Keaton Girard

Mr. Slater

English 12

21 November 2025

# The Corrosion of Craftsmanship: How Profit Left Quality in the Dust

Have you ever been in a Tesla? What about a BMW 3-Series? A stick-shift Honda CRX? A classic ‘60s Mustang? If you have, you probably remember how it looked, inside and out. You probably remember the V8 burble and couch-cushion seats if it was a Mustang, or the V-TEC in the nimble CRX. If it was the Tesla, you probably remember the quiet acceleration, and the minimal interior. If you drove it, you might have spent a few minutes trying to find the shifter, or the hood latch, or the ignition. You definitely would have noticed its creaky plastic panels or the cheap plasticy seats. I sure hope you never have to work on one! As you may have noticed, over the past century, the automotive industry has drastically lowered quality standards and therefore changed automobile design to follow profit instead of quality.

In the first few years of the auto industry, cars were a luxury, a utility, and even a form of art, each individual vehicle painstakingly hand-constructed and refined to perfection. These ‘horseless carriages’ were slow to build, slow to drive, but also slow to die. These cars were durable, utility-capable, and polished. Nowadays, most cars are cheap, disposable, often lazy tools of profit made to be sold at ridiculous margins and then be replaced a few years later. During the early 1900s, car production was expensive, inefficient, limited, and labor intensive.

Leading manufacturers at the time produced less than two thousand cars per year. However, in 1908, Ford changed the industry forever.

Henry Ford was the first and most impactful turning point in the history of automobiles, as he invented the assembly line and popularized the idea of affordable, accessible cars that retained absolute quality. In October 1908 came the automotive big bang; Henry Ford's Model T. Priced at just $825, the Model T was $75 cheaper than Buick's flagship Model 10 (Yanik). Ford had developed the assembly line, massively streamlining manufacturing and significantly dropping production costs. Ford also marketed his cars as affordable and accessible to the masses, notoriously proclaiming, "I will build a car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for... [so low in price that] no man making a good salary will be unable to own one" (Ford and Crowther 73). The assembly line's success was undeniable; in 1916 Ford produced an astounding 735,020 cars and trucks, and the price of a Model T had fallen significantly while maintaining the same premium quality. After WW1 however, competitors like GM found success in offering annual changes to their models, special comfort features, and payment plans, indicating that car design was now directed towards consumers (Farber). By the 1920s-1930s, the once hundreds-long list of automakers shrank to around fifty, with the 'Big Three' American firms being Ford, GM, and Chrysler. Across the world, many obscure, luxury auto manufacturers disappeared as the Big Three's mass-production philosophy took the wheel. By this point, it was clear that cars were changing the way society worked, and that 'Fordist' principles of accessibility, streamlined mass-production, and soaring profits were here to stay. Fortunately, however, there were still a small handful of marques that had the necessary means to continue producing machines with

unique style, character and performance. For example, the 1931 Alfa Romeo 8c 2300, an Italian, supercharged, straight-eight powered open-top roadster with the “boat-tail” Monza trim capable of a tremendous 140 mph! With only 188 units produced and nearly every 8c 2300 being different from the last, Alfa Romeo surely took their time to refine and polish their cars (Schleicher 13). However, it was clear by this time that the foundation for mass-production and profit-following design was firmly laid. The Second World War served to reinforce those foundations across the world, with Hitler being directly inspired by Ford’s highly successful industrial methods, which led to Ferdinand Porsche designing the “people’s car” (volks-wagen in German) later named the Beetle (Link 131). The birth of VW contributed to the new philosophy behind cars as a whole: cheap to build, passable quality, and mass produced; a recipe that continues to define major automakers nearly ninety years later. Post-WW2, things took a turn for the better as automotive engineering entered what many consider to be the true golden age of cars. A comfortable balance was reached between quality, cost, and utility during the 1950s-1960s. This is when automakers began to once again prioritize quality over cost, push the limits of performance and material engineering, as well as produce some legendary models that carry their legacies to this day. For example, the now-legendary Chevrolet Corvette sparked the flame for the American sports car at Motorama 1953 in Flint, Michigan sporting a revolutionary, world’s-first all-fiberglass body (Mueller). As for Europe, post-war Mercedes-Benz revealed their now-coveted 300 SL Gullwing. Propelled by the world’s first fuel injected engine, which had to be laid down over forty-five degrees to the left to fit beneath the slim hood, the 300 SL Gullwing had a top speed of between 146 and 161 mph, depending on which of the five available custom axle ratios buyers chose (Schleicher 79). This made it the fastest production car in the

world at the time! Wrapped in a remarkably light aluminum body, flaunting vertically-opening doors, and providing buyers with a complimentary luggage set that matched the interior, this vehicle represents the pinnacle of automotive class and craftsmanship, ignoring cost and profit to prioritize innovation, performance, and quality all at once.

Unfortunately this unrestricted era of extravagant, sophisticated, artistic machines came to a tire-screeching halt. In late 1973, the Oil Embargo completely and violently changed automotive engineering. As gas prices quadrupled, cars desperately needed improvements in fuel efficiency to comply with new regulations like the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards (Yergin). Europe and Japan adapted cleverly and quickly, with the new Honda Civic's tiny size and brilliantly effective Compound Vortex Combustion Control(CVCC) system to reduce emissions and increase efficiency, and Volkswagen's diesel version of the new Golf hatchback being called the 'fuel scarcity hero,' innovation and engineering was thriving. In the meantime, America was fumbling hard. Unprepared engineers and rushed designs led to the 'Malaise Era,' characterized by rampant corner cutting, incredibly subpar vehicles, and further loss of overall quality. Huge, inefficient engines were strangled by primitive equipment and emissions standards. Take, for example, the disastrous 1978 Oldsmobile Cutlass. Equipped with a 4.2 liter V8, the Cutlass made an abysmal 105 horsepower (Gunnell). The 'V8-6-4' was Chevrolet's ambitious attempt at an economy-based cylinder deactivation system that was famously unreliable and broke frequently. The Ford Pinto had a fuel tank that was prone to explosions during the event of a crash (Dowie 24). The Chevrolet Vega was known to arrive at dealerships with body panels that were already rusting (Yates). Remember that for later. Unsightly 5-mph rated 'railroad tie' safety bumpers were mandated on all vehicles (U.S.

NHTSA). American cars became boxy, brown, and ugly. Panel gaps, rattling parts, unreliable everything. At this point in the 1970s, American automakers' lazy attempts at economy cars were an insult to the beautiful, storied tapestry woven by previous decades of automotive pioneering. Where the US fell short in standard quality, Japan and Europe picked up the slack and dominated the market, a position they still hold today. Over the next few decades post-Malaise era, auto manufacturers began to really diversify and become more unique, introducing a multitude of new technologies like electronic fuel injection systems and Electronic Control Units(ECUs), which allowed for much more reliable and efficient engines. The 1980s and 1990s saw the inevitable return of America back to the front page, so to speak, of the global auto scene, as well as a brief return to performance-focused innovations. A perfect example of the advancements made during the 1980s can be seen in the Corvette 'C4' ZR1. The C4 used a finicky Throttle Body Injection(TBI) system which heavily held back performance until 1985 when GM replaced it with standard Multi-Port Fuel Injection (MPFI), pushing the new C4 ZR1 to a massive 405 horsepower and a record-breaking 181 mph, fast enough to sit on the podium with the fastest production cars on the planet (Ludvigsen). This proved that the industry still had the capabilities for quality and performance, they simply chose profit instead.

Coming into the 21st century, the downward trend only accelerated. Major auto conglomerates began buying, selling, and shutting down subsidiary companies. GM's Hummer, Pontiac, Saturn, and Oldsmobile were all shut down, clearly indicating a heavy focus on building a streamlined corporate structure instead of brand diversity, maintaining quality, or competing for performance. Leading the subsidiary changes, Per VW Group, Volkswagen purchased SEAT (1990), Bentley (1998), Lamborghini (1998), Bugatti (1998), Skoda (2000), MAN (2011)

Porsche (2012), Ducati (2012), and Scania (2014). They used this vast amount of influence and resources to, unfortunately, disregard quality and lower the bar for everyone. VW and other auto titans like GM have now shifted to a universal chassis platform, relying on plastic parts and universal components that fit 10+ models. VW's platform is called the MQB (Modularer Querbaukasten), and is still used as the chassis of almost every single Volkswagen model since 2012, from the Golf hatchback to the bulky Atlas SUV, and even in VW's many subsidiaries like the Audi A3 and Q2 (VW Group). The concept of universal platforms as a whole heavily homogenizes the automotive market, severely weakens and dulls overall quality, causes universal failure points for a multitude of vehicles across several brands, and exposes a design philosophy driven entirely by cost-efficiency and logistics and altogether disregarding quality in pursuit of profit.

Looking forward into the future, hybrids and EVs are starting to saturate the market and drastically reduce industry-wide quality, alienating automobiles and their drivers from the passion that automobiles were originally built upon. Kia, Hyundai, and *especially* Tesla are the worst offenders in terms of quality. Bland plastic interiors, flashy, distracting screens everywhere, unstable software, and even monthly subscriptions required just to operate the vehicle are now commonplace (Vella). Additionally, planned software and hardware obsolescence makes simple, at-home repairs (and modifications) genuinely impossible, forcing customers into outlandishly costly, dealership-only repairs. This dynamic creates the ultimate profit machine; a dirt-cheap-to-make vehicle sold at a ridiculous price due to little competition, with an Achilles' heel software paywall just to drive the car, impossible repairs, planned obsolescence, offputting looks and extremely lackluster reliability. Take the controversial Tesla

Cybertruck, for example. Its release was delayed several years due to failing to pass safety and quality control requirements. It uses glue to hold the heavy stainless steel body together (Levin). Remember the Chevy Vega from the Malaise era? The car that arrived at dealerships already rusting? The Tesla Cybertruck also arrived at dealerships rusty (Levin). Not to mention the frame tending to break in half under load. As of now, the future looks grim in terms of automotive diversity, quality, and passion. More and more, cars are becoming dull, copy-and-paste disposable cashgrabs. EVs have no engine roar, no supercharger whine or turbo flutter, no transmission, and generally no soul. A massive part in a car's quality is the experience of driving it, and EVs squander or eliminate that at the door with their lack of user engagement, detachment from equipment, and autonomous driving, which raises the question: Why buy a car if not to drive it?

From the 1880s to today, cars have changed from an extravagant display of wealth owned only by the elite, to a mass-produced instrument of utility, profits, and economy. From the beginning, with Henry Ford's goal of making cars accessible, to the oil crisis of 1973, to modern-day Volkswagen's massive conglomeration of auto brands and the worldwide adoption of modular design and mass-produced universal platforms, automotive design standards have strayed far from the hand-made machines of elegance and displays of premium craftsmanship they once represented.

## Works Cited

Appleyard, Brian. *The Car: A Biography of the Machine that Made the Modern World.* Pegasus Books, 2023.

Dowie, Mark. "Pinto Madness" *Mother Jones*, Sept 1977.

Farber, David. *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s.*

Hill and Wang, 1994.

Ford, Henry, and Samuel Crowther. *My Life and Work.*

Doubleday, Page & Company, 1922.

Gunnell, John. *Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1946-1975. 4th ed.*

Krause Publications, 2002.

Levin, Tim. "The Tesla Cybertruck's Design Has Some Surprising Issues." *Business Insider,* 28 Mar. 2024.

Link, Stefan. *Rethinking the Ford-Nazi Connection.*

Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History, vol. 8, Nr. 1, 2011.

Ludvigsen, Karl. *Corvette:Mid-Engined Revolution and the Cars that Came Before it.*

Bentley Publishers, 2020.

Mueller, Mike. *Corvette: America's Sports Car.*

Motorbooks, 2005.

Schleicher, Robert S. *The Car Bible: 100 Years of Classic, Concept, and Conventional Cars*.

Pyramid, 2005.

U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. *Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards; Bumpers.* 1974.

Vella, Matt. "Subscription Model Drives Luxury Automakers' Profits." *Forbes,* 20 Oct 2022.

Volkswagen Group. "Volkswagen Group - History and Development" *Annual Report 2014.*

VW Group, 2015.

Yates, Brock. *The Decline and Fall of the American Automobile Industry.*

Empire Books, 1983.

Yanik, Anthony J. *The Ford Road:100 Years of Ford's Assembly line.* Southbound Press, 2013.

Yergin, Daniel. *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power.* Simon and Schuster, 1991.