

Howard F. Reichenbach

1901 - 1959

"... Reichenbach... designed some of the most popular of all Chase specialties..."

-- Richard J. Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome Book 2: A Collectors' Guide: Industrial Design in the Chase Era*

Howard F. Reichenbach was one of the most important industrial designers working for the Specialty Division of Chase Brass & Copper Company during the 1930's. He and eight other designers created - and received patents for - some of the most innovative and beautiful decorative objects produced in 20th century America.

The Specialty Division's stated goal was to design household objects by combining good design and low price, using Chase's industrial materials: brass, chrome and copper. Bakelite, an early plastic, later became an important feature of the designs. For this creative process to be successful, the industrial designer became key. The industrial designer was to the plant engineer what an architect is to the contractor.

Howard F. Reichenbach was born November 15, 1901 in Waterbury, Connecticut to Edelbert and Henrietta (Goetz) Reichenbach. The family first lived on Walnut Street, in the German section of town, where young Reichbach's father opened a grocery store. They later moved to Chestnut Hill Road, now Farmwood Road.

As a teenager, Reichenbach was always tinkering with electrical equipment, radios and cars. His sister Ethel recalled that he bought an old car, took a blow torch to it, cut the roof off and had one of the first custom cars in Waterbury. Family lore has it that Reichenbach also assembled one of the first radios in town.

Reichenbach's mechanical abilities and inventive skills earned him the position of Apprentice Engineer at Chase Brass & Copper Company while still in his mid teens. Soon promoted to Product Engineer, he mastered engineering and design skills in the 1920's, and joined Chase's Specialty Division, which opened in 1928. He also held the positions of Industrial Designer, Development Engineer, Product Engineer and Manager, Sales Planning.

During Reichenbach's career at Chase, eighteen specialty product patents were issued in his name, a rare occurrence for a resident Chase designer. One of his most important patented designs was for "A Multiple Container Food Warmer", also known as the "Electric Snack Server" (1935). This early electrical appliance has a circular chrome design patterned with fluting and features painted black wood handles with Bakelite knobs. Food is kept warm when three deep Pyrex dishes are set in water heated by an electrical coil. The modern design was considered both practical and elegant.

One of Reichenbach's most widely advertised and popular products was the "Comet Lamp" (1935), a table lamp with a comet-shaped adjustable stand which supported a translucent plastic shade. Both whimsical and functional, it is considered a precursor of some products featured at the 1939 World's Fair. Reichenbach is also credited with patents on a portable electric hand lamp, which included the mechanics of a flashlight. Other notable designs were the adjustable "Hi-Lo Smokers' Stand", the "Wing", "Golfer's", "Riviera" and "Whirligig" ash trays, the "Blue Moon Cocktail Shaker" and the "Gaiety Cocktail Shaker", thought to be the best-known of Chase collectibles.

Reichenbach's sophisticated Art Deco chrome and black "Holiday Cocktail Set" (1933) was featured at Yale Art Gallery's



2004 exhibit "Livable Modernism: Interior Design and Decorating During the Great Depression". His designs can be found in the permanent collections of the Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, CT; the Yale Art Gallery, New Haven, CT; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; the Cooper Hewitt and Brooklyn museums, New York City; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England.

Chase's Specialty Division closed at the onset of World War II as manufacturing converted to war production. A unique period in American design ended as plastic and stainless steel replaced brass, chrome and copper in decorative accessories for the home, but the innovation and sheer creativity of the unheralded designers of the modernist period has influenced generations of designers.

Reichenbach became Vice President of Connecticut Plastic Products, Inc. and later started his own company, Cresale, Inc. One of his most successful later patents was the first mass-produced inexpensive twist-up lipstick case. The design is still in use today.

Reichenbach married Catherine Sheridan in 1929. They raised their three children on Farmington Avenue in Waterbury before moving to Middlebury.

A very kind and unassuming man, Reichenbach loved gardening, photography, music and family life. He enjoyed working in his own dark room and building his own stereo record player on which he played his collection of Strauss waltzes.

Howard F. Reichenbach died on January 24, 1959.