

Design Excellence and Craftsmanship: How to look at an Automobile by Fay Butler

History

Concours d'elegance is a French word that has been around since at least the days of carriages. These events allowed manufactures, designers, admirers and potential customers to come together to view first carriages, then automobiles at a central event. This was all centered on design excellence and craftsmanship. After first starting out in Europe, these events made their way to America.

At the height of the carriage industry in the late 1800's, Amesbury MA was the center of the transportation industry, so was the likely place to hold these first annual events. As automobiles became popular, major cities became hosts for such events.

1925 onward: an exciting era in style

The height of these concours coincided with two design styles: Art Deco and Streamline. 1925 in Paris showed the emergence of the Art Deco movement. Art Deco designs had sharp edges, angular geometric forms, and "Zig-Zag" patterns. Moving into the 1930's brought "streamline" design to automobiles. Streamline design had sweeping curved surfaces, tear drop and bullet shapes with ornaments of multiple horizontal lines suggesting the forward thrust of engines. These smooth continuous surfaces even at idle appeared to move through the air with ease, and did. Automobile style then, reflected art deco and more significantly streamline design, giving optimism for the 1930's depression era. Streamline popularity persisted into the 1960's and is still influencing design today.

Today style and design events with automobiles are quite popular, and can be seen in many formats. For a view to the past of traditional concours, this bringing back of the Newport RI Concours d'elegance after a 25-year absence is a welcome opportunity. Here, all era automobiles are displayed from early brass cars, to the stylish art deco and streamline designs of the 1930's to post-war cars. Even featured will be several new luxury Maybach automobiles showing their elegant style with the Maybach tradition of the "nod" to the latest innovative technology.

Some ideas on how to look at Automobiles from a designer standpoint

This concours is a great opportunity for participants to view a wide variety of automobiles from different eras. An idea that one might keep in mind when viewing a car, is "what does that car say to me?" Does it say that this car is fast or slow, is it powerful or weak, would I drive this to the grocery store, or to a picnic, or to a music concert. If these or other ideas come into your mind when looking at an automobile, what you then might consider, is why do I think that way about this auto? Part of what is giving you these feelings is the surfaces on that auto that reflect light. Those reflective surfaces are known as the "highlight lines", because they tend to be highly reflective, catching the light. These highlights, or bright reflective surfaces are what transfer the "vocabulary of forms", telling you what the designer hoped you would see. Automobiles are really just two large boxes; one large lower box that houses the engine, drive train,

and seating package, then a second box placed on top which has the glass and roof. These two boxes are often distinguished by a horizontal “belt line” that gives the eye a physical place where they are broken.

Conclusion

So when you are walking around the cars on the tours on Friday/Saturday or the car show on Sunday, look at all the automobiles closely. These will vary from the primitive looking cars of the turn of the century to the latest most advanced 2007 Maybach model 57S just recently introduced. Then ask yourself, “What was that designer trying to say to me?” Look and listen to the “vocabulary of forms,” which you will see from the reflective surfaces of those highly styled 2 “boxes” stacked up to give you more than just transportation. These automobiles just might give you feelings which hark back to the days of carriages when a concours d’élégance was truly about design excellence and craftsmanship.

Fay Butler www.faybutler.com has been shaping metal for cars from antiques to concept for 30 years. He runs a 35 hr, hands on metal shaping seminar open to the public, once a month. Recently Fay opened a Discovery Channel TV movie with Jesse James called Motorcycle Mania 3 where Jesse James and Fay built a copper riveted motorcycle gas tank for a custom motorcycle.