



# It Started With An Ashtray

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Chrysler ashtrays and boxes. Author's collection. Photo by Peter Wachter.

**S**OUVENIRS FROM THE GREAT FAIRS of the 1930s often inspired fans of Art Deco styling to begin their collections. Perhaps little is known about how an ashtray produced for the 1934 Chrysler pavilion at the Century of Progress exposition represented the debut of a prominent Chicago design office that created popular products for American residential and commercial markets for decades to come.

Just as the 1871 fire drew architects and engineers to Chicago to rebuild the city, so too the planning of the 1933–34 Century of Progress exposition attracted designers to the city. Eager to work with the many companies that would build displays, ambitious young men such as Kansas farm boy Jean Otis Reinecke (1909–1987), barely 20 years old, and James Barnes (1908–1986) moved from St. Louis to Chicago in 1930 to set up a branch office for their employer, General Displays, Inc.

Reinecke revealed his artistic skills and entrepreneurial energy while in high school in Pittsburg, Kansas. He picked strawberries and delivered newspapers to earn money to buy his own horse, worked in a sign painting shop, and partnered with a classmate to build and repair radios. After graduating from high school in 1926, he attended one semester at Kansas State Teachers College. His drawings illustrating some of the “Little Blue Books” published by the nearby progressive publisher E. Haldeman-Julius caught the attention of Chicago attorney Clarence Darrow. The lawyer complimented Reinecke and encouraged the young man to seek opportunity in a big city.

He left for St. Louis in 1927, attended a few art courses at Washington University and began working at General Displays. Soon named art director, he designed displays for conventions and store windows, and illustrated advertising posters, magazines and promotional stickers. His design for an

exhibit of an amphibian plane at the international aircraft exposition in St. Louis won a silver trophy. In 1930 at the company's new branch office, he designed posters for the national air races held in Chicago and in 1931 Reinecke was cited as a prominent Chicago illustrator in a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania newspaper advertisement for a hair care ointment.

In their hunt for clients, the adventurous artist Reinecke and salesman Barnes visited factories and fabricators to learn about the latest production techniques. While designing and managing displays for some 25 companies exhibiting at the Century of Progress, they also learned about merchandising and brand image. In addition to designing displays for the Chrysler pavilion, they redesigned the automaker's 1933 souvenir ashtray and its packaging for the fair's 1934 season. Transformed from a square to a circle, the updated ashtray improved on functionality, with one wider slot for the resting cigarette that replaced the narrow four corner slots. With a much clearer presentation of the Chrysler pavilion and the company's four auto brands, the ashtray emphasized the building's dramatic appearance at the 1934 Century of Progress. Similarly, its mailer package exhibited a much stronger graphic statement.

At the same time, Barnes and Reinecke began designing products for local manufacturers. For the Chicago Electric Manufacturing Company (located in 1935 at 2801–35 South Halsted Street and in 1939 at 6333 West 65th Street), they applied for a patent in February 1934 for a modernistic toaster. Named the Handyhot “Airline Beauty,” the toaster sold through the late 1930s.

Fortuitously, the article “Both Fish and Fowl” appeared in the February 1934 issue of *Fortune* magazine, which proved highly influential for business and design, as it credited the emerging industrial design profession for increasing



(left) Jean Otis Reinecke, ca. 1935. Author's collection.

(right) From lower left, the 1B12 with 3-part casing; foreground 1B14, was made of two curved shells joined with the center strip. Author's collection.

product sales. It featured New York designers such as Raymond Loewy, Walter Dorwin Teague, and Henry Dreyfuss, who commanded fabulous fees. Encouraged by such exciting opportunities in the new field, Reinecke and Barnes bought the General Displays office and established General Exhibits and Displays in 1934. They sold the enterprise in 1935 to launch the Barnes & Reinecke industrial design firm and settled into an office at 664 North Michigan Avenue. The ever-bold Reinecke was 26 years old.

### Chicago Designers Create Classics for American Consumers

Regional manufacturers and their suppliers provided the firm with a ripe field of potential clients hungry for new directions. Within ten years, Barnes & Reinecke became the largest design office in Chicago, serving companies throughout the Midwest and beyond. Designers in other Midwestern cities had to compete against the Chicago firm's size and reputation.

Barnes & Reinecke designed numerous products considered icons in their categories. The model 1B12 Toastmaster toaster, produced in 1939 for McGraw Electric Company of Elgin, Illinois, and the 1B14 design of 1946 created the typeform for the modern toaster. The later model became the top-selling toaster of the post-war period. With their 1939 Toastmaster, they also created the wavy emblem of the electrical resistor coil that was placed on the curved chromium surfaces to disguise imperfections in production or scratches from use. This graphic element remained the Toastmaster logo for decades.

In 1938 Reinecke's redesign of a heavy-duty Scotch tape dispenser for the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing

Company (3M) increased sales by 53% over the previous year and initiated his 40-year relationship with the company. The compact plastic dispenser designed in 1939 is still in use today.

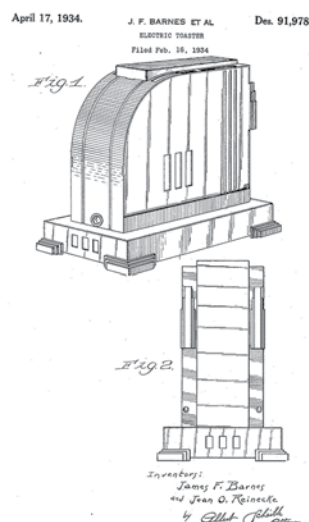
### Educating Business about the Value of Design

Early advocates for the latest materials and processes, Barnes & Reinecke understood the many benefits of the new plastic materials, which could create fluid forms in appealing colors, enticing consumers and resulting in higher sales, while at the same time delivering manufacturing efficiencies, such as reducing the number of parts in a product. The magazine *Modern Plastics* premiered in 1934, and Jean Reinecke frequently contributed articles that explained the materials' flexibility and applications. The firm's entries to the magazine's annual product competition often ranked among the winners.

Barnes & Reinecke promoted their skills and the success of their clients' redesigned products with "before and after" comparisons in advertising mailers sent to prospective clients and with articles in trade publications read by decision makers.

In 1940 Barnes and Reinecke were described in *Today's Young Men*, a book featuring profiles of seventy "inexperienced young men unhampered by precedent" who were achieving success in many fields and leading the way out of the Depression. Barnes and Reinecke, the author wrote,

... are changing the entire appearance of the environment in which we work and play, and—more amazing—are causing a multitude of long-established manufacturing principles to be tossed in the discard. Scores of the nation's large, well-established, long-experienced companies, faced by diminishing consumer markets the past ten years, have turned to Barnes and Reinecke, industrial designers, for a way out of the red.



Patent drawing of 1934 toaster

(left) 1940s tape dispensers. Author's collection.

(right) From Barnes and Reinecke product array brochure, 1946. Author's collection.



### Design Evolution in the 1940s

During World War II, Barnes & Reinecke's staff swelled to more than 325 as it embedded its engineers at clients' plants to create items serving military needs. The firm worked on many secret research projects for the armed forces and provided crews of engineers and designers to furnish "packaged" production services to eliminate war-plant bottlenecks.

To keep their name in the public eye after the war, the firm also designed numerous futuristic products for the imagined postwar consumer economy. In 1946 they mounted a national marketing campaign to attract new clientele. Its staff then numbered 181 and the firm stated that it grossed \$1,400,000 in sales in the previous year. Their success continued as articles about the firm's work appeared in trade journals and the consumer press, notably the October 1946 issue of *Life*, the nation's most popular family magazine.

In 1946 their sales brochure headlined the firm's credo: "Design Increases Sales." The back cover featured four large products: a Bucyrus-Erie construction shovel, a Firestone home laundry washing machine, an Allis-Chalmers tractor, and an electric carpentry tool for Milwaukee Saw Trimmer Corp. The inside message read, "A fact worth remembering: Our facilities, experience and knowledge of Merchandising, Materials and Manufacturing Techniques cannot be surpassed." The colorful array of small products included products for many Chicago area manufacturers and for companies more distant: Scoville Mfg. Co. (Waterbury, Connecticut) drink mixer and juice extractor, Bell & Howell slide projector and movie camera, Motorola automobile heater and portable radio, Dazey Corp. (St. Louis) ice crusher and juice extractor, Toastmaster hospitality set and waffle baker set for McGraw Electric Co., 3M tape dispenser (St. Paul, Minnesota), an electric guitar for Gibson (Kalamazoo, Michigan), and a desk lamp and pen set for W.A. Shaeffer Pen Co. of Fort Madison, Iowa.

### The Barnes & Reinecke Legacy

In 1948 The Barnes & Reinecke partnership ended when Jean Reinecke, along with the firm's key designers, formed J.O. Reinecke and Associates, with offices at 720 North Michigan Ave. As the design team continued together, the new firm could rightly claim to have designed profitable products from A (adding machines) to almost Z—they only reached to Y (yacht chairs), jokingly "offering a bargain to some zither manufacturer."

The booming postwar economy offered wider opportunities and many new design studios were established. By 1952 four associates left to form independent design firms in Chicago. Jean Reinecke continued to operate his Chicago office until relocating to California in the 1970s.

Barnes & Reinecke – along with the design departments established at retailers Montgomery Ward in 1932 and Sears, Roebuck, and Company in 1934 – formed the trunk of the Chicago family tree of industrial design. These three employers, established during the Art Deco period, trained designers whose heirs continue to practice in Chicago design offices to this day.

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