

KICKING TIRES

For the first time in probably 15 years, I've attended an auto show. Although I haven't been purposely avoiding them, over the past decade or so, the auto industry hasn't given me a compelling reason to go.

It used to be that you could tell the make, model and year of a car just by looking at it. But the recent cookie-cutter models seem to be stamped from the same set of dies, year to year and manufacturer to manufacturer. The automobile enthusiast has had only bits and pieces to get excited about.

But a rejuvenation in automotive design appears to be underway. Current and concept models on display at the 1999 Chicago Auto Show, held in February at Chicago's McCormick Place, focus as much on selling adrenaline, adventure and mystique as they do on transportation.

Some of the best examples include the recent work of Chrysler, whose Vipers and Prowlers are now among the most recognizable cars on the road. Chrysler also showed their new PT Cruiser, a model that takes its styling cues from classic cars of the 1930s. It looks like nothing else on the road. With its high fenders, distinctive grille and a shape that defies industry-standard classification, it's part car, part minivan and part sport utility. It seems like the people at Chrysler are having an awful lot of fun designing unique and specialized vehicles—and it's going to Europe. Americana, here we come!

Ford has also reached for some nostalgia with its concept for the rebirth of the Thunderbird. The prototype is reminiscent of the original 50s models, and it looks as good in metal as it does in print. Ford is planning to sell 20,000 of these per year, but frankly, I don't know why they can't sell twice that number. This car is going to put the "boom" back in Baby Boomers.

The American designers aren't the only ones who seem to have been rejuvenated. For example, the new Jaguar Type-S has all the styling cues that have made Jaguar famous, unique and highly identifiable. The Mercedes S Class used to be a big, blocky automobile, but I was impressed by its svelte new look. Even Volvo has broken out of its styling box with its S80 sedan. The Audi TT is a tightly styled coupe, and the Volkswagen Beetle, with its familiar design and cartoonish colors, is absolutely the cutest thing around. Although I didn't own one the first time around, I sure remember how they were all over the place.

The 1999 Chicago Auto Show has renewed my interest in current-model vehicles. The industry seems to be interested in serving more than just our transportation needs. This move toward niche marketing is going to make automobiles fun again. Perhaps I'll become an Auto Show regular again.

Michael Goldstein

Sincerely,

Michael Goldstein, Publisher-in-Chief



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