

The Night People

by JEAN SHEPHERD

Functional People

H. L. MENCKEN once wrote a rocker of a piece that had to do with the incredible taste that Americans display in architecture. He made particular reference to a couple of American Legion halls in Western Penna. that were outstanding pimples upon the much-eroded face of nature. It's too bad the Old Man didn't live to be able to write a note or two on the imbecilic tastes evidenced by the designers of the 1957 automobiles. God, what a field day he could have had!

Some of the horrendous ocular insults being displayed in showrooms across the country rival anything ever spawned during the Victorian Age, which up to now had held all palms for sheer idiocy of design, and was usually noted as the low-water mark in the taste department. All sights and scales of values are now being readjusted, and we have officially entered a new Age of Rococo. Long gone are the days of the clean line, and design that followed function. Today we owe all to Buck Rogers, Ming the Merciless, the Woolworth's toy department, Helena Rubinstein, and the designers of kitchen-cabinet de-cals.

Inverted Values

What inverted sense of color values states that if one color is good, two must be better—and if this is the case, three must be greater than anything, with the possible exception of the four-tone model that sports a gilt-colored gash on either side of the body? Who would have suspected that the modest raised twin tail lights that appeared quietly on a Cadillac in the late 40's would by now have blossomed into the 3-foot rudders that for some inexplicable reason are today embellishing the lines of every car made in America? One ad stated that the design of their model was based on that of a jet plane. As though that explains it! Good Lord, jet planes are designed that way because it is the only design feasible for a machine using the type of power they use and for the use to which they are put. It makes as much sense to copy a jet-plane design in an automobile,



that will mostly be used on crowded city streets, as it would build a bicycle along the lines of a Zeppelin, simply because the Zeppelin is pretty.

And they have the nerve to describe the design of the car as "functional"! Functional for what? What possible function do these ridiculous tail fins fulfill in a vehicle that rarely travels over 50 miles an hour? The people who work with racing-car design have found that fins are useless at speeds of less than 175 miles an hour, and even at that point the value is negligible. Yet those damn fins are being called "functional." One company calls its fins "Sweepspears." I can just see Granny backing into a parking place at the Supermarket. Her poor little watery myopic eyes, as she tries bravely to pilot the 18½ feet of three-toned metal backward, squint painfully as she hears her twin Sweepspears crunch expensively, but functionally, against the rear of the car behind her.

Don't blame Granny. Parking that monster, for all its automatic steering, etc., is about the same job as docking an 18-foot Christmas-Craft against a strong current in total darkness. And wait until!

Granny gets the bill for a couple of crumpled fins, after the repair shop has ironed them out. I know one body man who went into a traumatic state of shock for over 10 hours after he saw the ad for the new Mercury. He was revived two days ago, but hasn't uttered a word since coming to. And he hasn't even seen the Plymouth yet.

Aside from the body design itself, the most incredible aspect of this whole car-trend is the emphasis upon useless size. What drives a motorist, who has a rotten enough time parking his old model in downtown streets, to deliberately inflict upon himself a new job at least three feet longer and a foot wider, only a psychologist with a profound knowledge of masochism can tell. According to a nation-wide survey that was completed in 1952, the average American car carries

— Jean Shepherd may be heard every Sunday night from 9 to 1 o'er WOR.

about 1.7 passengers per driven mile, and this includes the driver. Yet our cars today are capable of carrying six people with ease, and have trunk space adequate for the transport of the kitchen equipment of four companies of infantry.

The man who wheels this enormous hunk daily from Westchester to a parking lot in town thinks he has a more practical machine than the one who buzzes around in a tiny VW. I guess the vast vistas of empty three-tone needle-point-plastic upholstery which surround him give him a sense of importance, and perhaps it is the only thing in life that does just that for him. In which case, it might be "functional" at that.

'SNOW WINGS' FOR AYH

Vic Coty's "Snow Wings," a skid-4m previewing the 1960 Olympics, receives its premiere tonight (Wednesday) at 8:30 at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA, under the sponsorship of the Ski Group of the American Youth Hostels. Tickets are available (\$1.50) either at the "Y" or at the AYH headquarters, 14 West 8th Street.



BOSWELL IN SEARCH OF A WIFE

Edited by Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle. McGraw-Hill, \$6. by Corinne Grad

James Boswell, recipient of reluctant acclaim as chronicler of Johnson's days, deserves greater praise for his own position. Granted astuteness and brilliance in deciphering and articulating the living sense in other lives, he has been sentenced to questionable renown as a rogue, gossip, and impudent lionizer. While this volume of journal and letters produces much of the colorful superficiality and bon vivance of Boswell's Auchinleck, Edinburgh, and London experience, the underlying current expresses the confusions, the tearings, the reconciliations of a man searching the essence of his own humanity.

A Rugged Course

True, Boswell runs a rugged course and is entirely absorbing in his dissertations on his fantasies, short flirtations, and long "affair." We follow him stage to stage to London twice, and observe the blustering wisdoms of Samuel Johnson. Fine wine, witty talk, and eighteenth-century names (Garrick, Sheridan, Franklin, Hume) are rampant. Venereal disease recurs as often as today's common cold.

Yet the inner levels of Boswell emerge throughout. The giant of the father figure is ever present, and Boswell now accedes and then rebels. He is moved by necessity and always failing attempts to explain himself to his parent, and chooses to practice "law" as his gift to him. But the case that most attracts Boswell is one in which his father, as judge, takes the opposing view. When Boswell's side is victorious, he leads a rioting mob in breaking the windows of all the judicial opponents.

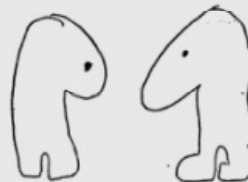
Boswell asserts his intellectual independence through his championing the struggle for Corsican liberty. He considers his appeals for assistance to the island and his well-received "Account of Corsica" the most meaningful of his activities.

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