

American Automobile Advertising, 1930–1980



An Illustrated History

Heon Stevenson

American Automobile Advertising,
1930–1980

ALSO BY HEON STEVENSON

British Car Advertising of the 1960s
(McFarland, 2005)

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HEON STEVENSON



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

Dates of advertisement illustrations

In this book, the dates given in picture captions are the cover dates of the magazines in which the advertisements appeared. In some cases, a magazine might have been published a few weeks before the beginning of the month of its cover date. Where the month of publication of an advertisement is not known, the model year of the campaign is given instead.

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To my late father,
Stuart D. Stevenson, BSc., C. Eng., A.M.I.E.E.

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Preface

Somewhere west of Laramie there's a bronco-busting, steer-roping girl who knows what I'm talking about. She can tell what a sassy pony, that's a cross between greased lightning and the place where it hits, can do with eleven hundred pounds of steel and action when he's going high, wide and handsome. The truth is—the Playboy was built for her. Built for the lass whose face is brown with the sun when the day is done of revel and romp and race. She loves the cross of the wild and the tame. There's a savor of links about that car — of laughter and lilt and light — a hint of old loves—and saddle and squirt. It's a brawny thing—yet a graceful thing for the sweep o' the Avenue. Step into the Playboy when the hour grows dull with things gone dead and stale. Then start for the land of real living with the spirit of the lass who rides, lean and rangy, into the red horizon of a Wyoming twilight.

— Jordan advertisement from the *Saturday Evening Post*, June 23, 1923

The aspirations of an era are captured vividly in its advertising, which is the focus of a multitude of human concerns and ambitions. At its best, advertising displays the finest fruits of engineering and the graphic arts. By their nature ephemeral, advertisements are compelling freeze-frames of the times that give them meaning.

The automobile, for its part, as a provider of freedom and symbol of affluence, and as a projection of its owner's world-view, has enjoyed a uniquely wide-ranging influence on American life. This is particularly apparent in the advertising of the “modern” period in the history of the American automobile, beginning with the entrenchment of the “Big Three” in the early 1930s, and concluding with the fuel crisis of the 1970s and the establishment of the Japanese automobile in America.

Individual automobile advertisements are interesting in their own right, and for what they reveal about the products that they attempted to sell. Particular campaigns stand out from the contemporary norm, and are memorable for their imagination and impact — such as J. Stirling Getchell's “Look At All Three” series for Plymouth in the 1930s, and J. Walter Thompson's “Ford in Your Future” campaign of 1945–47. David Ogilvy's advertisements for Rolls-Royce (1958–62) and Doyle Dane Bernbach's long-running, iconoclastic assault upon conventional automotive values with the Volkswagen

(beginning in 1959) have become famous, and are well documented.

Among conventional advertisements of this period, Studebaker's photographic series of 1946–50, De Soto's dramatic portraits of the finned Forward Look (1957), and Ford's atmospheric Thunderbird campaigns of the early 1960s are well remembered today. A few advertisements were controversial, such as Ford's “Lifeguard” promotion during the early part of the 1956 model year, which, with its emphasis on the passive safety of the product, anticipated later trends by more than a decade.

Some advertisements appear retrogressive to modern eyes — one thinks of much Studebaker copy of the early 1960s which, echoing the functionalism of the earliest automobile advertising, insisted that the product combined the best of all possible (prestigious and economical) worlds, which it did not. There were a few instances of *déjà vu*, the more amusing for not having been apparent to the advertisers themselves. Car buyers, meanwhile, usually proved cannier than one might believe from some of the modern period's more lurid copy.

Most of the themes and techniques evident in copy by 1980 were already apparent, if only in embryo form, at the beginning of the 1930s. Generalizations according to decade can therefore be misleading. It can be argued that the 1930s were years of functionalism; the 1940s (wartime prestige advertis-

ing apart) of escapism; the 1950s of fantasy; the 1960s of realism; and that the 1970s brought a fragmentation of approaches along “class” and size-category lines. There are, however, so many exceptions to this glib summary that it has only limited use as a temporary scaffold around which to build a more complete picture of the subject.

This book therefore follows a thematic rather than strictly chronological structure, tracing the development of the principal elements in American automobile advertising over fifty years. Advances in advertising layouts and graphics are discussed in Part One, together with the ways in which automobile styling, mechanical improvements, and convenience features were portrayed and highlighted in copy over the years. Part Two explores the advertising themes which were concerned less with the attributes of the cars themselves, but rather with the ways in which advertisers hoped that consumers would perceive and identify with their products. The practical aspects of automobile ownership are addressed in Part Three, which concludes with an account of the advance of imported cars into America after World War II. The Overview and Conclusion includes a discussion of advertising themes revisited and developed since 1980. Snapshots are taken of representative campaigns from the recessionary year of 1993, and from 2005-2006.

Choosing illustrations for this book has been an enjoyable but difficult task. As it is not possible to illustrate every campaign launched over fifty years, the advertisements selected have been chosen to be representative of their types, and to illustrate the themes of the text. The majority of the advertisements in this book have been taken from the unusually wide selection published in the *National Geographic*, whose clear

print showed them at their best, and whose high-quality paper has preserved them in good condition. Most also appeared in several other magazines at the same time, with the layout of each advertisement, and sometimes the length of its copy, being adjusted as necessary to the size and shape of a particular publication's pages. European advertisements for American cars are included where relevant, as is American advertising for imported cars.

Many parallels can be drawn between press advertisements and contemporary catalogs, particularly where pictures, slogans, and layouts were carried from one medium to the other as part of a coordinated marketing strategy. But the advertisement is not an abridged catalog, and the two have distinct, if sometimes overlapping, functions. This account is confined to the advertising published in the general media, which was not aimed primarily at car enthusiasts or at those who had already shown an interest in a particular product. This emphasis has also meant that a wide variety of advertisements can be shown here, an advantage given that many are often less easily found than brochures or catalogs which, in proportion to the numbers originally produced, have in many cases been more widely preserved.

I hope that this overview of fifty years of American automobile advertising will interest automobile enthusiasts, students of advertising and, not least, those who saw the advertisement, bought the car, and thereby sustained that powerful synthesis of illusion and aspiration which is the American dream.

Heon Stevenson
Cambridge, England, fall 2008

PART ONE : FUELING A FANTASY

Chapter 1

Igniting Desire

The beginning of a new model year was always exciting for Americans. In Europe, cars trickled onto the market when they were ready, and motor shows boosted enthusiasm for motoring as much as for particular cars. By contrast, the American automobile market was rejuvenated annually. After 1923, a year's new model was rarely exactly the same as what had gone before, and the new car buyer's first point of contact with the new model was usually an advertisement.

An advertisement is, and has always been, evangelical. It must cajole, bully, and entice its reader to spend on the strength of its promise, to partake of the enchanted life that the product will bring. Only after the potential buyer has been at least partly convinced does he fill in the coupon or enter the sanctuary of the showroom for a brochure. The brochure may confirm a consumer's desire for a car, but it is the advertisement which must ignite it. A brochure can run to several pages if necessary; the advertisement must do its job on one page, within seconds. It must make the reader stop and look, then read, then dream, and then become convinced, so that ownership of the automobile is integrated into his idealized self-image.

An advertisement therefore either succeeds or fails within a few seconds, after which its job is done, and it is thrown away and forgotten. Throughout the modern period in American automobile advertising it was an advertisement's appearance that had to make a reader stop; the car, as illustrated, had to persuade him to look; and the copy and backdrop against which the car was set invited him to read and, perhaps, to dream. Against this background, automobile advertisers' manipulation of layout and illustration reached new heights of subtlety and, sometimes, of elaboration.

There was a myth, widely perpetuated, that early advertisements were unrealistic, even dishonest, and that later copy was realistic, presenting the product in its true colors; that

"accurate" photography superseded "impressionistic" artwork. In the beginning, it was argued, the consumer was duped by advertisers' fanciful rendering of their products, but later rose up against the artists who were the cause of his confusion, and demanded realism instead.

This analysis appears superficially convincing. Its advocates need only produce an impressionistic rendering of a Chrysler or Lincoln, *circa* 1930, juxtapose it with a resolutely realistic portrait of a Chrysler or Lincoln, *circa* 1970, and point triumphantly to this supposedly irrefutable evidence of progress. This myth sustains a belief in progress itself, and may be attractive to the tastes of professional nostalgists, but it is not the whole story, not least because no advertisement can be wholly realistic about its subject, and no portrait is impartial. The strictest impartiality might be said to consist not in the identification of a single, "true" perspective to the disdain of all others, but in the practical and perhaps conceptual absurdity of an unmediated presentation of all possible perspectives simultaneously.

It has been claimed that the inception of color photography in automobile advertising from around 1932 removed the interpretative artistic middleman who had hitherto stood between the reader and the product; but, in reality, the artist, including the "deceitful" elongator, continued to work alongside the photographer until after 1970. And the imaginative photography that captured the "high, wide and heavenly" view enjoyed by Ford Thunderbird buyers in 1969, for example, was vastly more sophisticated than the simple, faux-color photograph which had been considered adequate for British buyers of the Model A in 1931. Moreover, the impressionism which was once the preserve of the illustrator was increasingly achieved not only by the artist and photographer, but by the copywriter as well.

Photographers and artists sometimes worked simultane-

ously on separate campaigns, and in several cases they worked together. In 1939, for instance, Oldsmobile used paintings in advertisements which highlighted styling features and the novelty of the year's range, while black and white photographs appeared in advertisements for low-priced variants which were promoted on their "realistic," down-to-earth merits of low cost and economical running. Plymouth used both media in the same year. The marque's black and white photographs were unequivocally dull, but paintings, in which about five inches were removed from the height of the car, made it look

adequately attractive without exaggerating its length. In the 1950s, photographs and illustrations were sometimes combined in individual advertisements, as in 1955 when a painted Studebaker President sedan, elongated at the front and resplendent in pink and black, was surrounded by photographs of similar cars in scenic settings to show off the design's useful features.

The artistic elongator, who portrayed an automobile realistically in its details, but not in its proportions, was particularly popular among aspiring middle-market advertisers from 1933 onwards. The exaggerated illustrations deployed by Nash during 1934 recalled the proportions of earlier Cords and Duesenbergs, while adding embryonic suggestions of streamlining — suggestions that were taken up more fervently by Hudson, Studebaker and, notably, Hupmobile, who had a genuinely streamlined car to work with in 1934's Aerodynamic sedan.

The advance of the elongator represented a natural synthesis of two existing schools in automobile advertising. On the one hand, Nash's socially optimized architectural backdrops recalled the static, neo-classical tableaux favored by Lincoln, Packard, Cadillac, and Marmon in the late 1920s. On the other hand, the modern elongator's preoccupation with the horizontal elements in car design, together with an emphasis on speed and power, recalled the dynamic impressionism imported from Europe, initially by Chrysler through its distinctive Bauhaus-pastiche idiom, at the same time.¹ Though innovative and influential, this idiom rarely strayed beyond Chrysler Imperial advertising in the automotive field in America, and was by no means universal in publicity even for that marque. Dynamic impressionism in general was more frequently encountered in Europe, notably in Fiat's home-market advertising for its larger models from 1927 to 1936, and with copy for the streamlined 1937 Panhard Dynamic in France.

The aim of both neo-classicist and dynamic impressionist was to convey the totality of the automotive experience by visual means rather than to show the product realistically in a technical sense. In 1954, G.H. Saxon ("Bingy") Mills, copywriter for W.S. Crawford Ltd., Chrysler's British and continental European advertising agent from 1925 until the early 1930s, recalled:

The Supreme Interpretation of Chrysler Standardized Quality

The Chrysler line of Quality brand automobiles offers more and a superior, ordinary motorist's driving pleasure and modern, because it is made, first and foremost, ready to work which, before the time would take of engineering processes — the same standard quality and service of elegance and atmosphere — in the construction, its mechanical and the maintenance of your best, because and yours in the case of Chrysler's "80", "60", "50" and "40" — the first car to build out the best Supreme Quality in the world.

The body price, 1926, five years in 1926, A. & S. Duesenberg is present. Follow your call.

CHRYSLER IMPERIAL "80"

CHRYSLER SALES CORPORATION, DETROIT, MICH.
Chrysler Corporation of Canada, Limited, Windsor, Ontario

CHRYSLER MODEL  NUMBERS MEAN MILES PER HOUR

Mild impressionism from Chrysler in 1926. More extreme forms would follow (December 1926).



CAMP ANYWHERE! No "hunting up" places to sleep. The roomy rear converts into a full-size, soft double bed in five minutes' time...saves \$25 to \$100 a year for tourists, salesmen.



FAR AWAY PLACES are close in a Nash. The new engine flashes you from 15 to 50 MPH in 13 seconds flat, in high gear.

IT'LL LEAD YOU ASTRAY —and You'll Like it!

If you're resigned to a dull summer on the back-porch swing—better stay away from a Nash.

For here's a car that's not content with just taking you to the office and fetching the groceries from town.

It demands a better fate—and so will you.

Look at its clean, windscept lines, and you'll feel it. This Nash is eager to take you to those unspoiled secret places of the world, where roads and hills keep lesser cars away.

There's a little "Weather Eye" dial that you turn . . . and you stay spotless on the dustiest road . . . never know chilly drafts. There's a new kind of engine whose pick-up will match any scared jack-rabbit you meet.

There's a special gear—a Fourth Speed Forward*—that lets you breeze by the other cars . . .

saves up to 20% on gasoline. Around and under you are special soundproofing and shock-absorbing features used by no other car-maker . . . so that an extra hundred miles won't jade you.

And there's even a Convertible Bed! So that you can sleep near your favorite trout stream.

We made the windshield wider . . . the gearshift quicker . . . the wheel spin easier . . . the brakes stop faster.

For you're going to drive a Nash like you never drove a car before!

But why waste your time reading this ad, when the real thing's down on the corner? Listen—ten models are priced near to the lowest! Phone your dealer now.

Four Series of Great Cars, 22 Models, 10 Different Seats, to the Lowest—Delivered at Dealers, as Low as \$2795. Standard Equipment and Price of Taxes Inc. *Optional Equipment—Night Drive Unit.

\$770



Model shown is for the Dealer. This is a 6-cylinder, 112" wheelbase, 1600 cc. engine, with standard equipment and Federal tax included. (Vehicles shown here are optional at extra cost.) 1939 Models from \$2795 in California as shown. NASH MOTOR CORPORATION, Nash-Kellogg Corporation, Detroit, Michigan.



AHEAD OF TIME—in styling and in features like the "Weather Eye," new Nash offers you higher resale value.

It's that New **NASH**
THE CAR EVERYBODY LIKES

Nash's "angled block" layout was a masterpiece of ingenuity. No other manufacturer combined a multitude of illustrations with more than a dozen typefaces to such elegant effect (June 1939).

**AFTER EVEN FORTY YEARS OF MOTORING
YOU HAVE STILL SOMETHING TO LEARN**
unless you have tried this new
FORD V-8 "30"

"THERE IS NO COMPARISON!"
PRICES FROM
£230.
AT WHOLESALE

The history of the Ford Motor Company is written in revolutionary engineering talent. The Mercury is an entirely new car. It is not cluttered with history. It is not like the Ford V-8 and the Lincoln Zephyr. It is the Mercury, today, in its prime. It is many times over of Ford. It has a look that is... a look that is not repeated in the job that it does.

**THE NEW
MERCURY 8**
A PRODUCT OF THE FORD MOTOR COMPANY

Contrast of styles. Mercury combined realistic illustration with factual copy in 1939, while Ford's British advertising for the 1937 V-8 "30" was sometimes cluttered. The "angled block" headline derived from an earlier, more exuberant idiom, and fitted badly with the portentous copy and hum-drum, if elongated, picture (April 1937 and March 1939).

A theory of new-found public wisdom presupposed an earlier stupidity, and on neither count was this early form of the progressivist myth wholly supported by the reality.

Nevertheless, as motoring became ever more popular and widely accessible, advertisers had to cater to a wider audience: wider in outlook, in aspiration, in geographical extent. The Depression, and the popularization of the automobile, signaled an end to Bauhaus-pastiche and other instances of what has been called

...an epidemic of freak advertising, masquerading under the banner of the progressively modern movement, which has brought no commensurate results to any but its perpetrators.⁵

In fairness to advocates of the "freakish," such copy had almost invariably been confined to upmarket automobiles. When Chrysler in America adopted dramatic angles, stylized speedlines, and vivid tonal contrasts in the late 1920s, this copy, was addressed to an upper-class elite in such magazines as *House and Garden*. It was assumed that readers would be familiar with Bauhaus and, latterly, Cubist and Art Deco-inspired visual motifs, and the strategy was simply a visually dramatic manifestation of the snobbery that had often per-

vaded upmarket automobile advertising. Most car advertisements of the period were simple and functional, like the cars that they depicted. Copy for the Model T Ford was consistently down-to-earth, and even deliberately stylized renderings of the Model A, Model B, and V-8 which followed in the 1930s were comparatively innocuous.

Esoteric artistic motifs were criticized as much for their implicit elitism — on the basis that the majority of the public did not "understand" and therefore would supposedly not like them — as for any failure to sell upmarket cars. Their advocates, commercially rather than socially motivated, wondered whether it mattered that those who would not buy Chrysler Imperials disliked or were mystified by copy for such cars. Did the critical, self-appointed, guardians of public taste within the advertising industry forget that it was as patronizing to try to "protect" the public from artistic excess as to inflict pretension on it in the first place? And were those critics secretly dismayed to see art purloined by avowedly commercial interests, notwithstanding that the Bauhaus was a school of the machine age, which sought to integrate art and three-dimensional design?

Advertisers delightedly foisted asymmetrical layouts and

More than meets the eye

LOOK at it. You are impressed with its size and majesty and grace of line. Sit in it—your appreciative eye finds it faultless in all its appointments. But to *measure* the merits of the Buick LIMITED you must drive it. For the most surprising thing about this arresting car is its brilliance of behavior. Faster

on the take-off, lighter in all its handling, smooth with a fluid ease exclusive to Buick alone, it is nimble as no car of its size has been before. Add that to its stunning style and to its luxurious roominess and you have the reason why you'll fail to match its value elsewhere within a thousand dollars of its price.



"Better buy Buick!"

A GENERAL  MOTORS VALUE

The Buick shown is the LIMITED Limousine delivering at Flint, Mich. at \$2453, complete with standard equipment. Fenderwells extra. There are 3 LIMITED models ranging in price from \$2176 to \$2453 and 4 ROADMASTER models from \$1645 to \$1983 delivered complete at Flint. Seats and local taxes if any and transportation extra.

Realistic photography was not confined to utilitarians. In 1938, Buick evoked an earlier neo-classical style, long favored by upmarket advertisers (March 1938).

minimalist representation on automobiles which had been designed with scant regard for the ideals that sired those distinctive Bauhaus signatures. It was perhaps understandable that the purists should shudder; less so that they expected their purism to alight upon the aesthetic consciences of the advertisers and paralyze them into disregard of a potent and sales-catching innovation. Asymmetry caught the eye easily in a medium where symmetry was the norm; strong tonal contrasts could be reproduced faithfully in color or monochrome, the latter being particularly effective in newsprint of indifferent quality.

The artistic debate was never resolved, and in any event was rapidly subsumed within a general need to create new, flexible advertising styles for successive model years in order to bring the products of an expanding industry as close as possible to the viewpoints and aspirations of a widening consumer base. Not all upmarket manufacturers had succumbed to the transient allure of the Bauhaus fetish. In its advertising, as in its automobiles, Marmon in particular exhibited a flair and restraint which were closer in spirit to the Bauhaus ideal than Chrysler's graphic exuberance.

Any academic debate, as such, was peripheral to the business of selling cars, and a new realism came to the fore after the onset of Depression in 1929. Such fanciful renderings as did recur in the late 1930s were rarely as bizarre as the Bauhaus pastiches of ten years earlier. Optimism and national confidence had brought extremes of style, while cautious retrenchment was apparent in later, less whimsical copy.

If there was a discernible movement towards increased visual realism in the 1930s, it did not always entail unappealing and dogmatic authenticity. There were pedantic exceptions, but even they should perhaps be evaluated according to their effectiveness in selling automobiles, and not scorned simply because they are aesthetically unpalatable. The elongator — whether armed with palette, airbrush, or wide-angle lens — had an important role to play in enhancing the automobile itself, but the backdrops against which the cars were highlighted were predominantly realistic, rather than self-consciously surreal or abstractly atmospheric. Stylization — in detail, perspective, and coloring — was inevitable, but it was an optimized reality rather than contrived fantasy that prevailed by 1935.

Visual effects were carefully aligned with accompanying copy, with the result that specific codes for upmarket, popular, and middle-class automobiles could be detected without reference to the substance of the copy itself, or even to the marque depicted. These graphic codes were inherited from an earlier period, even if the mechanics of advertisers' visual language had changed radically since the 1920s. Low-priced automobiles were usually shown in small-town provincial and rural settings, while upmarket models could be encountered at recognizably "sophisticated" venues.



**JOIN
THIS
ARMY**
... and See the
World BETTER!

THE growing army of value-minded motorists who look out on the world from the comfort-seat of a Buick see more, with a mighty Dynaflex eight to take them places, and see better through windows enlarged by as much as 412 square inches of safety plate glass. Value's up, in this Buick — way up — but prices are down — down as much as \$102 under prices of a year ago. Hadn't you better see your Buick dealer and find out more?

"Better buy Buick!"
DIVISION OF GENERAL MOTORS CORP.
The first the Geographite—It lives for you.

Photographic anti-realism from Buick. The wide-angle, ground level shot was a favorite with advertisers at all levels of the market (March 1939).



THIS new kind of car conquers all roads, all circumstances of travel. On roads good and bad, the LINCOLN-ZEPHYR rolls up new records of performance.

Ask, as you consider this car, what it offers that other cars in its price field do not. The LINCOLN-ZEPHYR has a 12-cylinder engine—the V-type. Twelve cylinders mean greater smoothness . . . greater flexibility. And twelve cylinders, here, mean 14 to 18 miles per gallon of gasoline!

The LINCOLN-ZEPHYR has a unique body structure. *This is the only car of its kind.* Body and frame are one, welded together. You ride surrounded by steel.

The LINCOLN-ZEPHYR has extra roominess. It is a big car. The wheelbase is 122 inches. There are no conventional running boards; seats, like divans, are wider. Three may sit comfort-

ably on the front seat or the back.

Prices now are lower. Ask, today, for a ride in this Lincoln-built car. Convenient terms can be arranged through Authorized Universal Credit Company Finance Plans. *Lincoln Motor Company, builders of Lincoln and Lincoln-Zephyr motor cars.*

THE CAR THAT IS PRICED BELOW ITS SPECIFICATIONS.

LINCOLN-ZEPHYR V-12



A “distanced” backdrop for the stylish Lincoln-Zephyr coupe. Care was taken not to submerge this middle-class car within a socially constricted visual environment (March 1937).

News of Plymouth's 1938 "Jubilee" Car

IT'S AN EXCITING CAR TO SEE... TO DRIVE... NEW RICHNESS OUTSIDE AND INSIDE... NEW COMFORTS AND DRIVING EASE... MORE VISION... AMAZING VALUE!

PLYMOUTH'S STORY

The new 1938 Plymouth celebrates the most amazing record in history! 10 years ago, people first saw Plymouth. And they bought by the *thousands!* No car has ever made friends so *fast!* Now, the 10th-year Plymouth is here... the greatest car we've built. See it!



1 Step Up and look at this beautiful new 1938 Plymouth! See that long hood— bigger headlights—entire car is more distinctive.

COSTS AMAZINGLY LITTLE TO OWN. The Commercial Credit Company offers very easy payment terms on a new Plymouth—through Dodge, De Soto and Chrysler dealers. Tune in Major Bases' Amateur Hour, Columbia Network, Thursdays, 9 to 10 p. m., E. S. T.



2 Stretch Out! Enjoy the greater elbow room, head room and leg room. The whole car "floats" on Amola steel springs, with airplane-type shock-absorbers and rubber body mountings.



3 Inside this Trunk is extra baggage space... there's no sill to lift the luggage over. Just slide it in.



4 New Dials are easier to read ... and the handbrake is out of the floor, easy to reach!



5 Here's the New 1938 Plymouth... with double-action hydraulic brakes, all-steel body, record economy—"the car that stands up best!" PLYMOUTH DIVISION OF CHRYSLER CORPORATION, Detroit, Mich.

PLYMOUTH BUILDS GREAT CARS

See the 1938 Plymouth

This Plymouth advertisement was typical of the catalogs in miniature that enjoyed a brief vogue among low and lower-middle priced marques in the 1930s (November 1937).

In both cases, the automobile itself was often shown at rest, creating a freeze-frame of the desired social image. The greatest variety was reserved for the traditionally unstable middle-ground: the territory of Nash, Hudson, the smaller Buicks, and Lincoln-Zephyr. Dynamism and power were dominant visual themes; ostensibly indicating mechanical potency, they also vivified the social and cultural pretensions of the targeted consumer.

Compared with those of the upper and lower price sectors, these cars were anchored less solidly into a static physical and social environment. It was this fluid middle ground which provided the most fertile soil for the neutral backdrop, against which the lines of the automobile in question could be displayed without distraction. In 1938, a green Lincoln-Zephyr sedan was shown in front of a blue-grey background which faintly suggested sky and earth; in the same year, a blue Zephyr coupe could be seen against almost total darkness, which brought out its smooth, avant-garde lines convincingly, while allowing the reader to create his or her own preferred environment around the car.

Such layouts also suited the Lincoln-Zephyr's consciously rationalist copy.⁶ The middle-class buyer might be inspired by the styling of the car and all the connotations, mechanical and social, of its V-12 engine, but he needed to justify his choice, to be reassured that what he desired was attainable. This selective rationality was perceived to be the hallmark of middle-class values and was thus reflected in illustration. Within the constraints of this rationale, Lincoln also used stylized landscapes (occasionally similar to Adler's in Germany) and, in 1939, more obviously quasi-naturalistic studio poses. In one advertisement, the car was posed on a grass-green floor with a lilac panel behind. Rural serenity — and its psychological parallel, peace of mind — were suggested by cherry blossom hanging over the roof of the car.

Apart from neutral and stylized-naturalistic portraits, there were also "distanced" backdrops, as in 1937 when an authentically proportioned Lincoln-Zephyr coupe was superimposed upon a monochrome aerial view of New York, patron city of the newly affluent. Yet in all of these advertisements the copy was never submerged within a constricting visual environment, and a deliberate, underlying open-endedness remained.

Throughout the 1936–41 period, a time of sometimes fragile but increasing prosperity, established "fine cars" — the big Lincolns, Chrysler Imperials, Packards, and Cadillacs — stayed aloof from the turbulent middle market. But the middle ground was expanding, with Oldsmobile, Dodge, De Soto, Nash, and (from October, 1938) Mercury leading the way out of low-priced simplicity, while new "small" Packards and Chryslers invaded the upper strata of the sector from above.

Even in the sub-\$800 range, where common-sense virtue and value for money were most persuasive, advertisers sometimes looked balefully upward, with occasionally unfortunate

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Pre-war minimalism was revived in copy for the most expensive cars, such as this \$5,000 Buick Skylark, in the early postwar years. This illustration was one of the first for General Motors by Arthur Fitzpatrick (1953 campaign).

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