

Ex started at Advertising Artists, Inc as an office gopher and courier, but soon began working on the boards. This brochure for local instrument maker Conn was one of Exner's first major jobs.

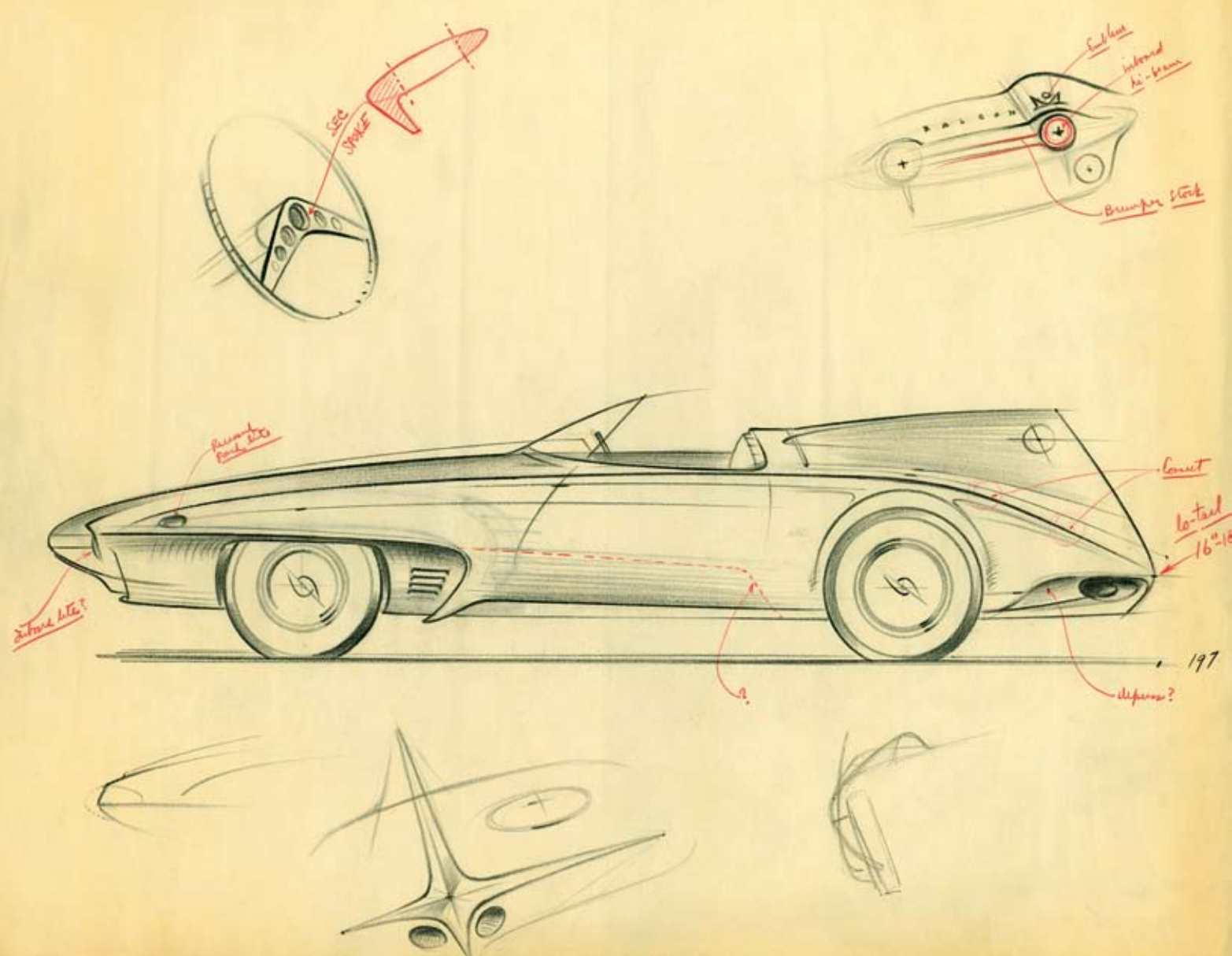


Virgil soon became one of the main illustrators for the prestigious Studebaker account. These two drawings, taken from the 1931 brochure, show a yellow President Four-Season convertible roadster and an elegant St Regis Brougham two-door sedan.

companies tried to increase production wherever possible. The hours were long and the pay was low but it was a job, and one that Virgil enjoyed, being close to artists, soaking up the abundance of knowledge around him. Virgil occasionally showed Ed Clarke some of the work that he had been doing at home. With the questions that he asked and the interest that he showed, it wasn't too

long before the office gofer was given a chance to show what he could do.

Under the direction of Frank Foote and Ed Clarke, Virgil was offered the chance to work on the 'boards', initially doing some backgrounds for Studebaker car illustrations. For the most part these early works

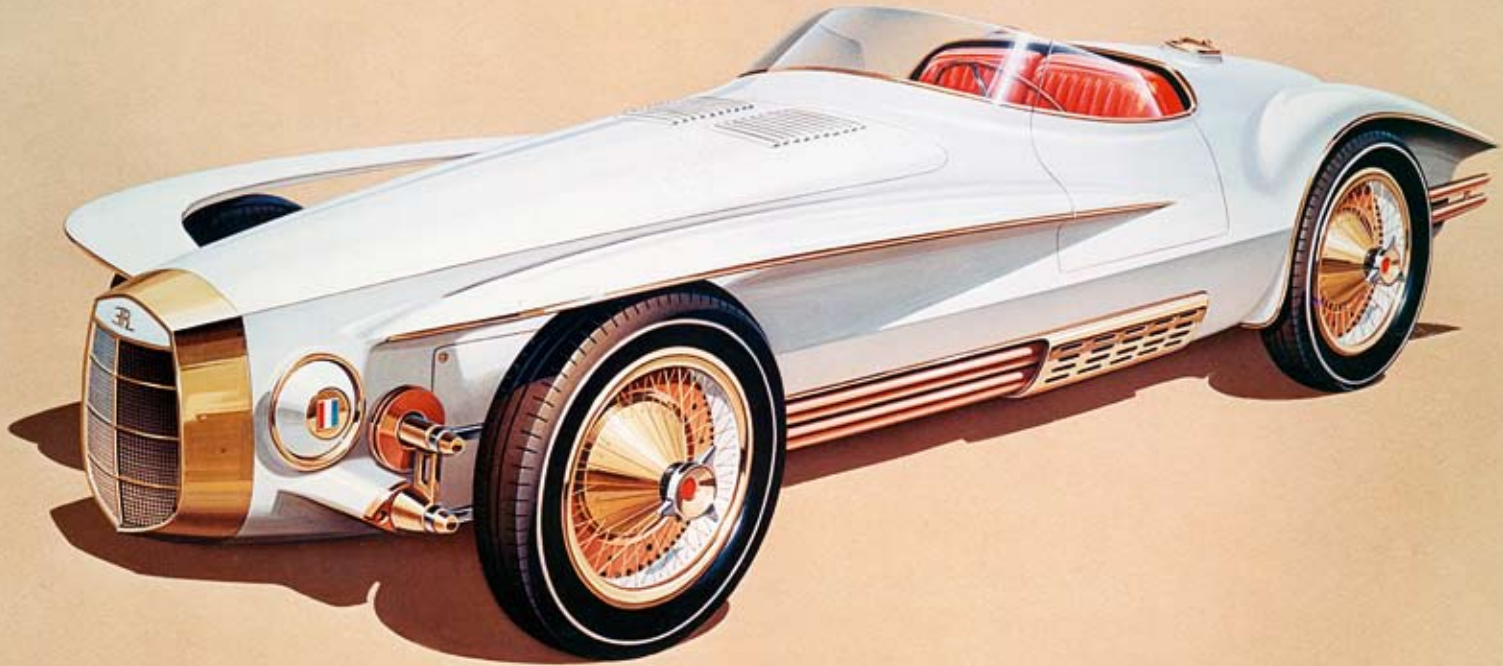


By 1959, the Falcon had developed into the XNR. This never-before-seen sketch by Virgil Exner shows his first interpretation of what would become the Plymouth XNR 500. Note that the front view still carries the Falcon name. (From the collections of The Henry Ford)

wanted me to design a steel top for the XNR and a front end for it with an aerodynamic nose. In the end, I only did the nose cone out of fiberglass. There was no opportunity to test it in the wind tunnel so I just built a mouth below the nose cone and put in a bigger, shrouded radiator with two electric fans. That mouth was so low you couldn't even see the opening unless you got way down on it, and we took it out to the PG, I remember, and it went about 153mph. He was delighted when that thing broke 150."

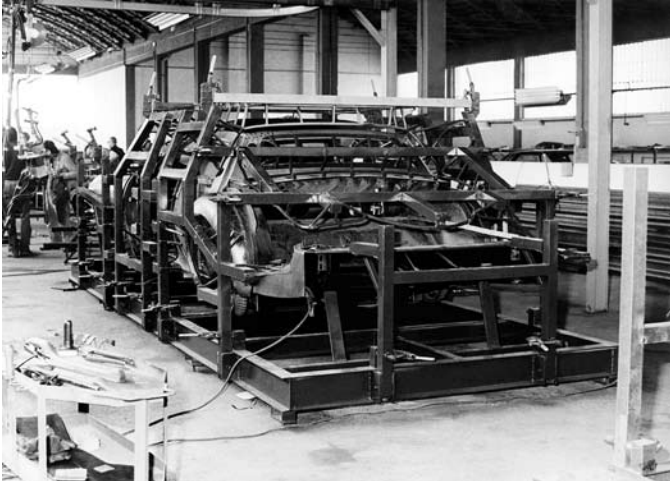
Ex said much the same thing when interviewed years earlier: "After we showed it around a bit, we took it to the road test people. The laboratory really hopped up the engine, to 250hp, a tremendous amount of power. We took it to the proving grounds and had a professional

drive it. He lapped at 151 or 152mph, which wasn't bad at that time." No stranger to high speed driving himself, it is thought that he once drove the XNR up to 135mph, this just a few years after his heart attack! The positive response gained at auto shows led Chrysler's Product Planning to put a team together to draw up plans for production for the 1962 season, while Ex developed the styling characteristics. In the June 1961 issue of *Motor Life* magazine Chrysler offered a rendering of how its new sports car would look. "Projected Chrysler sports car shows similarities to XNR" read the caption below the sketch, and went on to point out that some XNR features like external mufflers and a full-sweeping headrest would be dropped, but the rest of the car's styling, including the



1964 Mercer Cobra. Shortly after Ex revealed his thoughts on contemporary designs for classic cars in Esquire magazine, he was contacted by the Copper Development Company, which wanted a show car that would project the more positive aspects of using brass and copper alloys within the automobile industry. After discussing the idea with Ex, it commissioned him to design and build a car based on his Mercer sports car. This was Exner's finished design and, when created in metal, went virtually unchanged. (From the collections of The Henry Ford)





This photo of the rear three quarter view of the prototype Stutz sitting in its body buck, was taken at the factory at Cavallermaggiore, near Turin. (From the collections of The Henry Ford)



The Stutz Blackhawk prototype two-door hard-top was completed by December 1969 by Ghia artisans at a reputed cost of \$300,000 and made its New York debut in January 1970. From left to right are Paul Fargo, unknown model, Ex and James O'Donnell. (From the collections of The Henry Ford)



Opposite (both): While recuperating from a heart attack, Ex made the most of his time off by getting back to one of his first loves, fine art. These watercolor paintings of a desert scene and homestead were just some of the pictures done at that time.

effort. Hope shone briefly on one of the planned vehicles when James O'Donnell later saw the sketch of the Director's parade phaeton. This would be the Stutz VIP, to be produced in very small numbers at a cost of \$75,000. Alas, this was also not to be, as Stutz concentrated on selling the coupe and convertible version, no orders were taken for the car, and no time was dedicated to develop the idea, so the sketch remained just that.

Throughout the late sixties and into the seventies Ex continued to do consultancy work for Ghia, Pininfarina, and Karmann, but with the stress and work that Ex was putting into the Stutz project too, it was no surprise that he ended up in hospital once again in October 1969, complaining of stomach pains. He spent five days in hospital while tests were undertaken. He was joined in his room by Chrysler stylist Dave Cummins: "When I arrived at the hospital, I was asked if I would like to share a room with another 'car guy', to which I said yes. Imagine my surprise when I realized it was Virgil Exner. My admiration for his work was the reason that I joined Chrysler. He had been there for a short time for diagnosis of some internal problem. He kept saying 'my guts ache!' which prevented rest or any sleep. He would often, at 2:00am say, 'Dave, are you awake?' to which my response would be 'I am now', and we would converse until after sunrise. We talked over many things and I asked him why he wanted to work for Chrysler in the first place. 'I wanted,' he said, 'to bring a professional design organization to the last of the Big Three.'" He certainly did that.

After tests were carried out, it was found that Ex had severe heart disease and underwent further bypass surgery.

Virgil's health problems were exacerbated when he started smoking again in 1969, much to the annoyance of the family. Marie Exner told me that when Junior found out that his father had started smoking again while they were sitting around the dining table for a family meal, he almost jumped up and bopped his father on the nose. Junior was still a heavy smoker himself at that time, but the whole family was aware of the danger Ex was putting himself in. In 1970, he closed the

Snow in the Alps. Watercolor. 1958.



*Ballerina in dressing room. Pastel. 1957.
(From the collections of The Henry Ford)*

