



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.