

European Cars



The modern world may be efficient & convenient, but it's often also impersonal & rather soulless. Emerging nations rarely notice this in their struggle to rise above poverty, but for those not blinded by a daily battle for survival, the quality of modern life often seems to have been swept away by a flood of cheap Asian steel & plastic.

America & Asia may seem light years apart in terms of culture, but in reality their differences are far less important than their similarities. First-generation Americans of both yesterday & today have often known of nothing but centuries of grinding poverty and lack of choice, and when they hit America they become obsessed with having all the things denied to them in the past.

This is where the curious American notion that freedom is absence of external controls came from. And the idea that once you have absence of external controls and all the things you could never afford before, you must be happy.

The same applies to Asians who have recently come into comparative wealth. Because their entire lives have been focused on the journey out of poverty, they have no idea what to do once they arrive. In lieu of quality of life they remain obsessed with the quantity of life, as if having more consumer products than your neighbour is the key to happiness. I must be happy, they say to themselves – I have a Sony widescreen TV and a Hyundai Grandeur. Asia had a highly cultured aristocracy also, but Asia did not develop a middle class until very recently, therefore the aristocratic values were never shared with the masses.

The Europeans are just as materialistic as anyone else, but they also live under the influence of that mysterious force called the *European aristocratic tradition*. They grew up in the shadow of many centuries of life lived according to wonderfully quaint ideas such as honour and loyalty to God, king & country. Rather more importantly, they grew up under the shadow of the aristocracy that produced

the Mona Lisa, Mozart & Beethoven, great castles and manor houses, fine wines and even the idea of taking a summer holiday at the beach. Aristocrats were traditionally strangely non-materialistic in their outlook because they already owned everything and never had to work, therefore the pursuit of quality of life was often their primary focus.

It is this search for 'the good life' – the notion that your wealth is a means to support a lifestyle rather than being an end in itself – that most clearly distinguishes Europe from America & Asia.

In Europe the aristocratic value system was acquired by the middle class as it slowly grew after the Industrial Revolution. This aristocratic value system, or rather a somewhat more compassionate version of it combined with the work ethic of the emerging entrepreneurial class, passed through the middle classes and filtered out through every library, art gallery and school until quite late in the twentieth century. And this ethic was passed to the European colonies as well. Hard to believe it now, but it's only one long generation since New Zealand movie theatres stopped playing *God Save the Queen* before each performance, with many members of the audience standing to attention while it was playing.

It's worth noting that the American car never took off in Europe for the dual reason that few people could afford one and also because there were very few roads big enough to take one. Thus the Europeans designed cars to suit European expectations.

European cars tend to be compact rather than large, they tend to have smaller motors rather than big ones, they tend to be zippy & extremely fuel-economic, they tend to handle with a certain flair and above all else they often have that certain indefinable something that the French call *je ne sais quoi*.

For those not familiar with the term, *je ne sais quoi*, pronounced roughly: *zhur-neh-say-qua*, translates literally as 'I do not know what'. When a European says that something has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, he or she means: 'It has a certain immeasurable quality that I can understand, appreciate & value, whether I can define it or not.'

This recognition of a quality beyond that which can be measured by scientists or banks is the essential major difference between America/Asia & Europe. In America and Asia, the essential value of everything, including great works of art, tends to be measured in hard cash.

Not all Americans are blindly shallow and materialistic. The educated middle classes in

America and throughout the Western world may want lots of money, but they tend to spend it on things that give quality of life rather than just quantity of consumer products; thus they have a somewhat more European value system. The educated middle classes are more likely to have some understanding of art, literature and music, and they often want a car with a little more personality than your average Asian model. In other words, a European car.

This perception that European cars are somehow a superior alternative to the Japanese variety often seduces otherwise intelligent people into buying overpriced European models that turn out to be lemons.

Many of the terms we take for granted, such as *garage*, *chassis* & *coupé*, are all French terms; we forget that the car originated in Europe, not America.

Until about thirty years ago, European cars were unique and often had a real quality about them that you couldn't get anywhere else, for example, Rolls-Royces (now owned by BMW), the sporty Fiats, Lancias & Alfa Romeos & the stylish Jaguars (now owned by Indian company Tata) – thirty years ago there were no Asian or American equivalents of any of those cars.

However, for the past hundred years or so a small number of large corporations have been playing a giant Monopoly game, the stakes being all the world's assets. Many European car companies have merged to survive and those that did not merge either became predators or prey. Thus the world's car industry is controlled by a dozen or so major companies and with globalisation has come homogenisation; in other words all of the world's cars are starting to look and feel the same.

In the case of European cars, there are still a few differences, but regrettably, most of these differences are negative ones. There is a downside to European traditions: Europeans – and their businessmen are no exception – often refuse to move with the times and stubbornly cling to outdated systems – at least until annihilation threatens.

In the 1980s the European car industry saw the rise of Japan and knew it was staring death in the face. At this point a wise European businessman would have borrowed the quality ethic from Asia, retained the best of the old European engineering tradition and dropped the rest. Instead the European car industry woke up one morning in a panic, threw out virtually their entire automotive heritage and suddenly began trying to out-Asian the Asians.

Since 1980 the European carmakers have been world leaders in certain design and as-



sembly techniques, but the new techniques tended to produce style over substance. The European carmakers knew that their customers were going to own their vehicles for only a few years before rust (Europeans put salt on their roads in winter), harsh government regulations and social pressure put the cars off the road; so they designed vehicles to last only a few years. And this strategy would have worked as long as there was no place called Asia.

The older European cars had a certain *je ne sais quoi*, but *je ne sais quoi* is not a term corporate accountants are generally familiar with. The orders went out to sell more cars at higher profits and to hell with customer loyalty.

Thus, today, most European cars are but shadows of their former glory, and they have most of the negative features of Asian cars (tinny bodies, plastic fittings, etc), with few of the positive features (long-term reliability, cheap parts, etc).

Modern European cars may be shiny, stylish marvels of high technology, but they often have the long-term reliability of a politician's promise. The Japanese can do the same and make a car that runs reliably for decades. Which vehicle would you buy?

To be sure the more expensive European makes – Mercedes, BMW, Audi and Jaguar – can be nice to own and are very safe to drive, but you pay a premium price and you will lose horribly on depreciation. Depending on which make he or she chooses, the new customer may see the value of his or her luxury European model drop by around 40% in the first year alone, and it's all downhill from there. Later owners will lose less to depreciation and more to horrific expenses for repairs. Unless you are a millionaire, you lose badly both ways.

One of the key reasons that the European car industry failed to adequately adapt to the threat from Asia is that Europeans as a whole suffer from delusions of superiority in car design. They haven't quite been able to accept that the Japanese succeeded because the Japanese produced more reliable cars at a better price.

This unjustifiably arrogant streak often runs through the people who buy European cars as well. Not for them the humble Holden or Toyota – they will demonstrate their uniqueness and subtle superiority by buying a superior kind of car – it goes with the image.

Of course, they pay a very high price for their pomposity. Repairs to the more expensive European makes may cost many times that of the equivalent Japanese car, and European makes tend to rate around the bottom, not the top, of reliability stakes.

To be frank, European cars tend to be poorly designed, poorly engineered and poorly assembled. This applies to the expensive cars as well as the cheap (see the following article on German cars).

Worse, when it comes to fixing them, European makes are an absolute pig. For example, on some Mercedes models, you have to take the entire dashboard out to change the tiny bulbs that light up the instruments at night. This can cost thousands of dollars.

Were the designers stupid? No, they just never saw changing the light bulbs as being their problem. After all, many of their customers will have disposed of their cars long before the dashboard bulbs start blowing.

European carmakers tend to achieve their wonders of performance and economy by developing extremely complex designs that, however well built, will inevitably fail, and often sooner rather than later. But they don't see this as a problem; after all, complicated designs mean high labour charges and high labour charges keep the Mercedes workshops happy, at least until the Lexus dealer moves in next door.

There are other considerations, too. Cars like the VW Golf may be a reasonable choice in Europe; however, we still don't recommend them strongly simply because both Australia & New Zealand lack the infrastructure to support them.

For example, if you own a five-year-old Toyota, you are one of thousands – there's a whole local industry built up over thirty years to support you. There are plenty of garages who can fix them, and there's plenty of competition to supply these garages with spare parts at very reasonable prices.

If you own a five-year-old Golf, there is no such infrastructure. You own a car that only a few garages will want to fix, which probably means you'll pay more, and if you take it to your local garage, you'll pay for the mechanics to stumble their way through an unfamiliar set-up trying to figure out how it all works.

If you break down in Te Awamutu or the Northern Territory during the Christmas holidays, you'll likely end up renting a car for the rest of your journey while the local mechanic scratches his head and begins the long and costly job of working out what's wrong and searching, at your expense, for parts from God-knows-who in God-knows-where.

When it comes to secondhand parts, you'll pay a premium price for half-worn-out bits, and when it comes to new parts you'll likely get robbed even more. It's not uncommon for European car parts to cost up to several times

the Japanese equivalent and to take several times as long to install.

In terms of satisfying presentation, however, some European makes such as Audi, Jaguar & Porsche, are still somewhat better than their Asian counterparts.

However, even this small advantage is rapidly waning. Have you noticed the number of Japanese cars that look as if they were designed in Europe or America? Chances are they were. The mechanical bits were probably still designed in Japan by white-coated engineers using computers. However, the shape and interior of any modern Japanese car body was probably sorted out in Europe or America in order to better suit local tastes.

The bottom line, my friend, is this: in terms of personality, it's arguable that no modern car has any real personality – they're all sterile, efficient and produced using high tech materials that somehow rob them of life.

Other than the antiquated Rolls Royce there hasn't really been a Western car produced in the last thirty years that has a flicker of personality. All modern cars are examples of high-efficiency, computer-driven engineering with shallow, shiny styling on the top.

Personality comes from a human touch that is totally lacking in anything from either America, Europe or Asia (however they still make Morris Oxfords in India).

In terms of driving pleasure and styling, there are still a few European cars that have a certain *je ne sais quoi*, although each generation of European models looks a little more Japanese, and each generation of Japanese cars looks a little more European.

We're sorry to say this, but in every other way, the only real difference between modern European cars and Japanese cars is that the Japanese cars are sometimes cheaper and don't break down so often. We suggest you take our word for this and avoid finding out the hard way •

