



Japanese **at last**

A DUTCH MASTER HELPS MAZDA
DESIGN FIND ITS ASIAN SELF.

BY ROBERT CUMBERFORD // ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAEKO

NAGARE

.....
LOS ANGELES 2006



HAKAZE

.....
GENEVA 2007



FURAI

.....
DETROIT 2008



TAIKI

.....
TOKYO 2007



RYUGA

.....
DETROIT 2007



In the past half century, Japan's motor industry has come from nowhere to become the most powerful and most profitable in the world,

turning out cars of superb quality, even those that are entry-level. Somehow, though, those millions of excellent vehicles have never managed to express any visual links with Japan's extraordinarily rich aesthetic culture. Up to now, with only a paltry few exceptions, to say that a car "looks Japanese" has been derogatory, meaning in fact that it is essentially non-descript, a pale imitation of something American or European. As Japanese car design has become more professional and the cars aesthetically equal or superior to those from the West, that dismissive phrase has evolved. No one thinks a poor design is Japanese anymore; now we say "looks Korean" or "looks Chinese" when we want to denigrate a clumsy shape. But for all the improvement, Japanese cars still don't have any intrinsic national characteristics.

Efforts have been made to incorporate traditional nonautomotive design themes, most notably in the Nissan Jikoo four years ago. When I was a student at Art Center long ago, we used to try to define exactly what an "automotive" shape might be. We looked at each other's sketches and with youthful certitude pronounced a design "automotive" or "not automotive." We might have been guilty of pretentiousness, but in fact it was—and is—a perfectly reasonable way to look at car proposals, and by that either/or standard, the Jikoo was a total failure. It was beautifully made, with superb



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NISSAN JIKOO CONCEPT

examples of traditional Japanese materials and craft methods, but it was also extremely dorky and simply did not look like a car that anyone would want to drive anywhere, except in a parade as a clown car.

In the past fifteen months, though, a series of brilliantly conceived and executed concept cars from Mazda have shown the world that long-established Japanese sensibilities can indeed be expressed in such a way as to embrace both cultural imperatives and the senses of motion and emotion that are central to the worldwide love of automobiles. Amusingly, just as it took Freeman Thomas, an American, to create the quintessentially German shape of the original Audi TT, it has fallen to a Dutchman working for an American parent company to give Japan its own breakthrough car-design direction.

Laurens van den Acker, 42, is a true cosmopolite. He speaks five European languages and is making a serious effort with Japanese. He has lived in seven countries, including Japan. He worked in Italy and Germany (with Audi) and has been associated with the Ford Motor Company for nine years in a series of posts in which, as he puts it, "I've done my share of wacky cars." He did that well enough to have been named deputy general manager of Mazda's Design

Division in February 2006 and to become its general manager shortly thereafter. I asked him about the cars that most influenced him in his career and found that they consisted of two three-car series, both created before he was born: the General Motors Firebirds I, II, and III and the Bertone B.A.T.s 5, 7, and 9... perfect antecedents for his larger Mazda series.

Van den Acker inherited a concept-car program that called for four cars in just one year. He noted that three excellent Mazda concepts had been done prior to his appointment, but they were not coherent; each of them

was original and innovative, but with no reference or visual link to the other two. He decided to make sure that the four cars—now expanded to five with the Furai for the 2008 Detroit show—were representative of just one vision, however separate they might be in purpose. He pushed for a "family feeling" in the concepts, even though they were created in four separate studios in three countries by multinational design teams.

The Mazda Design Division encompasses 325 people—100 of whom are designers, the others being modelers and technicians. The modeling staff at Mazda is extraordinary, van den Acker says. He has worked in many places, including Turin, but has never encountered a team as sensitive and capable as this. He found that Mazda had "flip-flopped a lot," never consistently following a single developmental line, and his brief to his designers was that they needed not so much to seek new directions but to "turn up the volume" on the zoom-zoom idea for the future. He says that he shocked his designers by telling them to do whatever they wanted, consistent with staying clearly connected to established Japanese aesthetics. "The first tries were not very good," he says, but he pushed his staff to go further in the new direction, which was related to garden art and to the control of nature. "Soft, not aggressive," he said, and the ideas kept getting better and better.

Asked about the influence—or lack of same—from Ford corporate design boss J Mays, van den Acker said that Mays is a great supporter but has left him alone. That was no doubt helped by the fact that those who saw the early models of this "gracious flow" design theme were immediately won over, even conservative marketing people who usually just want what the most successful competitors have. The new, natural way to express motion simply pleased all hands. "The idea sells itself," van den Acker claims, and we're inclined to agree, having been smitten by the first of the series, the centered-driver Nagare (the word means "embodiment of movement") coupe shown at Los Angeles in November 2006. The gull-winged Ryuga sedan that debuted at Detroit in January 2007 further impressed us. The first car was executed in California by Franz von Holzhausen's team, the second in Mazda's main studio in Hiroshima, where Yasushi Nakamuta is design director.

The third car in the series, the gently nonaggressive Hakaze SUV shown

in Geneva last year, came from Mazda's studio in Frankfurt, run by Peter Birtwhistle. The Taiki, the sporty two-seater seen at Tokyo, was done in Atsuhiko Yamada's experimental studio in Yokohama, which also produced the Senku concept that earned our approbation as the best concept at the 2005 Tokyo show [By Design, February 2006]. In a true tour de force, all four recent concepts were shown together in Tokyo, showing how well designers from widely differing cultures had integrated the basic idea, keeping an emphasis on Japanese character. It has now come full circle, with Irvine creating the ALMS-based Furai, the unexpected but welcome fifth car in the series. Van den Acker says that it is an actual three-year-old, 450-hp rotary-engined race car chassis in a Nagare-style body shell.

It's a bit more complex than that, but it's clearly in the line of descent of the other exercises. All five are characterized by wavy, not-quite-parallel lines on the body flanks, as delicately delineated as surface details on Japanese porcelain. I haven't seen any scaled-down models of these cars yet, but when they do exist, I want one of the first four—the Furai's wing end plates would be a bit too sharp—as a netsuke, those little sculptures developed over the past 300 years as toggles for hanging small items from kimono belts, or simply carried in sleeves or pockets as soothing shapes for fingers to caress. Indeed, the Furai's ribs are more pronounced, looking more like fan blades on a jet engine, even to the convoluted twists they make, as befits a car designed to celebrate Mazda motorsports.

To us, the five Mazda concepts show the potential for the design theme to be adapted to the entire range of Mazda production vehicles, each with its own characteristics, yet all clearly belonging to the same family, whatever their purpose. That approach has historically worked for other carmakers, and it should still work today. All of the concepts' interiors are strikingly related to the external flow lines, both in their shapes and in the fine details. The delicacy and crispness of the flowing lines must have been a true challenge to the modelers, who likely shaped every one of them purely by hand. In cross section from the peak of each rib, the surfaces flow as negatives to the positive underlying surface of the body sides. Integration of lamps and windows into the overall forms is particularly elegant, even on the race car, where function took precedence over style.

Many Japanese designers are confident and positive about what they have accomplished—justly so—and they talk of expressing Japanese character in their most recent designs. Shiro Nakamura, one of the best design chiefs practicing today, insists that his Nissan GT-R could not be anything but Japanese. We see it as a really good design, not something related to a thousand years of aesthetic refinement. The Mazdas, we think, are exactly that. ■

