

CHROMIUM is Prominent on 2000 Auto Designs

Nostalgia Drives Resurgence in Chrome Accessories for New Vehicles

There was a time when chromium heavily adorned just about every car and truck in the U.S. The use of chromium on automobiles grew extravagant in the 1950s, 60s and 70s; so much that consumers grew tired of it.

In recent years, the use of chromium on vehicles has returned. The 90s brought about a resurgence in bright trim, and the trend has continued into 2000. While it is doubtful that the use of chrome will ever reach the level of the 50s and 60s, consumers are again showing a preference for chrome and bright trim.

Baby boomers' desire for retro designs has fueled production of vehicles like DaimlerChrysler's PT Cruiser, Plymouth Prowler and the Volkswagen Beetle. The demand has led to a significant increase in chromium and bright product use on

new model vehicles. In fact, 2000 model cars and trucks have shown a distinctive increase in bright trim use over previous years. A recent market study conducted by EPIC-MRA, Lansing, MI, predicts that consumer desires for bright parts will remain strong for the next 10 years.

"Consumers want chrome tastefully applied on their vehicles. Like jewelry, chrome accents strongly enhance a vehicle's appearance," according to J. Patrick Billinge, executive committee spokesman for the Automotive Bright Products Association (ABPA) and national sales manager for Atotech Canada. "Automakers have carefully avoided overuse like that in the 50s and 60s, and as a result, consumer desire for vehicles with bright trim has increased."

The EPIC-MRA study showed 56 percent of drivers believe bright products enhance a vehicle's appearance by adding a unique and luxurious quality. Auto designers and original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) have responded to this desire by incorporating chrome-plated parts in their designs and adding accessories like bumpers, wheels, window moldings, light surrounds, grilles and door handles to the list of options available to consumers. Chrome and bright trim is very attractive to designers and manufacturers because it is an easy and very cost-efficient method to enhance a vehicle's appearance without complete redesign.

Adding chrome-wheel options is a simple and cost-effective method of dressing up the appearance of an



Photos courtesy of Cadillac Motor Car Division of General Motors Corporation, Detroit, MI.



2000 ABPA
Best Dressed Vehicles

1. Cadillac DeVille
2. Ford F-150 Harley Pickup Truck
3. Chrysler 300M
4. Chevrolet Tahoe
5. GMC Sierra Pickup Truck
6. GMC Yukon
7. Ford F-150 Pickup Truck
8. Lincoln Town Car—Cartier Edition
9. Cadillac Escalade
10. Dodge Ramcharger

automobile. Chromium wheels have been featured as an option for luxury vehicles for quite a while. The bright wheels are considered one of the top three options consumers choose when buying or leasing a new vehicle. Recently, Capitol Cadillac of Lansing, MI, reported that 90 percent of their customers request chrome wheels.

Demand for bright-finished wheels also has increased significantly in recent years. According to statistics from ABPA, less than one million aluminum wheels were being plated for OEMs five years ago. Current projections estimate that platers will produce more than 2.5 million for automakers in 2001. By 2004, more

than 4.5 million aluminum wheels are expected to be plated for automakers.

"In response to consumer demand, the automakers have approached us about increasing our chrome-wheel production," said Mike Kuntz, sales and marketing manager for Kuntz Electroplating, Kitchener, Ontario. "More and more, consumers are requesting chrome options, like wheels, because they enhance the vehicle's appearance by adding a luxurious quality."

Ten Best Dressed

The ABPA recently released its list of the top 10 "ABPA Best Dressed" vehicles. The selections recognize

2000 model vehicle designs incorporating the best use of chrome and bright trim. The top 10 were selected by the association's members to reflect vehicle designs that best demonstrate consumer interests and desires for chrome and bright products for the vehicles they purchase.

"We wanted to honor the automakers for their innovative use of chrome and bright products," Billinge said. "Today's designers are looking for ways to distinguish their designs and are using bright trim as accents to dress up their vehicles."

Number one on the list is the 2000 Cadillac DeVille, selected for its distinctive design and superb use of

Today's chromium finish is more environmentally friendly, recyclable and low maintenance.



bright products. The DeVille incorporates bright trim as a standard feature throughout its unique, classic design. Cadillac also offers a chrome-wheel option for consumers.

An important factor for return of chromium in vehicle design is the relationship between designers and platers. The two are working closely to develop the best possible parts and accessories. The result is a better product.

Plating companies are using more auxiliary anodes, which allow for more nickel to be deposited into hard-to-reach areas of parts, improving corrosion resistance and providing a more uniform surface to the part. Designers have also learned more about nickel and its properties. These innovations have improved appearance and corrosion resistance.

The chromium finish used today is far different from previous years, because it is more environmentally friendly, recyclable and low maintenance. Plating companies have generally incorporated pollution prevention innovations to make the industry safe for the environment.

Bright trim is also being used in many different ways on vehicles today. At one time, chrome only lined the vehicle's exterior. It is now used widely for interior trim as well. Designers are using bright trim to accent gauge surrounds, door handles and other interior features.

"We're seeing more chrome grilles, bumpers and headlight and taillight surrounds, and we're seeing more interior applications," said Chuck Vint, sales manager for Dura-chrome, Ltd., Wallaceburg, Ontario. The EPIC-MRA study also indicates that 45 percent of consumers think manufacturers should continue to increase levels of chrome used in vehicle trim.

Chromium's primary appeal remains appearance, which is the number one reason for the resurgence. About 56 percent of the vehicles on the road have some chrome or bright trim. The ABPA fully expects the trend to continue and expand because of recent consumer research and industry projections.

"Everyone in the industry is expanding to meet consumer demand," Billinge said. "Young designers are incorporating chrome and bright trim into their designs, and we fully expect to be very busy well into 2010."



One major industry misconception is that all bright metal on a vehicle is chrome, which is not the case. Stainless steel and polished aluminum are other bright trim products that decorate today's vehicles.

"Although it's a natural assumption, chrome is not the only bright metal to make its way into a vehicle design," Billinge said. "Stainless steel

and polished aluminum are widely recognized as bright trim, and normally receive some type of corrosion protection plated layer, such as nickel/chrome plating of chrome flash."

The future looks bright for surface finishing companies that provide the bright trim for the automotive industry. P&SF