

Color Styling the American Automobile

BY EUGENE BORDINAT

In designing cars for the American public, the stylist is dealing with millions of people who flatter themselves that they buy products on a rational basis, while actually they buy products, to a great extent, on emotion. The average American also likes to think that he is an independent thinker and a rugged individualist, while actually he is closer to a sheep and follows the herd. He resists change. He wants just enough change in cars so his neighbor will know it is the latest model, but not so much that he has to explain to his friends why he bought the strange contraption.

William Stout's Scarab car and Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion effort were good cars from a logical point of view, but they couldn't, and in fact didn't, get any place. They scared the public. However, the public is susceptible to influence by saturation and association.

The stylist must consider these factors when he outlines his advanced thinking on trim and color. He may develop a color combination with tremendous emotional impact, but he must be sure that the scheme isn't so radical that it will frighten the color-timid public. He must also consider how to best introduce this new color combination in order to give it its best chance for acceptance and popularity. The result will be closely connected with the type of car or body style on which new colors are used, and the geographic area in which the new colors are introduced.

It is generally assumed, and I think correctly, that people who normally buy convertibles or sporty hard-tops, enjoy the attention they get and the ego satisfaction derived from being seen in them. These people are rarely *Milquetoasts*—they're usually sports. This group, then, provides the best proving ground for the more exciting and attention-getting color combinations.

When these pioneers have bought and driven enough of the new color combinations, the public begins to grow accustomed to them. They lose some of their shock effect and are accepted as being good, solid, normal colors. The time may then be ripe to carry some of these colors into more conservative body styles—the two-doors and four-doors.

This procedure must be carefully watched, however, because too accelerated a program can kill the color before it has a chance to get solidly implanted in the public's mind. Some years ago, for example, back when *chartreuse* was just a tough word to pronounce, Ford Motor Company decided to introduce it in combination with black on its Ford convertible and *Crestliner*.

The scheme enjoyed a wide and successful acceptance. It attracted attention, and provided considerable showroom traffic. Certain factions of the sales organization, a group that is very sensitive to fast-moving merchandise, reasoned that if *chartreuse* were the reason for increased sales in the sports line, more of the same should have a similar effect on the two-doors and four-doors. As a result, a flood of yellowish-green sedans hit the market. The public considered this too much and too quick, and *chartreuse* bit the dust.

The second point, or where, geographically, to introduce brighter colors, can have quite a bearing on their acceptance. Generally speaking, the Southwest Coast provides the most adventurous customers; the Middlewest next; and the East, around New England, the most conservative. Because of the greater acceptance of new colors on the West Coast, several manufacturers carry certain colors as West Coast exclusives.

Colors don't just happen to be on cars. They are there as a result of a long and painstaking evaluation of color trend, an evolutionary steering of the public in certain color directions, carefully calculated timing as to how and when to introduce various colors, and even a sampling of the public's tolerance for certain strong colors. Mix this all together in the proper proportion and add just a dash of the stylist's own emotion and imagination, and you have the recipe for a successful color cake. Of course, like any other cake, there's an element of luck. Some unsuspected factor could, I suppose, drop on the floor and cause our cake to fall — so we always tread lightly until we see how the public will respond to it



Eugene Bordinat, one of the ablest designers in the automobile field, is the Chief of Lincoln and Mercury styling in the Ford Engineering Staff Organization.