

Lowrider culture gets high profile

L.A. museum's exhibition looks at cars' beauty and significance

Phil Patton, New York Times
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Lowriders are riding high. For instance, the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles recently opened an exhibition titled "La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels." It includes 21 cars, several bicycles, pedal cars, scale models, photographs and other images from the lowrider culture of Los Angeles.

This is not the museum's first exploration of the subject. In 2000, it held a show called "Arte y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition."

"We always thought about revisiting the subject," said Denise M. Sandoval, the guest curator for both shows and an assistant professor of Latino studies at Cal State Northridge. "We wanted to tell a cohesive story. This show is a way to teach kids the early history of L.A.," or at least the mid-20th century part of it.

The new show, which runs through June 8, emphasizes the social side of lowriding in Los Angeles. Things have changed in the city since Petersen's last lowrider show. The city has a mayor with Hispanic roots, for one thing. Also, the image of lowriding is no longer that of outlaws, and Sandoval's emphasis is on ethnic, neighborhood and family pride. She said car clubs provide a cause for community spirit, an avenue for family bonding and an alternative to criminal gangs.

Almost forgotten is the rebellion in which lowriding was born. Lowering cars as close to the pavement as possible was a symbol of defiance, as irritating to authorities as drag-racing souped up Model A's or installing very loud sound systems in Honda Civics.

Most lowriders were teenage toys, swaggering, snarling, sulking symbols of youth.

But with age, American culture absorbs the rebel; he does well at the box office. If Bob Dylan can help to promote Cadillac in commercials, it's no surprise that lowriders can feel at home in a museum.

"These cars are in some cases family heirlooms," Sandoval said. "They are sometimes passed down for three generations." Sometimes cars have been rebuilt several times by families or clubs.

Lowering the bodies of old, cheap cars by cutting their springs began in the late 1940s, but that was only part of how the customizers, who were usually Mexican American, changed the cars. They also painted the bodies candy-bright colors, adding chrome and creating elaborate new interiors. The late Julio Ruelas, a founder of the Dukes Car Club, once said that the colors of the cars harked back to the bright colors of feathers in an Aztec headdress.

The Ruelas brothers, Julio, Fernando and Ernie, arrived from Tijuana with their mother in the mid-1950s. In 1962, they formed their own car club, the Dukes, as an alternative to the neighborhood gang, and have presided as venerated elder statesmen of the lowriding world.

Riding low and slow was a style in contrast to driving fast in highboy Fords, the essence of the hot rod culture that was the center of the automotive world in Southern California in the 1940s and '50s.

There are many local variations of lowriding. Espanola, N.M., is renowned for its lowriders, many recorded in pictures taken from behind the wheel by photographer Alex Harris.

Sandoval emphasizes the upbeat side of the culture. For her, even the pinup-style women draped across lowrider hoods, often in bathing suits of a color to match the car's paint, are simply reflections of a wider culture. "Lowrider culture is a very male cultural space," she said. "The bodies of cars are presented like the bodies of women."

The first lowriders were rounded models from the 1930s and '40s. Chevrolets were favorites of lowriders for their low cost, and for a time cars of the 1950s and '60s were used. Later cars called Euros were import models, and despite the name, included Hondas and Toyotas.

The state of today's lowrider art is suggested by the stars of the current show. One of them, the Beauty Mark, is a candy-violet 1979 Lincoln Continental Mark V with pinstriping. The car was on the cover of the June issue of Lowrider magazine (*lowridermagazine.com*). Sandoval dated the critical innovation of using hydraulics to raise and lower cars to 1958. In that year, according to an essay she wrote for the show's brochure, Ron Aguirre of Los Angeles installed a hydraulic system in a 1957 Chevrolet Corvette. "The setup allowed his car to be lowered or raised with a flip of a switch," she wrote.

Hydraulics were borrowed from old fighter airplanes. Today's lowrider shows include hydraulic contests. Sometimes the equipment that makes the cars leap and dance is pushed beyond its limits and a hose bursts, spraying hot black oil.

The Petersen show emphasizes decoration over engineering. There are golden oldie cars, notably Gypsy Rose, a 1964 Chevrolet Impala painted with 150 roses by Jesse Valadez. The car appeared in the 1970s television series "Chico and the Man."

Another virtuoso job of painting is found on a truck. Ry Cooder, the rock and blues guitarist, dreamed up the idea of using a 1953 Chevy ice cream truck to promote his album, "Chavez Ravine," released in 2005. He hired an artist, Vincent Valdez, to decorate it with the story of the destruction of the Mexican American community in Chavez Ravine, near downtown Los Angeles. Bulldozed for a promised public housing development, the area was instead offered as a stadium site for the Los Angeles Dodgers when they moved from Brooklyn. Dodger Stadium opened there in 1962.

Although lowriding was grounded in defiant self-expression among Mexican Americans, Sandoval wrote that there was also a strong African American element, with neighborhoods forming lowriding clubs.

Lowriding was a crime: California traffic laws forbade vehicles that were set too close to the pavement. Eventually, police cracked down. To authorities, lowriders were punks and delinquents. Lowering a car

was the automotive equivalent of a zoot suit, with its oversized shoulders and legs, and cuffs that scraped the sidewalk. Like zoot suits, lowriders were a mark of defiance and provocation. (Zoot suits lent their name to Los Angeles' ethnic riots in 1943, when off-duty servicemen rampaged, attacking Mexican Americans.)

Lowriding and zoot suits have their equivalent today in the saggy trousers worn by some young men, exposing their underwear. Some communities have moved to make the fashion illegal.

In America, rebellion and ethnic defiance often end up in mainstream culture. Lowrider magazine was founded in 1977, and soon there were huge lowrider shows at the convention center in Los Angeles. Today, the magazine sponsors a national tour of shows. Lowriding has become widely enough known to have appeared in the cult film "Napoleon Dynamite" in 2004.

"In Japan they are mad-crazy for lowriding," Sandoval said. Mr. Cartoon, an automotive muralist and tattoo artist whose work is displayed in the Petersen show, has been hired to do promotion for Toyota and Nike. He also helped supply the graffiti for the video game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/11/25/BAD7TEJPT.DTL>

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