluorescent tube, which, today, is very plentiful. It's



Console televisions were the big-screen televisions of their time, representing a possession of pride and a piece of furniture in many homes. Since most appliances were free-standing, the televisions were designed to work nicely in households of the time, keeping pace with trends and interior decorating demands of discerning consumers. (1962)



Fluorescent lighting had already established a reputation for its low operation expense. Increasing energy costs in America caused a growing concern about energy conservation and created an interest in exploring new applications for fluorescent lighting.

I received the assignment to design a low-cost adapter that would allow a customer to use a circular fluorescent lamp in a conventional screw-in socket. The adapter would make it possible to replace regular incandescent light bulbs in table and floor lamps, as well as in ceiling fixtures. The science was unsophisticated, with little research and development having taken place up to that time. Nevertheless, the need for an adapter existed. We reviewed state-of-the-art and off-the-shelf components and made choices based on performance requirements. The final components were creatively arranged to fit inside a small

enclosure. The enclosure, or housing, had to be lightweight and small in order to obstruct as little light as possible. Also, the unit had to look attractive, hold the fluorescent lamp securely, and provide easy access for replacement of internal components. The solution was an injection molded plastic product that was granted a U.S. design patent. This design set the standard for similar products to follow. (1970)



Standing in pecking order was protocol in Japan. In this photo at the Maruzen Manufacturing Company, the man in the middle was the highest ranking member of the Sears contingent, and the rest of us were in order of power. Sears people were on the left and Maruzen employees on the right. National Manager, Buyer, Designer, Manager of Sears' Tokyo office, and the Buyer for the Tokyo office. (1970)

WORKING AROUND THE WORLD

THIS PAGE AND NEXT: When Sears needed a new exclusive look in a hair dryer with distinctive features, this unit was the result. The dryers featured a built-in power manicure set, remote control for heat setting, built-in cord storage and a smoke-tinted skirt on the bonnet to give a more comfortable feeling for the user. (1977)



Head Cap and Crown
This new hair dryer is designed for the woman who wants to keep her hair in a permanent style. It features a built-in power manicure set, a remote control for heat setting, and a built-in cord storage. The price is \$2475.

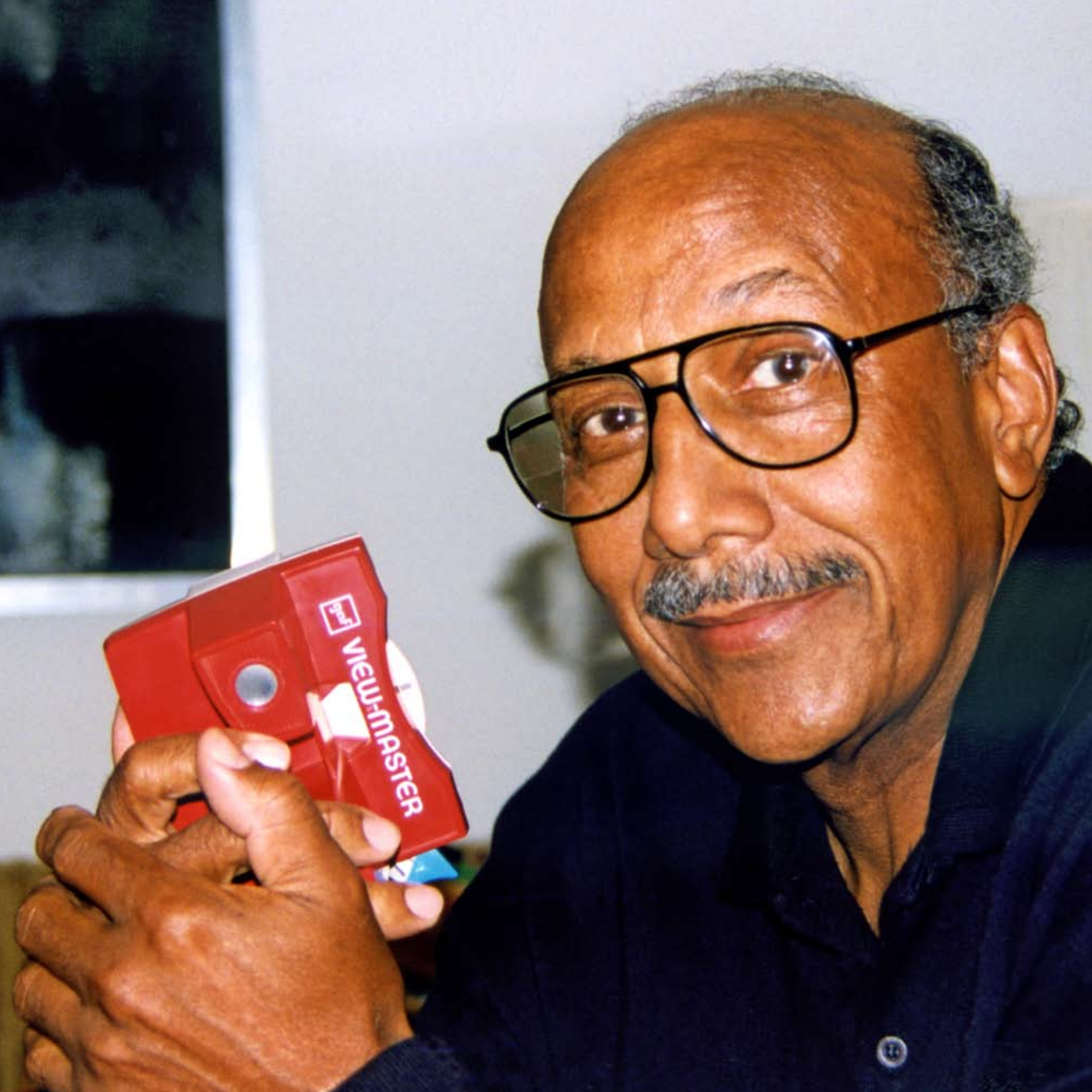
Steam Bonnet Portable
This new hair dryer is designed for the woman who wants to keep her hair in a permanent style. It features a built-in power manicure set, a remote control for heat setting, and a built-in cord storage. The price is \$2700.

Beauty Care Center
This new hair dryer is designed for the woman who wants to keep her hair in a permanent style. It features a built-in power manicure set, a remote control for heat setting, and a built-in cord storage. The price is \$2500.

Our best Luggage-style Dryer
This new hair dryer is designed for the woman who wants to keep her hair in a permanent style. It features a built-in power manicure set, a remote control for heat setting, and a built-in cord storage. The price is \$2300.









THIS PAGE AND NEXT: This garden tiller and lawn tractor were made for Sears by American Yard Products (AYP) in Orangeburg, South Carolina. They were designed in collaboration with the AYP design department headed by Brian Coleman.

