

CHEVY CORVETTE: ICON OF AMERICAN LIFE IN THE FIFTIES

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ABSTRACT

Cars not only function simply as a mean of transportation. Like paintings, the design of a car could represent a certain cultural and social phenomenon of a country. The design of Chevrolet (Chevy) Corvette is very different compared to its competitors in the 50s. The size, engine, weight, and the materials of this car were chosen based on the assumption that speed and agility is on top of everything. It was not surprising that in the 50s, the year when the first Corvette was designed and launched, The US was involved in a cold war with the Soviets. Arm race and competition to be the first was the major issue and Corvette was the first car that suggests this spirit. This paper tries to show the distinctiveness of Corvette and how it can be used to explain the character of American people in the fifties.

Keywords: *Chevrolet Corvette, icon, American life, fifties*

ABSTRAK

Mobil tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai alat transportasi. Seperti halnya lukisan, desain sebuah mobil dapat merepresentasikan budaya tertentu dan fenomena sosial sebuah negara. Desain sebuah Chevrolet (Chevy) Corvette sangat berbeda jika dibandingkan dengan pesaingnya di tahun 1950an. Ukuran, mesin, berat, dan bahan baku mobil tersebut dipilih berdasarkan asumsi bahwa kecepatan dan ketangkasan adalah di atas segala-galanya. Tidak mengherankan jika di tahun 1950, ketika Corvette pertama kali didesain dan diluncurkan, Amerika Serikat sedang terlibat perang dingin dengan Uni Soviet. Perlombaan senjata dan kompetisi untuk menjadi yang pertama merupakan isu utama dan Corvette merupakan mobil pertama dengan semangat tersebut. Artikel membahas keistimewaan Corvette dan bagaimana mobil tersebut dapat menjelaskan karakter masyarakat Amerika di tahun 1950an.

Kata kunci: *Chevrolet Corvette, ikon, kehidupan Amerika, lima puluhan*

INTRODUCTION

1954 and 1955, was the year that America entered a new stage concerning the taste for their daily gadgets. Advertisement in various magazines such as *Look*, *New Yorker*, *Life*, and *Vogue*, shown that people took more care about their personal life than before. In the twenties until forties, American house ware, instruments, and machines including cars were designed in accordance to the old American traditions: big and heavy, made of metal with shiny chrome garnishing all over the body.

In the fifties, however, there was a new trend, which was in the opposite of the old traditional and typical American values. Personal things such as home appliances are now sleeker and smaller but portable enough to fill the needs of its users. These preferences of style are closely connected to the political atmosphere in the fifties, which suggested speed and power.

The end of World War II brought thousands of young servicemen back to the US to pick up their lives and start new families in new homes with new jobs. With an energy never before experienced, American industry expanded to meet peacetime needs. Americans began buying goods not available during the war, which created corporate expansion and jobs. Growths are everywhere. The political competition with the Soviets also brought a serious tension between the East and the West. This tension, combined with the post war optimism, made most Americans thought that in order to survive, they have to be able to outrun their enemies in many aspects such as gadgets, and any other instruments.

The mass media captured this spirit in their headlines. A picture of a missile in *Life* magazine's special issue cover of January 4, 1954 entitled: "Power" where on the top right corner it says: "US Growth Our Biggest Year ... and Basis for a Bigger Future." (See Appendix 1) (Anonymous, *Life*, 1954). This cover seemed to suggest the post war optimism of the US in terms of technology compared to the Soviets. The picture of a launched missile also implied the speed and the power of American technology to counter any possible threats from the communists.

Personal vehicles, which were more affordable than previous decades, were also influenced with the political war syndrome. In the fifties, cars were designed in connection to power and speed as the missile suggested. They were mostly long and low, with tailfins at the back. Most of the ads in the 1954-1955 magazines focused on innovation. New fabric material such as Dacron was specifically made for those who like to travel because of its "never wrinkles" characteristics. Innovations in the automobile industry were made in the design to spoil the customer. Abernathy, Clark, and Kantrow in *Industrial Renaissance: Producing Competitive Future for America* listed that from 1953-1955 there were 23 new inventions made by the major American automotive company. General Motors (GM) the maker of the famous car brand Chevrolet found the molded plastic body in 1954 and the bucket seats in 1955. GM and its divisions found seven brilliant innovations including curved side windows, dual headlamps, and wrap-around front window (Abernathy, Clark, & Kantrow, 1984). 1953 and 1955 definitely was the year of innovation for GM.

DISCUSSION

Chevrolet Corvette: A History

American cars in the 1950s were traditionally designed in a big and bulky shape, painted in bright color – usually two-tone color, and the whole parts of the body were made of metal including

the small parts and sometimes it was laden with chrome. It uses big engines such as V6 or V8, but it was used to provide smoother and quieter ride rather than speed.

Chevrolet Corvette was developed in contrast with the common American designed cars. When it was launched in 1953, Corvette had a totally different concept of American car. It was small, coupe (two-door) car, inspired by a similar type of car brought by World War II soldiers from the Europe.

The entrance of Chevrolet Corvette in 1953 was the perfect time for many Americans. The end of Korean War and Joseph Stalin's death on March 5, 1953 had temporarily relieved many Americans on the threat of Communism. These made some Americans and politicians forget about the communist threat and start focused on their personal life such as to buy an automobile. With the average income of \$4,000 and cost of gasoline that was only \$.21 per gallon, it comes to no surprise that almost all Americans could afford to buy a car (with an average price: \$1,850). Charles C. Freed, the chairperson of N.A.D.A. mentioned that since the war, Americans for the first time do not have to worry about the capacity of its automobile factory. The problem was more likely to distribute the car and to make the production growth (Freed, 1955).

Before Chevrolet Corvette was introduced, there were lots of debates inside the GM management. Since it was based on the European small cars such as MG and Alfa Romeo, the introduction of a two-seater sports car in America was regarded strange because many Americans considered that two-seater cars could only used by the elites. It was also believed that this type of car was not suitable for American road and driving conditions (Anonymous, National Corvette Museum).

Despite the issues, the management in the General Motors, finally decided to produce this car to boost Chevrolet image. Therefore, when Corvette was first introduced in July 1953 in the GM Motorama show at New York's Waldorf-Astoria, Corvette became 'the car of its own' because of its small and compact design that did not connect with any previous Chevrolet or any GM models.

Corvette and American Culture in the Fifties

Corvette stressed its design on functions, portability, and speed. Since its body was made of fiberglass, this car was light and easy to drive. Its small body was powered by a 150-horsepower engine called the "Blue Flame Six," a six-cylinder in-line engine tuned to give 150 horsepower, three side-draft carburetors, and *Powerglide* automatic transmission.

The portability of Corvette can be seen in the advertisement of the Life magazine. Corvette's plastic body and easy to fix feature seemed to be related to the 'do-it yourself' culture in the mid fifties. The light and portable design of the parts in the Corvette enabled any people to fix or to install the equipment in the car. In the 1956 Corvette's advertisement it shows how easy for people to install the hardtop for the Corvette. It only takes two men – or women—to install it. Despite of its main purpose as a high performance sports car, Corvette was also user friendly and easy to maintain (See Appendix 2).

In 1953, GM built 300 Corvettes, all of them identical - Polo White with a Sportsman Red vinyl interior. This mass produced car was made of 54 plastic parts, with the gas tank lid the only metal part of the body. Available only in white with red interior, since white is the plastic's normal color, it sported a \$3,490 suggested retail price. The reason to use plastic instead of steel is because of its cheaper price and flexible characteristics. In its January 4, 1954 issue, *Life Magazine* reported, "Owners will like its lightness and ease of repair: if the tough plastic is punctured in an accident it can usually be patched like new with a blowtorch for a couple of dollars" (Anonymous, A Car of the Future in Mass Production Today. Corvette Shows the Way for Plastic Cars., 1954).

The Corvette's first striking appearance has brought a competitor. The Thunderbird, the first compact two-seat convertible made by Ford, came out from its production line in Detroit in February 20, 1954. The Thunderbird is a major part of General Motors' decision to continue production of the Corvette. With two big car companies started to compete in small personal two-seater sports car, Americans came to the era where personal pleasure regarded as the most important factor in life.

It also suggests another idea of race. Since the arm race between the US and the Soviets was temporarily forgotten, now it was the time for Americans to experience speed and the race between the two giant auto-manufacturing industries. The Corvette completely prepared to enter this race after the Chevy General Manager Ed Cole installs a small-block V-8 in the '55 model and recruits engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov, the man behind the *Vette*. In 1955, America finally has its own genuine sports car (Anonymous, *Tracing the Corvette's history C1 (1953-62)*, 2001).

The concept of the 1954-1955 Corvette that showed simplicity in design but robust and wild in power has symbolically represented the culture of Americans in the 50s. The wild rebellious youth as seen in 1954-1955 films such as *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) or music such as *Rock Around The Clock* (1955) were represented by the powerful and fast V8 engine in 1954 and 1955 Corvette. The curve and the streamline design, especially the curvy taillights, represented the youth spirit in the mid fifties.

By the design, Americans were asked to be more focused about their own life. The arm race and the threat of the atomic bombs did not scare people away as in previous years because Americans were now more confident about their capability and the technology. An advertisement in *Life* magazine in 1954, pictured an analogy of the 1954 Corvette with a rocket missile (see Appendix 3). In fact, Americans seemed to enjoy this arm-race. They were probably thinking that the year when Corvette was introduced was the time to enjoy life because when the war comes, they would not have time to do it anymore.

Culturally, the concept of Corvette has represented the changing culture of American life in the mid 50s. The arm race between the US and the Soviets made Americans more aware about the importance of automobile. The article in *N.A.D.A.* magazine entitled *Atoms and Automobiles* mentioned about the function of automobiles in the Cold War; it says: "The Federal Civil Defense Administration recognizes that the medium of escape is automobile and the truck. Moreover, FCDA has learned that the automobile not only can serve for escape, but can also be "home" to millions of Americans if necessary following atomic attack (Anonymous, *Atoms and Automobiles*, 1955)."

CONCLUSION

The powerful but light Chevrolet Corvette is identical with the arm race spirit in the 50s: fast, innovative, and portable. When the other automobile industries caught the idea of the fast moving Americans in the fins and streamline design, the Corvette added the feature of simplicity and portability in its design. Culturally, Corvette has changed the whole concept of an automobile in the fifties. It suggested to more Americans to be more focused on their personal life where the two-seater provided more personal freedom and do it yourself culture, which was preferred by most Americans in the fifties. Symbolically, Corvette's appearance and performance in the fifties had boosted American's confidence of its superiority against the Soviets. This, in conclusion represented the idea that many Americans in the mid fifties believed that faster are better.

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APPENDIX



Appendix 1 (Cover of Life Magazine, January 4, 1954)



Appendix 2: The Corvette's Easy to install hardtop



Appendix 3: The Corvette's advertisement comparing the V8 engine with V2 missile