

Holy Name Wahroonga 65th Parish Anniversary Carnival, 26 October 2013

Church opened - 1954

GRAND DESIGN: ICONS OF THE 1950s – Part II

CITROËN DS 19 - 1955

It is no irony that this truly magnificent, great, classical building of worship, and this car, should share the stage, when discussing Grand Design in the 1950s.

For this is no ordinary Church building.

And this is no ordinary car.

In the history of the motor car, no single design has been as extraordinary, and as revolutionary, as the Citroën DS.

The DS has inspired literature, taken centre stage in museums, and made motoring writers run out of words.

Breathtaking, radical, daring.

Enigmatic, intriguing, mysterious.

More than a car, more than art, it was a philosophy, a method of reasoning, a new way of thinking.

Its mechanical and technological innovations defied the limits of what car designers could imagine.

In a golden half-century of exceptional Citroën designs, between the 1930s and the 1970s, the DS stands at the pinnacle – between

other legendary Citroëns such as the famous *Traction Avant* (1934), and the *SM* (1970).

Everything about the DS defied convention: the self-levelling, height-adjustable, hydro-pneumatic suspension; the brakes, the gear-change, the steering, all operated through a centralised, high-pressure, hydraulic system.

The aerodynamic profile, the proportions, the interior, the details. The list was endless.

It was futuristic. It was simply an amazing thing to see. When it moved, and when it stopped.

How it seemed to glide, oblivious to bumps and dips on the road beneath it.

Far from being a random collection of individual design elements, the DS used a completely integrated approach.

For example, the conceptual theory behind the central hydraulic system was based on the human heart, and the arteries and veins, linking the lungs, the brain, and the limbs in the human body.

It was a car, and yet so much more. It was 'something else'.

Perhaps it is the DS's very name which best holds the secret in understanding what it really is.

The letters *DS* in French are a pun on the word *Déesse*. *Déesse*, as in *Deity*. *Déesse*, in fact, means 'Goddess'.

Philosopher Roland Barthes, not long after the DS had been unveiled, contemplated its mythology. He wrote:ⁱ

"The new Citroën manifestly falls from the sky... It has all the characteristics of one of those objects from another universe... The DS is foremost a new Nautilus... It may be that the DS heralds a change in the mythology of the

automobile... Here, it becomes at once more spiritual, and more object-like... In exhibition halls, the automobile in question is visited with intense, devoted concentration: it is the great tactile phase of discovery, the moment when the visual marvel is put to the test, and touched..."

A few dates

- 1955 October 6, Paris Motor Show, 9:00 am, at the *Grand Palais*. Record crowds are in attendance. The DS 19 is revealed for the first time, to a totally stunned audience. In the first hour of the show, over 800 orders are taken. On the Sunday, 150,000 visitors come to see the new Citroën. At the show's end, 80,000 DS have been sold. In the streets of central Paris, crowds crush around any DS that happens to pull up.
- 1958 The *Prestige* version introduced, aimed at ministers of government and chauffeurs.
- 1959 The DS wins the Monte-Carlo Rally, which it wins again in 1966. Over the years the DS consistently wins the world's longest and toughest international car rallies, on all continents. All-women DS crews frequently take out the ladies' prize. From 1971, the successful Citroën Competition division is led by Marlène Cotton, the first and still the only woman to have ever led a motor-sport division of a car manufacturer.
- 1961 DS convertible introduced. Revised engine. New curved dashboard.
- 1962 Revised front bumper and under-bumper profiling.
- 1964 The *Pallas*, the luxury version of the DS, introduced.
- 1965 The DS 21 appears, alongside the existing DS 19. New engines.

- 1966 The hydraulic system uses a new mineral-oil fluid.
- 1967 New swivelling headlights which see around corners, behind integrated fairings.
- 1968 DS 20 replaces the DS 19.
- 1969 New dashboard. Electronic fuel injection on the DS 21. The 1955 DS 19 reached 140 km/h; the top speed now is 188 km/h. One millionth DS produced.
- 1972 DS 23 introduced, replacing the DS 21.
- 1975 (June) After 20 years, production of the Citroën DS comes to an end. Over 1.4 million produced.

Far from being an exotic and expensive car destined merely for the wealthy elite, the DS was a mass-production car, accessible and affordable. The common man could make it his own.

Elegant and feminine too, so could Madame.

It came in endless variations: convertible, wagon, family 8-seater, ambulance, ministerial and presidential versions, and competition models.

As the 20th century drew to a close, a jury of representatives from the world of design at the FX Magazine International Design Awards in London voted the Citroën DS the 'Product of the Century', placing it ahead of the Boeing 747, the Apple Macintosh, the transistor, the ball point pen, and even the lunar landing craft.ⁱⁱ

The Design Museum, in London, declared that the design project to replace the famous *Traction Avant* "became the car that received more superlatives, made more of an impression, and was more of an advancement in one step, than any car created before or since; it was the Citroën DS."ⁱⁱⁱ

Graham Hull, former chief stylist at Rolls-Royce and Bentley, wrote

"The DS is one of the most interesting cars ever, an incredible combination of technological and aesthetic objectives. The total vehicle experience was intended to meld engineering and art, two disciplines combined to make the experience of ownership and travel a sensory delight."^{iv}

In the daring of its design, the Citroën DS is an unrepeatable event.

Today, prescriptive design rules, globalised car manufacturing, and disappearing profit margins, have seen automotive design become inseparable from marketing strategy and, in reality, subordinate to it.

Fortunately, as the years pass since production ended, nearly 40 years ago, the Citroën DS is being rediscovered and re-appreciated.

At a Bonhams' auction in Paris recently, a DS convertible sold for \$676,000.^v

And the Citroën DS was recently voted the most beautiful car of all time, by a twenty-strong panel of renowned automotive designers, beating classics from Jaguar (including the E-type and the XK120), Ferrari (the 275GTB), and Aston Martin, Bugatti, Delage, Delahaye, Hispano-Suiza, Maserati, Mercedes, and others.

The panel was organised by the British magazine *Classic and Sports Car*. It included Giorgetto Giugiaro, voted in 1999 as Car Designer of the Century, and responsible for great designs at Maserati, Lotus, and Alfa Romeo.

Giugiaro declared that, in the history of automotive design, "The Citroën DS is the only example of a car really conceived 'outside-the-box'. It is just impossible to imitate."^{vi}

Hull, in *Citroën DS - Design Icon*, concluded "If the Gods ever challenged mankind to produce an artefact as evidence of a desire for betterment, the DS would be a worthwhile candidate." ^{vii}

Contemporary allusions to the surreal impact of the appearance of the DS over half a century ago have reinforced these interpretations.

Paolo Tumminelli, Director of the Goodbrands Institute for Automotive Culture, and professor at the International School of Design in Cologne, recently wrote: ^{viii}

"Paris, 1955: the première of the Citroën DS 19. The black and white picture at the Grand Palais reveals a circular artificial lawn surrounded by a white fence, in the middle of which there is a white circle, and on it, finally, the goddess. A hovering Madonna in a black and white dress, the tyres likewise surrounded by a white strip. The association with the halo is obvious.

The masses are congregated. In several rows right around the fence. Struck by the marvel that this automobile is. This is no car show. This is adoration."



Crowds at the Paris Motor Show at the Grand Palais in 1955 surround a Citroën DS 19
Photo: Keystone/Getty images

We are grateful to today's Citroën DS owners, and the Citroën Car Clubs, for preserving and looking after this irreplaceable icon of automobile design.

An icon to be treasured, if not quite worshipped!

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ⁱ Roland Barthes, *La nouvelle Citroën*, in *Mythologies*, 1957, Editions du Seuil.

http://www.desordre.net/textes/bibliotheque/barthes_citroen.htm.

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ⁱⁱ <http://archive.cardesignnews.com/news/2003/030815bertoni-xhibition/index2.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://archive.cardesignnews.com/news/2003/030815bertoni-exhibition/index2.html>

^{iv} Graham Hull, in *Citroen DS: Design Icon* by Malcolm Bobbit, Veloce Publishing, 2005, pp.7-8.

^v <http://www.drive.com.au/editorial/articledetail.aspx?ArticleID=60814&vf=1>

^{vi} *Classic & Sports Car*, March 2009, Volume 27 No 12, p.80.

^{vii} Graham Hull, *ibid.*, p.9.

^{viii} <http://www.stylepark.com/en/news/waiting-for-the-next-goddess/298161>