

Love, Not Logic, Sets Design

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

AN EMINENT researcher has discovered by the diligent application of pseudo-psychology that an automobile (convertible) is a man's mistress. He was right. I am a woman who plays second fiddle, or wheel, to a humble Volkswagen (convertible), while her husband dreams of a Maserati. No wife is competition for those beautiful Italians.

There is really no more predictable rationale for taste in automobiles than there is for taste in women. One man's Grand Prix is another man's poison. Only one thing is certain: gentlemen prefer blondes and sports cars.

There is equally little rationale to automobile design, beyond the fact that a chassis must be attached to an engine. A top official of a famous art museum known for taste-making has called the automobile "hollow rolling sculpture." He has never lived it down, but he was right, too. "Hollow rolling sculpture with sex appeal" might be closer to the mark.

Nothing is more arbitrary or more subject to those monumental, shifting intangibles of

fashion and status and the unfathomable instincts of pure or adulterous pleasure than the way in which that chassis is shaped and trimmed. It doesn't just grow, and its bow to function is minimal beyond the basic necessities. It is the product of drawing boards, sculptors' tools and dreams.

The Price of Romance

Does the center passenger do a shifty battle with the bump in the middle of the floor? Small price for that long, low look. Must you sidle past a "dog leg" to get out the front door? The compensation is that stunning wraparound glass.

Entering or exiting is known to be unbecoming and painful for all over 16 and not in Olympic condition. But once in that sleek, racy job, the happy implications are clear. We are beautiful, romantic people, all intent on going somewhere glamorous.

I know a very small woman who solves the problem of the inevitable extra passenger in a Jag two-seater (intimations of wonderful, wicked weekends) by stretching out on the ledge under the back window, where the less chic, in American cars, put life-size plush poodles and

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dolls. She looks better; she's alive.

Love, then, rather than logic, has a lot to do with the automobile. And since love makes the world go 'round, it is no surprise that the automobile has changed the world, in more ways than one.

There is automobile architecture—the motel and shopping center—which emphasizes a kind of transient flashiness to match the car that brought it into existence. The insolent chariots have produced insolent buildings, whose best feature is often the quick getaway.

There is the "automobile esthetic," a look that is quietly and pervasively altering the visual world. Nothing housed in metal—and almost everything is except people—fails to carry the stamp of the style popularized by Detroit.

Squares Are In

It has transformed all the artifacts of daily life. Can openers, floor polishers, knife sharpeners, stoves, refrigerators, toasters, tools, boats, soft drink dispensers, all of the gadgets, appliances and conveniences by which we live are designed in the Detroit image.

When that image was streamlined in the nineteen-thirties, every stationary object looked as if it were about to take off. When the "jet look" was strong in the fifties, a housewife needed a copilot for her washing machine. Even her electric mixer had tailfins.

Now the "square look" is in, and we have straight-lined, square-edged products that manufacturers told us could not be made. It is a Pyrrhic vic-

tory for the purists, however, because automobile stylists have achieved the impossible. They have managed to make the straight line vulgar.

They do this by a kind of rakish exaggeration that turns any trend into caricature. Even the subtle, sophisticated Italian touch, the smooth, or liscio, line of Pinin Farina at his classic best, is translated into something jazzier by Detroit. It is all summed up in the General Motors Pavilion for the New York World's Fair, which looks like some gigantic, yet-to-be-invented automotive accessory. It is a pure exercise in automobile esthetic abstraction.

Motel in Moscow

Just how pervasive this influence is can be seen by the increasing popularity of American styling abroad, where it is now being sent back to us in European models. Even Pinin Farina is not immune. Architecture is the last bastion to fall, although Moscow has its first motel.

But the ultimate impact of the automobile is on the environment. The spreading suburbs, their services and connections to the cities, the growing network of new highways lined with automobile-architecture, the changes brought about by automobile transportation and the population explosion have led to the biggest design problem of all: the need for new environmental patterns for the automotive age.

This is the greatest design challenge of the century, and it is the overwhelming preoccupation of today's architects, engineers and planners. Except, of course, when they happen to be thinking about beautiful Ferraris and beautiful blondes.