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The Socio-Economic Effects on
Symbolism and Styling
of the American Car
1965 - 1975

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor of Design degree in Industrial Design at the National College of Art & Design (Dublin), in the year 1990.

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Leonardo Da Vinci - look what you caused!

SYNOPSIS

The relationship between car design and socio-economic developments during the period 1965 - 1975 is as important as the relationship between symbolism and marketing of the same period. This thesis deals with the following major factors in the relationship between automotive design in America and American socio-economic changes between 1965 - 1975. These factors are as follows:

1. Changes in post-war American culture. The development of youth culture and the development as a potential market.
2. Changes in American values as social attitudes were changing. This led to changing tastes and demand for products.
3. Car design of the late sixties and early seventies evolved from the symbolism of the period.
4. The oil crisis was a major turning point in American car design in the period 1965 - 1975. The result was an immediate change in American car buyers' tastes and needs.
5. Foreign cars adapted to the needs of the American car buyer and its success on the American market.

This thesis concludes with an analysis of the decline of the American car industry and the widespread invasion of America by foreign cars.

INTRODUCTION

In 1783 America became a republic after winning its independence from the United Kingdom. A new country now needed to develop itself. This country became the land of opportunity, the land of the free and the home of the brave, as according to the National Anthem. Settlers arrived in America hoping to begin a new life for themselves. There were still large tracts of land unclaimed and undiscovered. These settlers dreamed that they would lead a happy and prosperous life in this new country. This dream became the famous American dream. The American dream is the ideal of a democratic and prosperous society which is the traditional aim of the American people.

Prosperity meant having materialistic values and being prosperous in the eyes of others. Prosperity is something that one aspires to but is often unattainable. Thus the American dream of being free to create prosperity for oneself became a myth and people lived by this myth. Americans fantasised about money, materialism and happiness. Advertising and Marketing people were quite happy to sell goods to American people who purchased in order to fulfill their American dream.

The American automobile is an important part of the American dream. Its symbolism and imagery and wealth were styling details that Americans were delighted to flaunt. Indeed the car became a major status symbol for American families.

Motivational studies showed - that one could enhance his own status if he was able in his car buying to move up the hierarchial ladder: from Ford, Chevrolet or Plymouth to Pontiac, Dodge, Mercury, Studebaker etc: perhaps to Buick, Oldsmobile, Chrysler etc; then up to Imperial, Lincoln or Cadillac. (Packard 1959, p.274)

The 20th Century saw marketing and advertising envelope the original American dream and produce myths and icons. Products such as the car became icons - expressive of the people that bought and treasured them. People bought products under the illusion that this product would better their lifestyle. A ceaseless barrage of advertising has been exhorted to Americans from earliest youth to consume and consume the



1. Status advertisement:- Cadillac 1959. (Weynes. Classic Cars. February 1990, p.13)

best. Marketing and Advertising appealed to people to raise themselves from the social class that they live in. They portrayed the American car as one of the greatest symbols of wealth and prosperity.

Plymouth quoted a happy family standing before their long car and disclaiming proudly "We're not wealthy..... we just look it". Dodge in one of its radio commercials depicted an admiring man exclaiming excitedly to a Dodge owner "Boy you must be rich to own a car as big as this". (Packard 1959, p.273)

Car manufacturers want to sell cars. They used the myth of the American dream to do so. They added symbolism to their cars in the form of styling. Styling of cars led Americans to believe that cars were the wheels of the American dream.

.....American car manufacturers created a large and expandable market for their products by gearing them to a human need which had nothing to do with getting from here to there. (Lewis 1980, p.293)

The major socio-economic changes brought about by increased prosperity, coupled with the oil crisis, affected American car design. Cars are not created in a vacuum, and their designers were affected by what was happening in the world around them. Thus as designers they wield the power to create or destroy symbols and imagery in car design. It is this changing symbolism in American cars that concerns this thesis.

Ch. 1

American Socio-Economic Developments 1945 - 1975

'The times they are a changin' -
Bob Dylan, 1964

American car design will be examined with particular emphasis on the period between 1965 - 1975. It is also important to explain the socio-economic developments of the period 1945 - 1965, as a background.

After the Second World War Americans settled down to a period of peace, American GIs returned home and married, settled down to start a family and moved into a Levittstown suburb. There was a baby boom and the economy of the country picked up. Productivity was high due to the fact that many of the war time production plants were now converted into producing goods instead of weapons. America was spending large amounts of money on its policies and was very concerned with the communist threat as advocated by the cold war and Senator McCarthy. Economically the country was doing well but working people were not reaping any benefits. There was a great sense of poverty evident in the 1950s especially among the coloured communities. Civil rights for the black people were an issue but the Eisenhower administration did not look favourably on full citizenship rights for blacks. The space race which began in the late fifties was an important event for American people. National pride was at stake. It created the appetite for science fiction and produced space-age symbolism in American products of the time.

Because of mechanisation of most American production plants fewer people were needed in the production industry, and service industries (education, insurance, banking, amusement) absorbed the workforce. This caused a great upthrust of working class people into middle-class and higher salaries. The fifties ended with people being better off than they were before.

Even allowing for inflation, our individual buying power has increased by more than half. Some groups have prospered much more than others, but more families have seen paychecks doubling or tripling. (Packard 1959, p.27)

The start of the 1960s saw the election of the popular John F. Kennedy. This man was just elected to office when the



2. Vietnam War protest poster. (Yates 1981, p.133).

Cuban missile crisis struck and the whole country was paralysed, on the verge of nuclear war with Russia. However America won the argument. Kennedy also was sympathetic to black civil rights. The black civil rights movement was led by Dr. Martin Luther King. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963. Lyndon B. Johnson was to take over as President of America.

Up to 1965 the important issues in America were:

- (1) Social unrest among blacks and other ethnic minorities;
- (2) More money being spent on the space race and defence than on tackling poverty at home.

Socio-economic developments 1965 - 1975

The years 1965 - 1975 was a period of rapid social change in America. Politically the country was stable. The President in 1965 was Lyndon B. Johnson, who in June 1965 ordered the U.S. marines into Vietnam. The Vietnam war quickly escalated with more American soldiers being sent to Vietnam. In 1968 the Tet offensive began and America knew it was in a stalemate. The war finally ended for America in 1972 when President Nixon pulled out his troops after 57,000 Americans were killed.

At home the civil rights demonstrations became violent when a lot of people became disillusioned with the peaceful Martin Luther King. But in April 1968 when he was assassinated, serious violent riots were triggered off, forcing Lyndon B. Johnson to create an emergency Congress and pass some equality laws. More ethnic minorities were protecting for their rights of recognition of their being. All minorities were given rights, and in some cases, given legal status.

The struggle for black civil rights involved large numbers of Americans and also served as a model for other ethnic minorities as well as women, homosexuals and other self-defined groups claiming collective grievances. (Issell 1980, p.174)



3. Two typical hippies. (Law 1987, p.93).

Students were also protesting during this period. Following the rebellion of students in Paris, American students protested for free speech in college and a say in their education, and then against the Vietnam war and racial discrimination. This period also saw the emergence of popular youth culture. The youth of the sixties was richer than its parents had been, and was reaping the benefits of its parents' hard work and accomplishments.

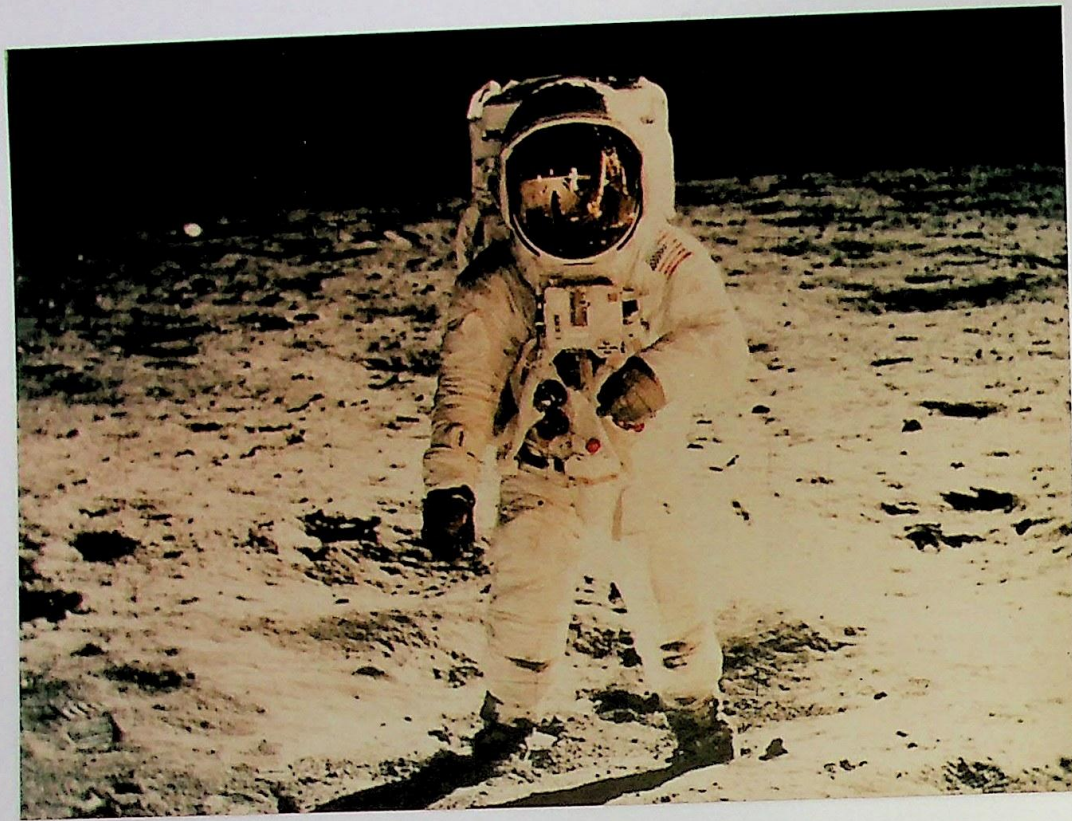
Young people found they had financial and commercial power. They used it to go one better than their parents but in the same direction. Trendier clothes, faster cars and larger doses of comforting materialism. (Randel 1978, p.213)

It was during the late sixties that some young people discovered themselves and dropped out from society. After listening to the social poets and beatniks of the time like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and the teachings of Dr. Timothy Leary. Some young Americans became counter-culturalists. The hippy came into being, rejecting society's moralistic values and returning to nature. The hippy adopted Asian/Indian cultures and experimented with all kinds of sensory distortion such as sensuous message, transcendental meditation, bio-feedback and LSD. The hippy movement was socially conscious, rejected materialism, pollution and war and proclaimed virtues such as peace and love.

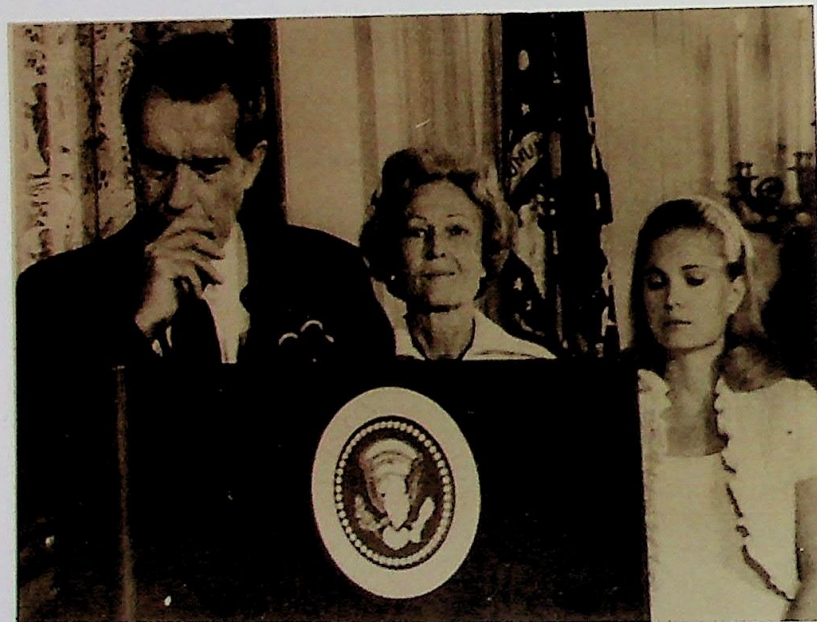
The sexual revolution was a phenomenon of the period 1965 - 1975. Attitudes to sexual expression changed and permissiveness was more common and acceptable than ever before.

The sixties saw a shift in sexual attitudes and the initiation of a public discussion around sexuality. Sex was to be made more like other commodities which could be exchanged on the market. (Seidler 1989, p.72)

Not every young person during the late sixties/early seventies was a hippy however, although issues that hippies dealt with were on the minds of the majority of socially-aware young Americans. Environmental issues became prevalent



4. Neil Armstrong lands on moon. America wins space race. (Issell 1980, p.423).



5. Richard Nixon resigns from office following the Watergate scandal. (Issell 1980, p.440).

during the late sixties, with people lobbying the government about pollution controls in cars. As a result, Congress passed many bills concerning pollution control in cars and pollution causing systems.

Economically America was well off at the start of the 1960s as many other countries in the world had just finished recuperating after the Second World War. 'In 1965 the U.S. controlled 60% of the resources of the world but had only 6% of the world's population' (Randel 1978, p.206).

However due to foreign policies such as involvement in Vietnam, the American dollar was devalued. This, coupled with government economics, forced the balance of trade into deficit in 1971 - the first time since the 19th century. America was also using up larger and larger quantities of raw materials.

The United States used up more raw materials in the 40 years after the Second World War than the entire world did in the preceding 4,000 years. (Bayley 1986 p.101)

This was a factor leading to the crippling of American manufacturing. Inflation of 12% was experienced and unemployment figures rose to 1.97 million. However, there was one morale-lifting event of the era 1965 - 1975 when, in 1969, Neil Armstrong was the first human being to walk on the moon. America had won the space race and boasted about its country's technological advances. Many Americans became cynical during the seventies and one incident in particular made them so - Watergate. The president of America, Richard Nixon had bugs planted in the offices of some of his Democratic opponents. These bugs were detected and a scandal arose that attracted worldwide attention. Two Washington reporters discovered that Nixon gave the order for the bugs to be planted and in August 1974 Nixon went on television and resigned. Gerald Ford took over in office, leaving the American people stunned and angry, and it was on this point that the era 1965 - 1975 ended.

To recap and summarise the socio-economic developments of 1965 - 1975:

1. Politics

Foreign policy caused the involvement in the Vietnam war where America had the fighting power, but not the jungle skills. The U.S. pulled out of the war a disgraced nation, both in the eyes of its own countrymen and the world's eyes. Disgrace also followed with the Watergate scandal where President Nixon was caught bugging political opponents and in due course he resigned.

2. Economics

The period started well for the country but with the Government's policies and economics the country had its first trade deficit since the 19th century. The oil crisis of 1973 hiked up inflation to 12% and America became aware of how much resources it was using up. Pollution laws were passed in the late sixties in response to dangerous levels of smog and pollution to land.

3. Social change

Blacks and other ethnic minorities, homosexuals and lesbians received some civil rights and legal status during this period. Students were protesting all over America about issues from pollution, civil rights, the Vietnam war and involvement in education. The hippy or drop-out appeared during the late sixties' rejecting society's lifestyle. They opted for a simpler life, and self-examination to rid themselves themselves of society's immorals. Sexual attitudes were more liberal and permissiveness grew as a result. Neil Armstrong landed on the moon and everybody eluded themselves that America had the technology to make the world a better place.

Ch. 2

Symbolism & Imagery used on American cars

and

their
relationships to
popular youth
culture

'Just looking at a fast car is a prologue to desire,
driving one a form of sexual display' - Stephen
Bayley 1986.



6. Symbols for the perception of America. (Rothwell, David 1990).

Perception of America

America, as perceived by Europeans is associated invariably with Coca-Cola, baseball, skyscrapers, the Statue of Liberty, Hollywood and large cars. An American regards money, the American flag, liberty, Cadillacs and cowboys as symbols of America. He regards these as symbols of the essential quality of America and the American way of life.

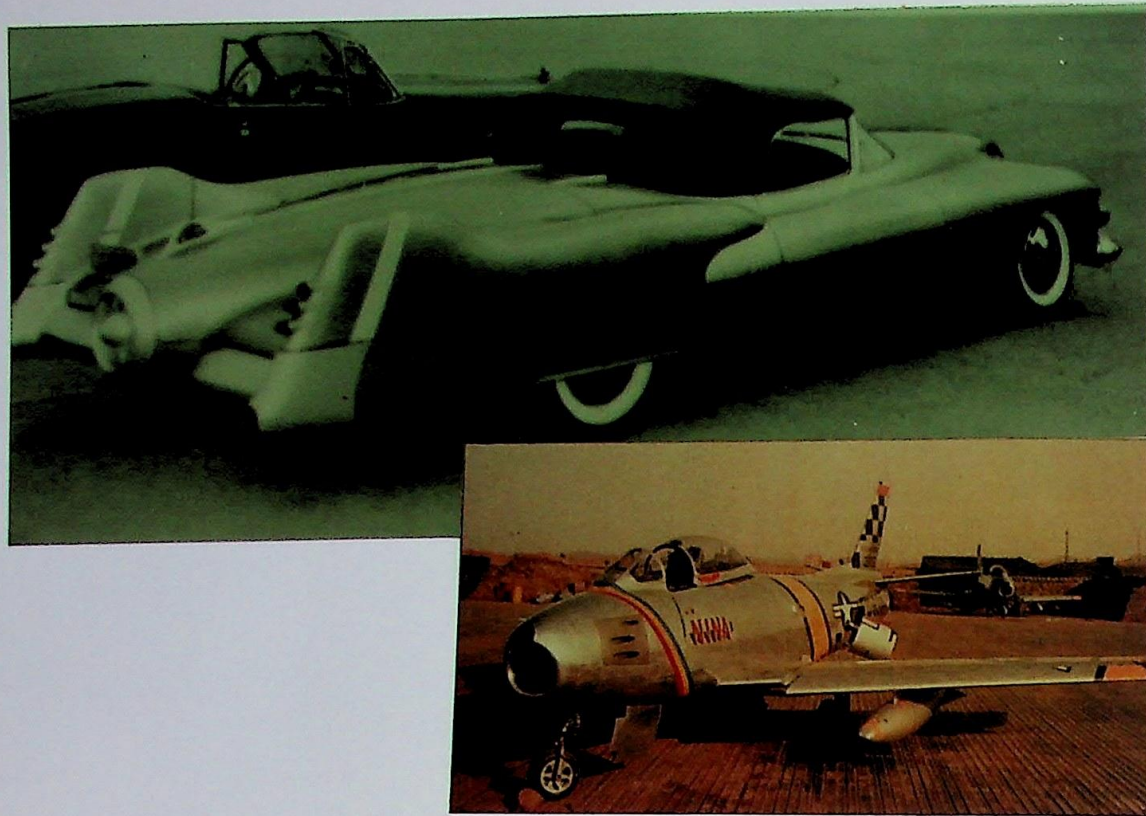
Symbolism and American cars

Symbolism is an important component in American car design, for it is symbolism that the consumer can more easily relate to. To use the analogy of a newspaper, the symbolism of a car is comparable with the headline of a newspaper article. It is that element of the car which stands out and attracts the customer. During the fifties it became apparent and important to marketing people that in order to sell goods to the consumer it was necessary to use symbols and imagery that would appeal to this person.

Post-war Americans demanded a host of newly-designed consumer goods to reflect and enhance their optimistic mood and erase memories of deprivation due to wartime shortages. (Horn 1989, p.12)

Manufacturers gave these people the products they demanded. In order to gain dominant market share manufacturers used symbols and imagery that would appeal to the maximum number of people possible. The American car was one product that was elevated to *super* product when symbolism and imagery were added to it by its designers. And it was one man that started it all. In 1926 General Motors employed a car customiser called Harley Earl to run its Art & Colour Department. He began to structure a formal process of designing cars and he set up styling departments. Harley was told he had to sell five million cars annually and the method was his own device. He used symbolism and imagery to do this.

After the Second World War he used aeroplane imagery with great success on his Cadillac range. The aeroplane that initially caught his eye was the P.38 lockheed fighter.



7. General Motors' Le Sabre 1949, and its styling influence - the F-86 jet. (Bayley 1983, p.62)



8. Detail of use of chrome during the 1950s. (De Waard 1982, p.25).

We absorbed all details of its lines. Every facet of the twin tails and booms stretching out behind the engine enclosure, was recorded mentally. After returning to the studios Mr. Earl immediately put the designers to work adopting the ideas to automobiles. (Armi 1988, p.76)

Earl believed that this kind of symbolism would give imagery of grace and speed to the cars. He also used the F.86 jet as a source of inspiration for the 1949 Le Sabre, incorporating a wraparound windshield and fender protrusions. The cars that Harley Earl produced used symbolism that the felt would be good for his cars at the time. As time would pass he knew other symbols would be used such as speed, performance, elegance, wealth, personality traits, machoism, power, technology and sexual symbolism. It is important to note that it is the designer who gives an automobile this symbolism, and it is through imagery that this is achieved. Imagery which is appropriated to cars gives people the illusion that they have something more than just a car.

Of the cars of the late 1940s and 1950s there are elements that are famous for the imagery they convey:

1. Chrome:-

Chrome trim was used as a decorative element primarily as part of the streamlining fashion of the late 1930s. During the 1950s it was said that Detroit layered it on with a trowel. Polished chrome was considered a finishing touch. It symbolised wealth and elegance.

2. Wraparound windshield:-

Used first by Harley Earl on the Le Sabre in 1949, it was copied from the military jet F.86. It conveyed imagery of speed and streamlining, which gave the impression of speed.

3. Dagmars:-

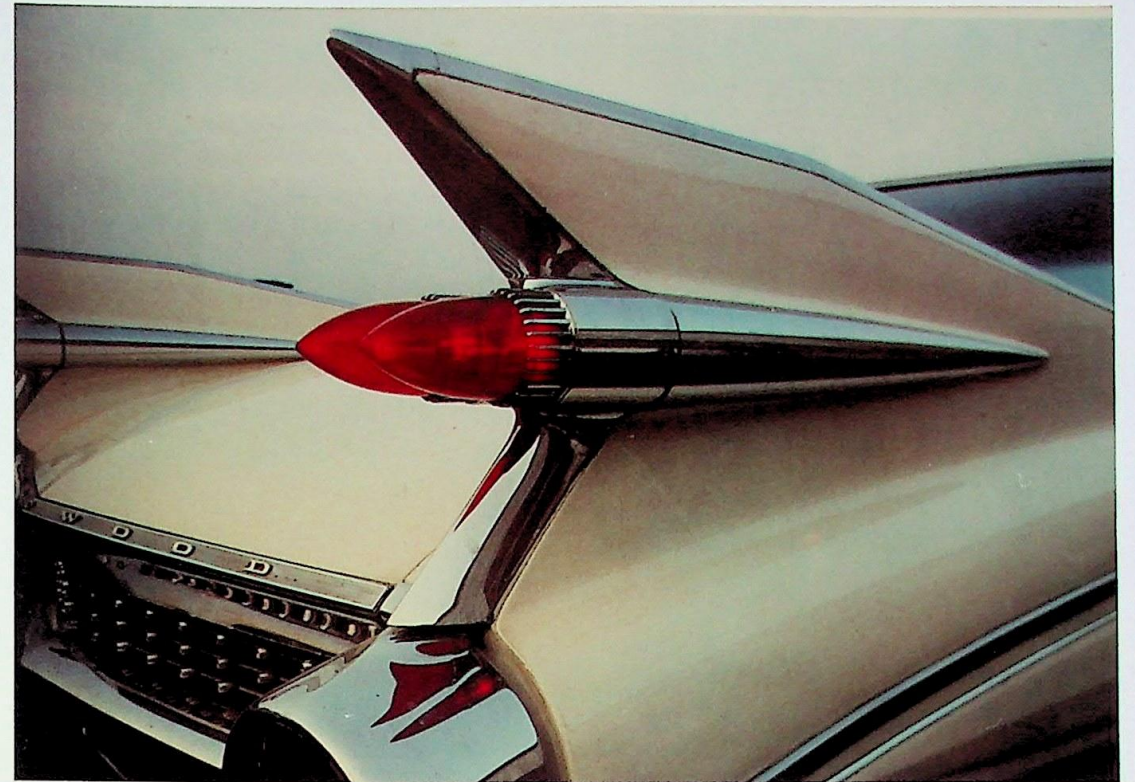
Nick-named Dagmars after the busty actress, these protrusions or nozzles coming from the front fender were considered the



9. Detail of dagmars. (Hirsch 1985, p.136).



10. Detail of use of two-tone colouring. (Barry 1988, p.51).



11. Detail of fins on 1959 Cadillac Eldorado. (Hirsch 1985, p.139).



12. Detail of ventiports on Buick 1952. (Barry 1988, p.57).

breasts of a car. They also helped the car seem symbolic of speed, because they reminded people of propeller nozzles.

4. Two-tone colour combinations:-

Cars were given two colours combined to add contours to the surface. This also added personality, as bright colours were used, such as red or blue. When the combination initially came out the car symbolised glamour and wealth but much later symbolised lively excitement and adventure.

5. Fins:-

These were most famous styling elements of the fifties. When Harley Earl first introduced fins on the Cadillac in 1948, they were small hump projections on the rear wing of the car. By 1959 they had reached such large proportions that lights were incorporated. 1959 saw the demise of fins because they now were regarded as ugly, and were phased out on later models. They symbolised speed and performance and people were very enthusiastic about them for this reason, although they did little to affect the performance of the car.

6. Ventiports:-

Ventiports were Buicks' trademarks for some years during the 1950s. Essentially they were holes on the body, lined up above the front wheels. They were supposed to let out hot air from under the hood. They conveyed images of speed and were exclusive to the Buick.

Symbolism was at its greatest during the fifties. American car production reached a peak during this period. Americans lapped up the cars and the symbolism attached to them.

Americans in the 1950s were if they were living much above the poverty line, willing to part with a lot more of their income more frequently than they are today.
(Lewis 1983, p.353)

Popular youth culture

Where cars were symbols of status and success to American adults, cars were symbols of identity, fun and freedom to the developing popular youth culture. Because not many teenagers could afford to buy cars they drove their parents' cars, but those that could afford to, bought cars that were basically souped-up 1940 Coupes and Roadsters, and then developed Hot-rods from these models. It was for these people that Ford brought out the Corvette. These cars were really sports cars and were extremely popular. 'Ford did not even call the Thunderbird a sports car, it was a "personal" car which was something quite different' (Wilson 1976, p.218).

The Thunderbird used air scoops and it was a two-seater which led people to consider it a sports car. Its symbolism was perfect - images of freedom, speed and sex appeal made it a best seller.

The Corvette was Chevrolet's attempt at producing a sports car. Its styling was borrowed from European models. The advertising campaign explained it was more than just a car - its styling giving images of speed, power and sharpness, helped give illusions of freedom and adventure, although its handling left a lot to be desired.

Young cars buyers were now a recognised market for car manufacturers and leading up to 1965 car manufacturers were using symbolism to appeal to these buyers. However the popular youth culture however had developed and changed. Their lifestyle now reflected new symbolism that was to become apparent in their car buying tastes and was to become incorporated in the American cars of the period 1965 - 1975.

Ch. 3

AUTOMOBILE

DESIGN IN

AMERICA

1965 - 1975

'I'd rather try crossing a river on a path of bobbing soap cakes than make a prediction about your car of tomorrow. The footing would be far safer.' - Harley Earl 1959.



13. Thunderbird 1954. (Hirsch 1985, p.103).



14. Chevrolet Corvette 1953. (Weynes. Classic Cars. February 1990, p.17).

The beginning of the 1960s saw all the car manufacturers playing a waiting game to see who was going to start a trend or who was going to correctly guess the preferences of the youth market. Certainly the styling of the 1950s was not going to continue through the 1960s. Two cars that did make it successfully into the 1960s were the Corvette and the Thunderbird. The Corvette had some styling changes carried out such as the recessed side-cove and quad headlights. But in 1963 the Corvette Sting-Ray was introduced which embodied a major restyle. The Sting-Ray looked like a grown up sports car.

The shape was a clean, knife-edged envelope with a sloped roofline that shows the inevitability of flawless design. The 1963 and 1964 fast-back had instant classic appeal. Later Corvettes would go faster but none more beautiful than the Sting Ray (Barry 1988, p.87)

By January 1963, demand had so far outreached production that there was a delivery delay of three to four months.

The Corvette had progressed but the Thunderbird had become a fat turkey. Ford had developed a four-seater. It gained 500lbs, lost its original identity, and sales plummeted. The sales declined because the original symbolism it displayed of speed and freedom were lost.

In the period 1965 - 1975 the car market saw the introduction of two new kinds of car - the Pony car and the Muscle car. The Ford Mustang became the first Pony car and the Pontiac GTO was the first Muscle car of the period. Both Ford and Pontiac realised that the youth market was still crying out for a cheap car that would suit their image, similar to the Thunderbird ten years previously.

Our public relations department was receiving a steady stream of letters from people who wanted us [Ford] to bring out another two-passenger Thunderbird. (Iacocca 1984, p.68)

Ford produced the Mustang because it recognised this vast and growing this market. The Mustang was an overnight success. Ford's success lay in selling the basic model for \$2368, which



14. Ford Mustang convertible 1965. (Hirsch 1985, p.182).



15. Pontiac GTO 1965. (Barry 1988, p.93).

included bucket seats, vinyl trim, wheel covers and carpeting as standard in each car. If a customer wanted more luxury, he could buy extra accessories and more power. The styling developed by the studio of Fords' head stylist Eugene Bordinat, was clean and rectangular, with a chic look that seemed to please everyone. It was sporty without the sports car price tag. The Mustang created a tough image with its long hood, its hood duct with twin air inlet scoops and its coke-bottle shaped mid section.

The Mustang was successful in three different shapes - fastback, notchback and convertible. It was the range of images and popularity of looks rather than performance that made the Mustang a great success. Most people didn't actually want a performance car, but wanted the look of one. The Mustang had the look with or without the performance. It was a car with great macho symbolism and was the source of a popular rock song 'Mustang Sally' by Wilson Pickett in 1965.

The Pony car named after the Mustang was a breed of car that was exactly like the Mustang in design, symbolism, imagery and performance. Other cars of the Pony car stable were the 1966 Plymouth - a two door fastback Barracuda, and the Chevrolet Camaro.

The Pontiac GTO appeared in the same year as the Mustang 1964. The GTO title was stolen off the fastest Ferrari of the day - the racing 250 GTO. The manufacturers took a 421 cubic inch V-8 engine from a larger car and put it into a smaller car, then sold it as a performance special. The Pontiac GTO was successful also for Pontiac as car buffs that wanted real performance cars with strong styling similar to that which hot-rodders raved about.

The GTO was special to American teenagers because it had clearly been designed for them. It was not a grown-ups car. Everything about it was geared to performance and style of speed. From the name to the V-8 engine and the special Hurst racing gear shift lever that came standard with the synchromesh gearbox. (Barry 1988, p.93)



16. Cheverolet Camaro 1966. (Hirsch 1985, p187)



17. Dodge Charger 1966. (Barry 1988, p.107).



18 American Motors AMX 1966. (Hirsch 1985, p.180).



19 Pontiac Firebird 1970. (Armi 1988, p.164).



20. Plymouth Barracuda 1970. (Barry 1988, p.127).



21. Detail of Coke-bottle shaped mid section on Plymouth Barracuda 1970. (Barry 1988, p.125).

The excitement created by the GTO brought out a clamour amongst other manufacturers to produce their own performance Muscle car. In 1966 Dodge brought out the two door fastback **Charger**. Pontiac produced another winner - the two door **Firebird**. American Motors brought out the two door fastback **AMX**.

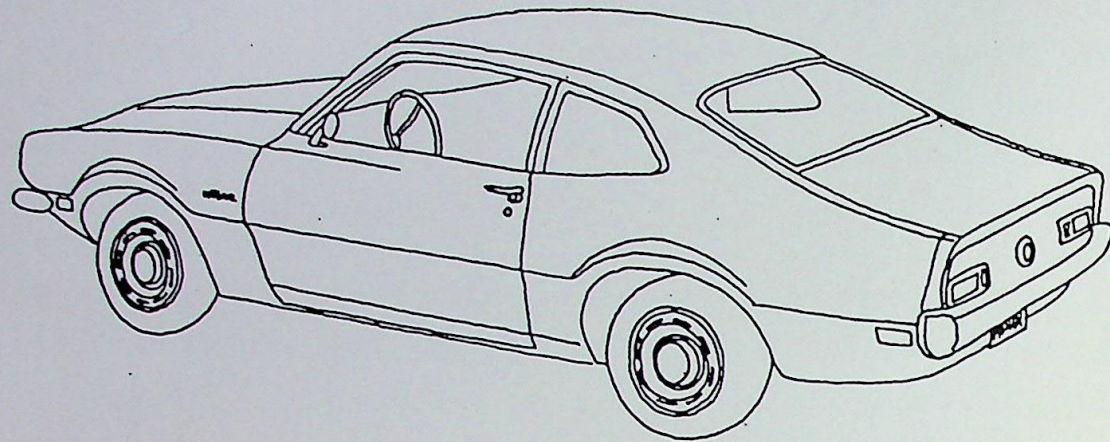
There were details that were common to the Pony car and the Muscle car. One of these was the Coke-bottle shaped mid-section. This detail grew each year getting larger and more pronounced just as the fins did on Cadillacs during the fifties. This Coke-bottle curve, or venturi shape, is remembered as a Pontiac innovation although it was used on the Studebaker Avanti and Buick Rivera first. Other common features were air scoops and air-intake ducts, which were plastered all over the Pony cars and Muscle cars.

In 1968 the Pony car had the reached the height of its popularity. In that year they made up one seventh of the total market. Road racing versions appeared on many models to compete with the Mustang in the Trans-am Series. Indeed all over America young dare-devils were racing in the streets - a pastime that got so popular it became an institution.

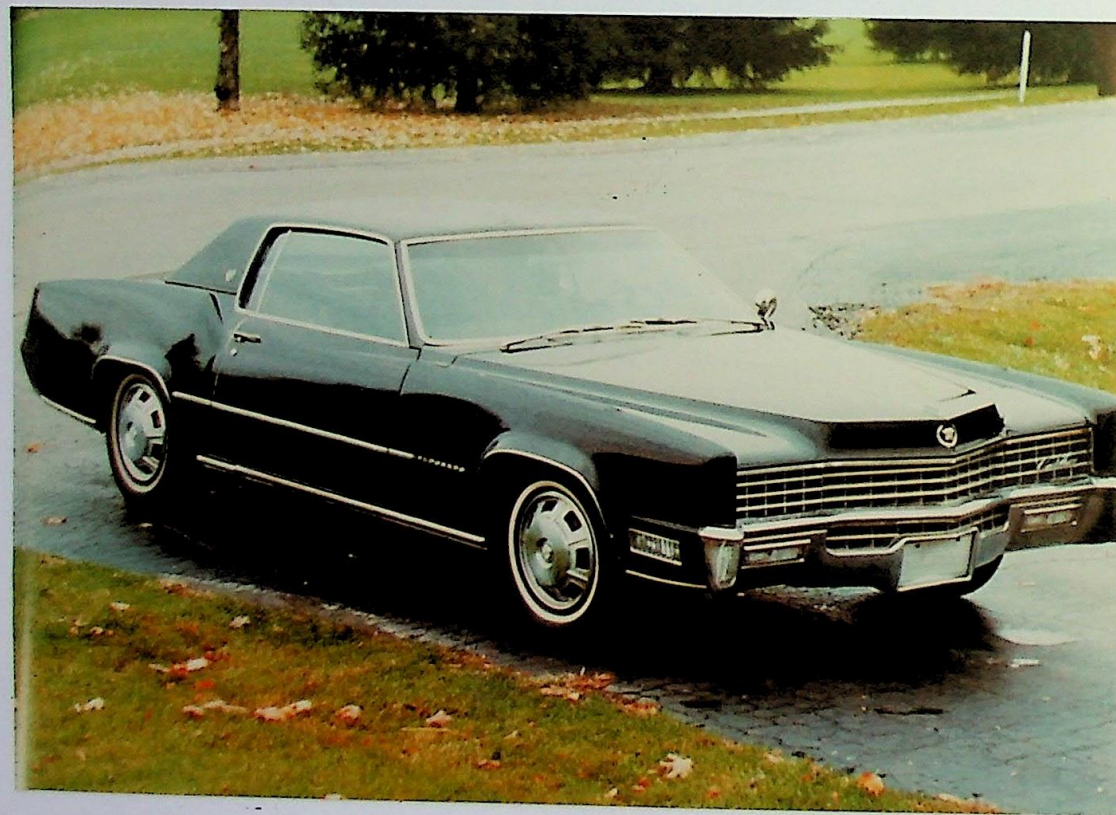
'Men come home from work - wash up
and go racing in the street.' (Bruce Springsteen, 1976)

The Dodge Charger had the most powerful V-8 engine on the market. The 1968 Charger had a graceful fuselage styling with a tunnel back rear window. 'The only 1968 car which came close to challenging the new charger for styling accolades is the new Corvette' - (Car and Driver, November 1968). The Charger was a blatant invitation to speed and power and symbolised the strength and performance that the driver could harness.

All the Pony and Muscle cars of this period symbolised speed, power and strength. Imagery such as street racing, go-faster stripes and spoilers consolidated these symbols. But as soon as Detroit was on to a winner it ruined it. Each year new models of most cars were produced. The Detroit tradition of



22. Ford Maverick 1969. (Wilson 1976, p.289).



23. Cadillac Eldorado 1969. (Barry 1988, p.117).

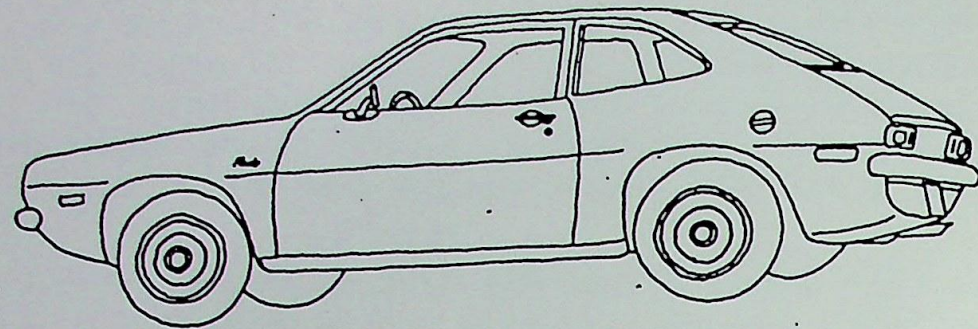
making a car bigger prevailed and most models grew to overweight proportions.

In 1968 Bunkie Knudsen came in as the new president of Ford. Right away he added a monster of an engine with double the horsepower to the Mustang. To support the engine the Mustang had grown eight inches longer, six inches wider and almost six hundred pounds heavier than the original 1965 model. (Iacocca 1984, p.81)

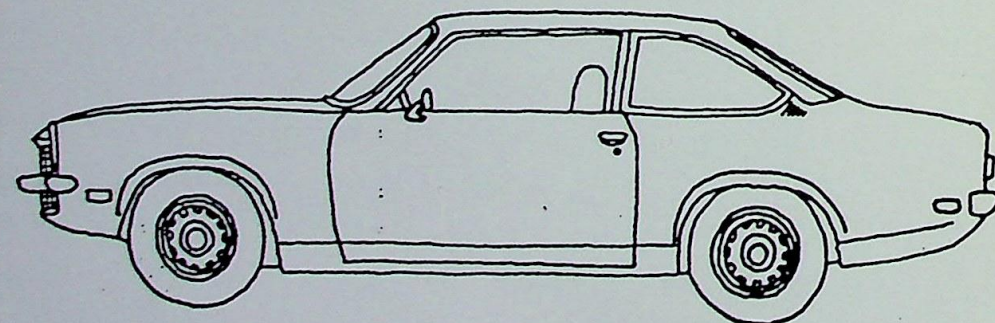
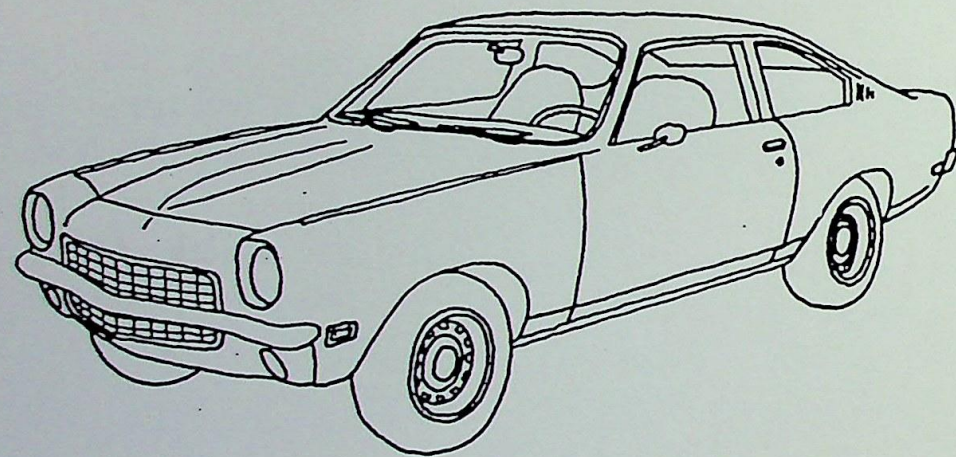
Detroit had a saying: 'Bigger cars mean bigger profits'. But in the late sixties there was a mood or attitude on the part of some consumers that cars had gotten too big. In response to this mood Ford introduced its new range of small car - the **Maverick**. There were small American cars on the market in the early sixties, such as Studebaker Lark, the Ford Falcon and the Chevrolet Corvair. Yet the Maverick in spirit was little more than a scaled down cheaper Pony car. All the same styling details were present except for the V-8 and the dimensions. It lacked the symbolism of its larger cousins and its success was moderate.

In the more expensive range, there was the 1969 **Cadillac Eldorado**. It was introduced as a ultra-luxury sporty vehicle. It was an effort to get rid of the humped body, and as a consequence was very linear. The glass was curved on the windshield but images of strength and power were still evident in styling as in other cars of this period. However, the Cadillac's images of power and strength did nothing to take from the ingrained symbols of wealth and prestige.

The closing years of the 1960s were years of federal safety acts with the U.S. Congress passing the 1965 air pollution and Control Act, making exhaust emission control devices mandatory on all 1968 models. In 1966 the Highway Safety Act was passed. In 1967 the Clean Air Act was passed. This Act resulted from the mounting public concern over the damage to the environment from exhaust pollution. Safety standards required heavier bumpers, and new cars had to burn unleaded petrol.



24. Ford Pinto 1971. (Wilson 1976, p.292).



25. Chevrolet Vega 1971. (Wilson 1976, p.292).

The standard applied to new cars purchased by the general public beginning January 1 1968. It was the first time in the history of domestic automobile industry that regulations concerning crashworthiness influenced the design and construction of new automobiles (Lewis 1983, p.329)

The OPEC oil embargo of 1973 was to be the single most important factor to influence modern American car design. A fuel crisis mentality developed and Americans rushed out to buy economical cars. The best economical cars of the day were foreign although Americans had been making small cars with medium fuel economy, called compacts. Compact cars had been around since the start of the sixties. However poor reviews and the Ralph Nader 'Unsafe at any Speed' book dismissed those compacts such as the Chevrolet Corvair and the Ford Falcon. However with the increase of people being actively conscious of pollution and economy, Ford and Chevrolet introduced the new compacts such as the Ford Pinto and Chevrolet Vega, at the start of the seventies. These cars were released in 1971 and sold well for the first year. After that, however, sales were dismal, since most Americans were still buying large cars. But in 1973 when the OPEC oil embargo occurred, Americans panicked and compact car sales soared again - especially foreign-made cars that were designed for a market that used high priced petrol and economical cars.

The Japanese had seven hundred thousand small cars sitting on the docks in San Diego and Baltimore but by April those seven hundred thousand Japanese cars were gone, snapped up by Americans who wanted instant fuel economy. (Iacocca 1984, p.194)

Caught offguard, American car manufacturers suddenly realised that Americans no longer bought cars for their imagery alone. People wanted fuel economy, safety standards, technology and ergonomics. The car industry initially felt it would blow over and claimed that the safety standards and high fuel economy were out of reach of the then American technology. But as foreign cars could comply to the standards and give a good fuel economy, their excuses were rejected.



26. Volkswagen Beetle 1973. (Rothwell, David).

The search by Americans for an efficient car during this period opened up the flood gates for the foreign car. Japan and Europe were exporting cars to America that satisfied the car buyers' needs. By 1975 one quarter of cars on American roads were imported. Many of these cars were already established on the market and with clever marketing strategies they gained even more of the market. One such car was the Volkswagen Beetle. Already popular with the youth of the late sixties and early seventies, it was regarded as an unstylish car that gave little in the way of performance. It had remained the same size as American cars grew bigger. It did not symbolise American values such as prosperity and freedom, but when the youth of the sixties countered against popular culture it became a part of their social protests. It was a rejection on the part of people who disliked the imagery of power, sex, performance and flashness in American cars of the time.

It was car for the individualist, though it sold in hundreds of thousands; it was supposed to be practical though its owners put up with the noise, cramped accommodation and feeble acceleration for the privilege of being considered sensible. (Wilson 1976, p.288-9)

In 1975 Americans were concerned with environmental issues such as fuel economy and the technology that would enable them to be considerate to the environment. They also wanted to live a prosperous and comfortable life that they dreamed about. The car had to be two things to Americans - a symbol of practicality and economy; and a symbol of wealth and freedom. Americans in the fifties did not care much about a car's practicality. What appealed to them most was its value as a symbol of both status and power. As socio and economic changes occurred in America, so did the symbols that people wanted from their cars. What they were looking for in 1975 was:

1. Technology

The car had to look like it was a technological improvement upon its predecessors. Technology also meant that your car was expensive because technology had an

inherent cost and driving an expensive car was still a status symbol.

Technology - this flattered the intelligence of the driver and awed the passenger. It made the car seem much more complex and therefore expensive than it really was. (Wilson 1976, p.261)

Technology was also a symbol of progress - an achievement which the young American desired. Progress, according to the American dream, would only lead him to a better way of life.

2. Sexual Symbolism

Cars were predominantly loaded with sexual symbolism that would appeal to men who normally bought cars. But during the mid 1970s over 50 percent of the adult female population in America worked outside the home in a variety of fields. For decades, ever since the Model-T back in the 1920s, car manufacturers targeted their sales pitch at men. Women had no income of their own so as far as Detroit was concerned they didn't exist. But now that women had an income, they were affronted with narrow-minded macho American cars. These women turned to Japanese and European cars that did not exude symbolism. It is important to have cars that symbolise neither masculinity nor femininity. The American car industry in 1975 did not have such a car and lost out as a result.

3. Economy

The oil embargo made Americans feel vulnerable and threatened at the prospect of a similar recurrence, and wanted their cars to be economical. In 1974 a new federal speed limit of 55 miles per hour was imposed by the Government as a response to the oil crisis. People wanted cars that appeared to be light and nippy and to look like European models. The Ford Pinto and Chevrolet Vega were two cars that relied on this symbolism for sales but were plagued with mechanical failures and bad reviews to make them best sellers.

4. Quality

Americans look for quality in all the products that they buy and this trait is even more pronounced in car-buying. It is a basic need for value for money. Japanese cars were generally cheaper than their American equivalents with often \$1,000 in the difference. The quality was equal if not better than some American cars, causing American car buyers consider quality as a discriminating factor when buying a new car.

A study by the Institute of Social Research at the University of Michigan showed that between 1968 and 1975 quality became an important a factor to Americans buying new cars. (Bayley 1986, p.65)

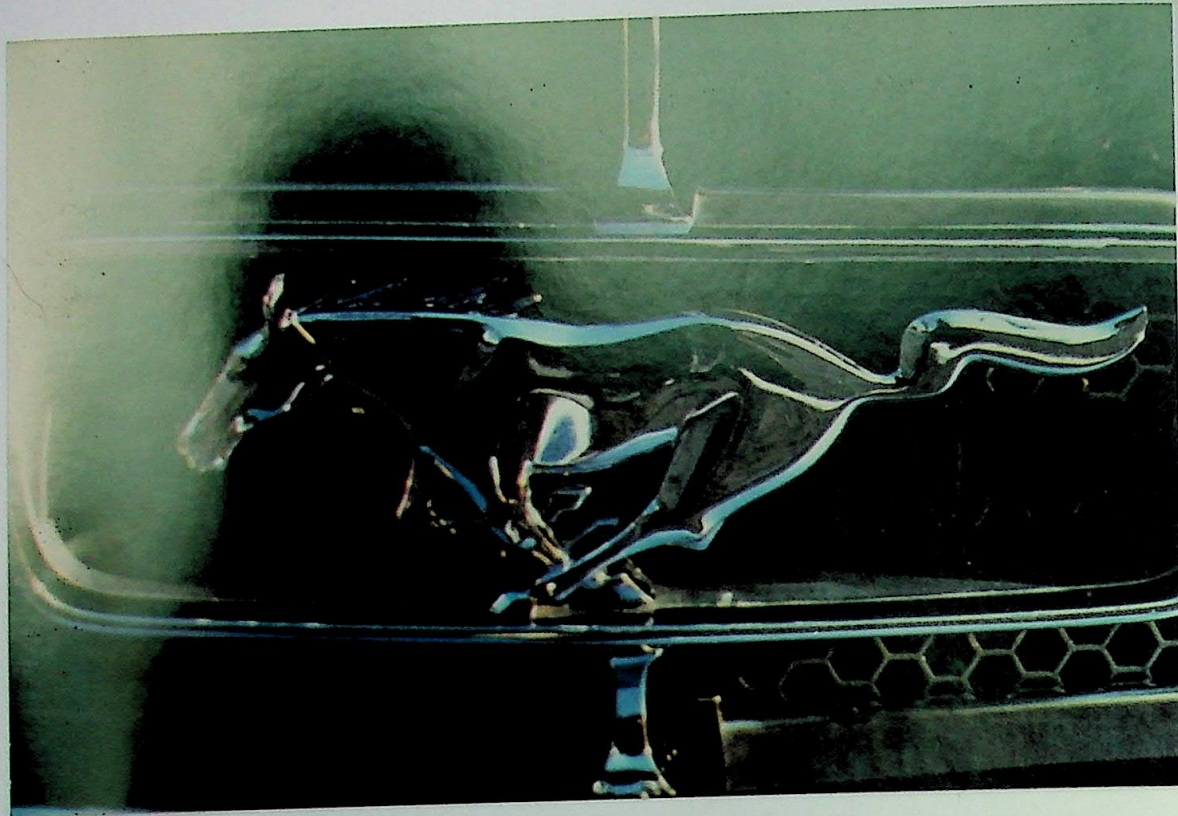
However great the changes in American socio-economics and the changes they impose on car symbolism, certain symbols will continue to be used. The process of making and selling cars is changing rapidly, but the taste for symbolism is as ineradicable in Americans as the parallel appetites for love and sustenance which remain constant variables in the universe. These symbols are part and parcel of car design and in 1975 were still evident in car styling. These symbols are speed, performance and wealth.

5. Speed

Out on the wide open road Americans had speed and freedom. Americans want their cars to symbolise these values. For many, these values epitomised their American dream. The fantasy of street racing and Trans-am were as alive in many American car buyers in 1975 as they were a decade before. Various cars were still using speed imagery in 1975. The Pontiac GTO had a spoiler that could only work if the car was doing over 150 miles per hour, which it couldn't anyway.

6. Performance

People were still buying GTOs, Firebirds, Mustangs and Camaros through to 1975. These cars retained their symbolic references to performance and power such as the power bulge and the air intakes. V-8 engines were still *the* performance engines. Even non-Muscle cars and non-Pony cars had to show they could give performance by giving the image of being a



27. Ford Mustang logo, 1965. (Barry 1988, p.106).



28. Cadillac Eldorado 1975. (Hirsch 1985, p.195).

small economical powerhouse. Even the names of these cars had to convey images of performance.

We were all driving around in animals - in Mustangs, Pintos, Broncos, Wildcats, Cougar and Foxes. Notice that they are all images of freedom, power and independence. There are no barnyard ducks or turkeys, nothing passive or herded to remind us what life is really like. (Lewis 1983, p.347)

7. Wealth

American cars used imagery and symbolism to sell in the late sixties and early seventies, as they did in the years previously. Using wealth, elegance and richness as symbols, cars were used to climb the status ladder. Cadillac was the leader in using this kind of symbolism. 'It [1975 Cadillac] was a car that cried "Manifest Destiny" and other imperialist American slogans with every contour and chrome accent'. (Barry 1988, p.147). Wealth and luxury were combined with the symbols of quality and owning one meant that one was at the top of the status pile. Cadillac ran advertisements with 'Cadillac - universal symbol of achievement'.

However with widespread introduction of European cars in the early seventies and effective advertising, people began to regard BMWs, Porsches and Mercedes-Benz as the new symbols for status, and foreign cars became incorporated into the American dream. Yes, now the American dream had foreign automobiles.

CONCLUSION

In 1975 Americans still needed cars. They now had a choice of American or foreign-made cars. Just as advertising and marketing persuaded Americans to buy large, over-decorated, over-powered and over-priced cars, the same advertising and marketing machines persuaded Americans that foreign cars gave economy, comfort, quality and value for money. People now could live the American dream *and* drive a foreign set of wheels.

In 1975 the best selling car in America and the world was the Toyota Corolla. This was the first time that an American car did not hold this position. All the major American car manufacturers were in a quandary and all recorded major losses. Detroit had lost touch with its car buyers, and did not relate to domestic trends. Detroit blamed everybody but themselves for their failure to hold on to American consumers. Detroit knew that a large percentage of Americans purchase cars on the basis of perception ie. what they perceive to be *their* car, *their* image and *their* style. Millions of Americans were cruising around in Datsuns, Toyotas and Volkswagens because they were influenced by televisions commercials that portrayed these cars as practical but great driving machines.

The all-important factor in American car design - symbolism, had not changed with consumer taste changes. Detroit believed in producing cars that symbolised success, status, power and wealth. Americans in 1975 had a wide variety of desired products on which to spend their money. Their American dream of living a prosperous and democratic life still existed. Prosperity now meant a job, house, children and vacations. The American car became a transportational vehicle. Foreign manufacturers knew this and produced cars with symbolism that expressed this fact. Detroit could have stemmed the flow of foreign cars by producing cars that Americans needed, but their own analytical skills prohibited this.

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