A design historian of an earlier generation once remarked that the streamline style of the 1930s exemplified the last moment of cultural coherence enjoyed by inhabitants of the United States. Viewed from the present, across the historical divides of the twentieth century, the decade of the 1930s can appear almost serene in its utopian optimism. There is something profoundly elegiac in historical images of the streamlined New York World’s Fair of 1939.\textsuperscript{1} For many Americans, however, the Great Depression hardly suggested anything so comforting as coherence. Economic hardship, migrations, political experiments, and threats of fascism and war contributed to a feeling of uncertainty that approached a national identity crisis.

Some Americans looked not to the future but to the past for a sense of national purpose. A desire for continuity found expression in hand-made crafts and in reproductions of colonial furniture. Other

signs of Americans looking back to the past included the historical themes of WPA courthouse murals; the popularity of *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell’s novel of agrarian loss; and the fabrication of such pre–industrial outdoor museums as John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s Colonial Williamsburg and Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village. Americans of the Depression years expressed less faith in technological utopia than their descendants might sometimes think. ²)

But if that is so, then how does one make sense of the artifacts of a machine–age streamline style that still survive from the 1930s—in image and in material reality: all those gleaming smooth–shrouded locomotives, rounded automobiles with teardrop fenders, radio cabinets with glossy black Bakelite plastic curves, “cleanlined” washing machines and refrigerators, all those bus terminals, gas stations, movie theaters, restaurants, and hotels with their streamlines, their curving marquees and horizontal facades of stucco or enamel–steel? How does one reconcile such artifacts with the expressions of despair and longings for tradition that also marked the decade? Did the streamline style’s visual coherence and utopian promise embody the aspirations of many Americans, or did streamlining reveal little more than consumer capitalism achieving an awareness of how to stimulate desire and manipulate behavior? From across a gulf of eighty years, it is possible to document the style, its sources, its development, and its survival, much transformed, into the postwar years, but it is not possible to recover the emotions stirred by first sight of a *Zephyr* streamliner streaking along the track.

When the industrial design profession first emerged in the United

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