

STOUT SCARAB

An Art Deco streamliner that challenged conventions and looked damn good at it.

The field of automotive trivia is littered with obscure superlatives, making it hard to pinpoint the “world’s first” in some categories. Although grounded in fact, sometimes technicalities can cloud the origins of certain models. Case in point: what was the first minivan? This question still seems to spawn debate.

Chrysler and Renault simultaneously popularized the concept of the minivan in the 1980s, but were they the first? They described minivans as vehicles with ample interior volume for both passengers and cargo, smoother to drive and maneuver than trucks, with niceties such as centrally mounted doors and reconfigurable seats. At the time, the minivan was regarded as a new concept born out of the full-size behemoths that had defined American car characteristics. Yet the basis for the minivan had come about 50 years earlier in the form of the Stout Scarab.

William Bushnell Stout was one of the luminaries of early aviation. When Packard started an aviation department in 1916, he was placed in charge. Three years later, he started a consultancy to develop his own creations, such as the Stout Batwing, an enormous, single-wing airplane that predated anything seen in comic books. When Ford bought his company, they developed the famous Trimotor, a pioneering, continent-crossing aircraft that brought forth an age of commercial aviation.

Stout left Ford’s airplane division in 1930, but he had learned enough from a lifetime developing lightweight, efficient, durable machines: “When we finally unhitch Old Dobbin,” he wrote in *Scientific American*, using an archaic term for a workhorse, “the automobile will be lighter and

more efficient, the ride will be easier, and the body will be more roomy without sacrificing maneuverability.”

Stout’s Scarab may have been an efficient one-box design for maximum practicality but was still bold enough to embrace the sleek lines of the Art Deco movement. A single, tall shoulder line swoops gracefully from the front wheels to an arrow-straight dash towards the rear, before accentuating the taper of the cabin. Wheels were pushed to the corners as far as possible, a consideration toward packaging but also defining the tautness of these lines: without the typical fenders and running boards of the era, the Scarab’s shape had no visual interruptions.

Up front, the Scarab’s deeply recessed front windows were split down the middle by an elegantly tapering structural spar. Atop this nosepiece, fender vents arced upward in the shape of its namesake beetle. Round headlights were nestled in between shield-like grilles. The lower section was streaked in chrome, while hidden rear wheels, door handles, and hinges allowed the uninterrupted shape to speak for itself.

The rear of the Scarab was the most dramatic angle. Here, the cabin narrowed inward into an arcing figure; instead of windows, a cascade of thin silver lines tapered inward before spreading out. It was an Art Deco sensation that captured the look of speed, injecting a beautiful flourish without the temptation of excess.

The people movers that followed the Scarab all drew from its forms: the Volkswagen Microbus, the Fiat 600 Multipla, and even the hugely successful 1990s Chrysler minivans. After all, minivans didn’t have to be angular or boxy. They could even be works of art.

