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ARE WE DOING A GOOD JOB IN OUR CAR INTERIORS?

By Helene Rother, Rother -- Design Styling Studios

It may come as a surprise to you to hear a woman talking tonight. Really, it even amazes me to be standing here! When I first came to Detroit to design for the car industry, and I attended my first meeting of the S.A.E., I had the surprise of my life. Seeing nothing but men, I was sure I had taken the wrong door! And even today, after six years, the automotive industry is still unique in its lack of employing women in creative positions. Therefore, I want to thank the Society of Automotive Engineers, and particularly Mr. Lindsay, for the opportunity they have given me to express the opinion of women on our interiors. I think it is an excellent idea that engineers are finally becoming interested in the "better half" of our buyers, inasmuch as the "better half", since the Nineteenth Amendment, has mysteriously acquired 70% of the nation's wealth – and, moreover are determined to spend 120%!

To come to our theme, "are we doing a good job in our car interiors", which means in other words; Do the interiors we make satisfy the American Public? Are we keeping step with the preferred change in taste and style development, color preference and expectations of comforts in the Post-War America? – and I even dare say, the World.

We are indeed very greatly handicapped in finding the answer to these questions. Since the War, selling has been done on what could be called a “take-it-or-leave-it” basis. Nobody has asked men or women outside of the automotive industry what they really want. There has been little possibility to find out the opinion of the average citizen about new cars. It is true that lately there has been some customer research done by different organizations, but somehow the results of such research seldom reach the styling sections, -- and if so, too late.

It is my opinion that the stylists employed by the industry must try their utmost to stay in contact with other parts of the country. In order to arrive at a satisfactory product, the creative urge of the designer must be supported by a real understanding of what the public needs and wants.

Is the “new look” in our interior styling not enough? Permit me to experiment. Let us forget that I am bluntly an old American. I look at our cars with the eyes of an immigrant woman. **Word** I see American automobiles always looking very handsome, big and powerful! There is plenty of choice. I see in part, too much choice. And then I peek into the car—rather salaciously. Somehow the styling stopped behind the instruments board. The inside of different makes of cars is difficult to distinguish.

I feel that our car styling, inside as well as outside, is in a new stage. Let’s call it the Post-War Period. Our next interiors will surely be different. The new car designs, the first ones

coming out after a repose of seven years, cannot be more than a proving ground. The real styling match will begin when buyers are more difficult to find.

One of the most important tasks we face is to arrive at a different approach to colors. Americans, men and women alike are the most color loving people in our Western Civilization.

One of my first impressions of America when I landed here was the abundance of color. Americans love color, and, as you all know, love is apt to make us blind! Perhaps our new stylists fear to use colors that are too extreme. This results in our being presented again and again with gray and tan interiors. Or maybe it has something to do with the bad climate in Detroit.

I have interviewed a number of women in different groups and in different cities in the East, South and Middle West, on the subject of colors in cars. When I asked what colors they would like best in a new car, the answer which I usually received (and this will surprise you) was "Red". Then they said, with a dreamy look, "Or perhaps deep green with a very little silver". When I asked if they meant a convertible, they were usually astonished. Indeed they did not. I began to suspect that people buy convertibles, not primarily to be able to drive in an open car, but because they are the only cars in which colors are used to any great extent. People do not know what they want, but they won't be satisfied until they get it.

Choice and matching of colors is an emotional process. It relies upon feeling and intuition. All of the man-made color mixtures, such as those of **Ostwald, Russell** and **Milford** help very little to make a fine color combination. Really, the woman is by education and inclination, better equipped to create better color combinations, and is more definite in making her choice in buying. The industry would surely profit by employing more women for the selecting of colors and fabrics.

If we begin to use more colors in our interiors, our whole conception of fabric textures will also change. Women very often ask me, “When do we get the new fabrics – the ones we can wash and clean, the more colorful ones?” If there is some clear conception of what women want in cars, it is a miracle fabric – a fabric which we do not have so far.

There is another fact which should not be overlooked. High-pressure advertising has made women very gadget-conscience. It is really surprising how much an American woman expects of an automotive engineer!

I have a long list of such gadgets for use in cars, beginning with outlets for heating baby bottles and canned soup, cigarette lighters on springs, umbrella holders, safety belts, and so on. Since this is primarily an engineering problem and only secondly concerns styling, I will leave it up to the engineers to figure out what a car battery can stand in gadgets! But I am reminding you that it is the gadget that will sell the house or car of tomorrow!

One of the most important parts of a car is the instrument board. On the appearance of the dashboard, the appreciation of a car may succeed or fail. Most objects which are designed, such as houses, furniture, clothing, etc., have a long line of precedents, -- one style usually following the other for centuries. But the car stylist has nothing to look back to -- except the Model T (of which Norman Bel Geddes says, "The health of the nation improved considerably after it disappeared!" [ ])

The stylist is entirely up to his own devices to find the right design. The instrument board of a car shows more than anything else how well-styled the car is. Here the driver is in real contact with the mechanics, and here is the surest test of good coordination between the engineer and stylist.

Most people, both men and women, are more or less ignorant about the mechanics of a car. When the automobile was in its first phase, the driver tried to understand the mechanics, and the designer wanted to impress him by overemphasis of the mechanical functions. And at this time it was the goal in styling. Then we designed a lot of important looking buttons and parts surrounding the superman driving the car! Now, we are in the second phase of automobile styling, where the average driver does not understand much about the car. With the accumulation of scientific knowledge, on the whole, the non-engineer, the non-chemist, the non-physicist is condemned to be ignorant. And modern man is complaisant about it. Everything is a wonder to him! He desires that at the touch of a button the car will start, at

another touch the lights go on and off, in the same way the windows open and close, and so on. Here is really the thrill of progress, and out of this mentality a new style acceptance is born.

Lightness is the aristocracy of mechanical technology. Lightness, effortless and simplicity must be the basic considerations of our automotive designs. A speedometer which looks like a cash register is out-of-date. So are **word** buttons and complicated ornaments, **vaguefully** designed to bruise knees and elbows! We will need much less chrome but we will be forced to find better metal finishings, more exciting complications and contrasts of colors, textures and lines.

Our interiors should be designed to match the exteriors. Maybe it is necessary to break the isolation in which our stylists here in Detroit are kept. I can well imagine that, for example, the formations of a group of designers specializing in transportation interiors – cars, buses, trains, planes, ambulances etc. Will bring the stepchild of the industry, Interior Designing to a more mature state.

There are too many interiors in the automotive field which are not even touched by the stylist. Taxi cabs, for example, are completely ignored. Bus interiors in city transportation are a wonder of discomfort and poor color combinations. And in a number of small communities, it is necessary to transport accident and hospital cares in the community hearse -- with all the trimmings – black and purple velvet and the smell of flowers. The converting of a medium-priced automobile into an ambulance which could be afforded by smaller

communities, would be a problem of great interest to both engineers and stylists, and it is certainly a pressing one.

Someone at some time developed in our industry a mysterious classification of cars, dividing them into De lux, Custom, Standard, Super, Special, etc. These names have something to do with prices, and somehow they classify different types of the same car. Very few people, outside the industry, clearly know the differences. I believe it is a good thought to have a car finished in several interiors, because we have different people who buy the car. Indeed, people are so different that it is practically impossible to satisfy all their needs with the same car. We may be able to give satisfaction with the same outside appearance, but we cannot with the same interiors.

For example, a farmer surely should have another interior than a city dweller using the car as transportation to and from his work. An interior designed with the convenience of an office would find interest far beyond the traveling salesman. A family with a lot of children (there are still some), does not want the same interior as a single woman. To solve the problems of a better car interior, I believe we must break down the cars of future car buyers, not into Standard, De Luxe and Special types, but into a few groups according to their needs and expectations. This, I believe, should be the first step in making better interiors, interiors which really fit the needs of the people.

I would like to leave this thought with you -- The good or bad taste in the interiors of automobiles or other transportations vehicles is one of the most visible expressions of the cultural standard of a people. There can be no doubt that our car interiors are better than any produced in the same price class by other countries. But even so, tomorrow they must and will be better.

*The transcription of this speech was undertaken by Francesca Steele and Roxanne Pelton from the original, which is preserved within the Society of Automotive Engineers International Mobility History Archives.*