THE MANIA BEGINS

In the first decades of their existence, automobiles were primarily playthings for the well-heeled and adventurous; nobody bought one to commute or run errands. But for those who could afford them, cars offered an intoxicating and thrilling experience that raised questions about how these machines could radically transform our lives.

The change ushered in by cars was not entirely positive. In 1907 the French poet Octave Mirbeau described motorists as “the worst of all animals on the road” and confessed that while driving he would “begin to feel obscure stirrings of hatred and an idiotic sense of pride.” “No longer am I a miserable specimen of humanity, but a prodigious being in whom are embodied—no please don’t laugh—Elemental Splendor and Power. . . . Imagine with what contempt I view the rest of humanity from the vantage point of my car. . . . Out of my way!”

MACHINE ART FOR THE MASSES

Perhaps no figure had a greater impact on automobile manufacturing—and modern industry—than Henry Ford, whose system of assembly-line production was a uniquely American, spectacular iteration of industrial capitalism that drove efficiency and boosted production capacity. At the heart of Ford's production program was the River Rouge factory complex in Dearborn, Michigan. Designed by Albert Kahn, the plant was completed between 1917 and 1928. Workers at River Rouge manufactured the standardized components for utilitarian and affordable vehicles like the Ford Model T, which made car ownership available to the masses.

Mesmerized by the look of machines and the new technologies shaping the modern world, architects, artists, photographers, and designers flocked to River Rouge. The curators of the 1934 MoMA exhibition *Machine Art* argued that a mechanistic style had taken hold in everyday life, putting car parts including pistons, ball bearings, and headlamps on display among six hundred other industrial items.

THE LOOK OF THINGS

"Automobiles are hollow, rolling sculpture," the curator Arthur Drexler famously wrote in the catalogue for *8 Automobiles*, MoMA's first exhibition of car-body design, which opened in 1951. It was followed up two years later with *Ten Automobiles*. Both shows presented a mostly European selection of cars, reflecting the organizers' belief that "in Europe, where a car is a luxury rather than a necessity, design still has some of the qualities of a fine art."

Postwar reconstruction maintained a hold on Europe well into the 1950s, inhibiting the expansion of a domestic market for cars. In the United States, by contrast, automobile sales were booming. Aiming to attract the emerging middle-class consumer, automakers launched spectacular car shows and exuberant advertising campaigns. Body-stylists—such as Harley Earl, who founded General Motors' influential Art and Color Section in 1929—became integral to selling cars. In an intensely competitive landscape, manufacturers introduced updated models annually, offering cars in a range of colors and with futuristic, space-age flourishes like tail fins.

CAR POP

As objects of consumer desire deeply embedded in postwar popular culture, cars were ripe terrain for artists wishing to relate their practice to the breadth of contemporary experience. These artists offered critical perspectives on society's relationship to technology and consumerism. The breezy optimism and picture-perfect narrative of endless social and technological progress being pedaled by the automotive industry was falling out of sync, it seemed, with the way things actually were.

THE VIEW FROM THE ROAD

In 1932 the architect Frank Lloyd Wright imagined a world built around “giant roads, themselves great architecture.” This vision was realized during the postwar years with the intensive construction of highway networks in the United States and elsewhere. A new generation of artists took roadside culture as their point of departure, such as the photographer Robert Frank, whose celebrated photo essay *The Americans* (1958) documented the flow of culture along the nation’s highways, offering a portrait of a country in the midst of profound change.

Designers sought to shape and critique the experience of the increasingly road-centric landscape of the United States. An influential study published in 1964 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, *The View from the Road*, examined “the esthetics of urban highways: the way they look to the driver and his passengers, and what this implies for their design.”

CARMAGGEDON

By the 1960s the technological optimism embraced wholeheartedly in the previous decade was starting to wane. While the automobile industry had been an engine of postwar economic growth and improved standards of living, its positive impact was becoming overshadowed by the problems that came with a car-centric world: traffic-clogged, smoggy cities; suburban sprawl; landscapes scarred by oil extraction or submerged beneath a spaghetti of roads; the displacement of communities by highways; and endlessly escalating fatalities.

Mitigating the harm wrought by cars while still accommodating them is a challenge that, to this day, vexes planners, architects, environmentalists, manufacturers, consumers, and politicians. Humanity has entered an intimate partnership with a machine that it won’t easily escape.