

Last issue I banged on a bit about what I called ‘predator styling’. To my mind this is an important issue so here are some thoughts on why we do this, how it happened.

When the automobile was a gay young thing (a different meaning back then, obviously) enthusiastic owners referred to their idiosyncratic and unreliable vehicles as *she*, as in *she’ll start from cold with only one turn of the handle* — and stuff like that. Cars were female in gender and I suspect that was a convention carried over from the nautical world, from ships and boats. Right up to the 1950s and 60s you would still hear older, male car-types boasting to their chums in pubs and bars: *I took her up to 85 on Wednesday and nothing fell off* — for example.

Car designers knew that cars were feminine objects; it was taken for granted. Cars could be ugly, they could be ordinary, there was a chance they could be pretty, but the ideal was that they should be beautiful. Was this a healthy way to carry on viewed from the perspective of modern gender politics? Why not? The English language is unusual in making most nouns neutral, gender-free. If we choose to attribute gender to an inanimate object there must be a reason; maybe it’s because cars and boats protect us in a perilous environment; we put our lives in their care, hence *mothership*, perhaps. So cars were feminine and ideally beautiful, and this convention worked and made sense — to women and men alike.

Beauty wasn’t the only aesthetic goal of course, although it was the most sought-after and respected. Designers learned that *cute* was good (the Cinquecento), and *cheeky* (that arrived with the original Mini) and *feline* enabled them to make sports cars look fast and purposeful (the E-Type Jaguar of course) but all these looks, these ideas, had to exist within and below the assumption that beauty was the overarching ideal.

Then something happened; quite what happened, and when, I’m finding it hard to fathom, but happen it did: somehow we abandoned the idea that cars are essentially female. Where once designers took as their aesthetic model the convexities and concavities of the female body, they now spoke of sinew and muscle. Cars should be *muscular*, because they are dynamic and mobile — this became the new received wisdom. And to go with this new, essentially masculine athleticism, the car’s face could change too.

Now, faces had always been a problem: we all knew that with their eyes and mouths (though much less so, noses) cars had faces, but had no idea what to model them on. Female bodies may have inspired the fenders and flanks, but at the front you could hardly expect fluttering lashes and pouting lips. Fish could help, witness Bill Mitchell's shark-like Corvettes, but generally the piscine model led to the 'startled guppy' problem that so bedeviled Ford a few years back. But then, when the design gender switch flipped from F to M, and pictures of oiled-up, six-packed torsos began to appear on those image boards, the face problem was solved! The car was of course a snarling beast, crouching, calculating. Beady, predator eyes and huge, thin-lipped, gaping, snarling mouths — here was a look that worked, consistently, face and flanks working together in the triumphant birth of the *mean machine*.

And beauty, in that old sense of taste and elegance, went out the window.