Bling Is The Thing On Cars At Detroit Auto Show

Jeff Karoub, AP Business Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Headlights, grilles and other doodads are stepping up and popping out on cars: from daytime running lights that go up the hood of the new Cadillac ATS, to a wide, bold grille on the Ford Fusion, to engraving within the lamps of the new Corvette and Ford Transit. They are inexpensive but distinctive, providing automotive eye candy that can even boost gas mileage or improve safety.

Car bling is in abundance at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, which opens to the public Jan. 19. Here's what's adorning vehicles on the floor:

FETCHING ETCHING

Mom never advised looking into lights, but peering into the lamps of certain vehicles offers some aesthetic rewards: Tiny engravings are appearing inside, like figures inside a snow globe.

Headlights in the splashy new Corvette feature the brand's crossed-flag logo, and the utilitarian Ford Connect offers Ford's Blue Oval logo contained in a seven-sided shape.

Likewise, the new Jeep Grand Cherokee features a vintage miniature Jeep silhouette and the phrase, "Since 1941," referring to the year Jeeps began rolling out.

IHS Automotive analyst Rebecca Lindland says it's intriguing that designers are "laying this kind of jewelry in just that small spot" — in the process attracting buyers and providing recognition on the road.

LINE OF SIGHT

Distinctive lights abound, but a prime example graces the front of the new Cadillac ATS, a sport sedan.

The car's daytime running lights go up the top of the fender along the hood line. They help contribute to an overall design that is angular and edgy.

Those lights are helping Cadillac set itself apart from competitors, says Consumer Reports lead car tester Jake Fisher.

Osram Automotive supplies lighting components for the ATS and other Cadillacs. David Hulick, the company's global marketing director of solid state lighting, says the ATS benefits from hidden LEDs, or light-emitting diodes, which offer an "intense, white appearance" that can't be duplicated with traditional bulbs.

Hulick says getting more out of illumination was the impetus behind the first

automotive use of LEDs in exterior lighting: a mid-1990s Ford Thunderbird. He said that model used "super-red LEDs with a neon look" — something that also "couldn't be achieved with traditional technology."

HOT OFF THE GRILLE

Ford is heating up its grilles, particularly its Fusion model. The Fusion jettisoned the old, bulky shutters that go back years and embraced a wide, bold grille with numerous thin blades.

Consumer Reports' Jake Fisher says the grille helps the midsize family sedan "evoke the looks of an Aston-Martin" — adding to the mystique and brand identity without adding to the bottom line.

Ford hopes to finally surpass Toyota Camry's sales with the new Fusion, helped by a more aggressive-looking trapezoidal grille.

There are other grilles providing artistic thrills: When the light hits it just right, the angular brushed-metal grille of Hyundai's new luxury concept car shows off at least a dozen small inverted triangles that appear behind horizontal bars. The wide-mouth grille has a bunch of tiny holes, and the angles reflect light. It's just one of many new styling cues on the HCD-14 Genesis, which Hyundai says is the direction it will take the next generation of its luxury cars, the Genesis and Equus.

THE EYES HAVE IT

The tail lamps on the high-performance version of the 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee are tinted black, giving it an ominous look. Ralph Gilles, a Chrysler design leader, noted the lamps are "kind of like death."

"They look like they're really staring at you. If you look at them they're all dark inside. You can't even see the lens," Gilles says.

He says it's the first time Chrysler has done such headlamps. The vehicle, he added, "can pretty much be sinister if you want it to."

He says designers wanted to create something unique that "owners will love."

The headlights on Land Rover's small SUV — the Range Rover Evoque — also give that vehicle "a bit more of the sinister look," according to IHS Automotive analyst Rebecca Lindland. The slim lamp also represents an advance in functionality.

"The great thing with lighting technology is that you can actually have a very narrow light and still have a tremendous amount of road illumination," she says.

CRYSTAL CLEAR

When it comes to headlights, there's bling, and then there's the king of bling.

The Acura RLX's headlights look like a crystal chandelier, courtesy of a horizontal collection of lenses and LED light that has been split and directed in a beam pattern, according to Hulick of Osram Automotive.

He says Acura's lights are a great example of a vehicle being simultaneously eye-catching and illuminating with the help of LEDs.

"Lighting, in my opinion, has replaced chrome as the jewelry on the car."

STEPPING UP

The 2014 Chevrolet Silverado pickup truck has a practical feature that breaks up the boring horizontal view of the bumper.

There are two steps that make it easy to climb into the bed to fetch tools or tie down a load. The steps are inset into the corner of the bumpers, and even have treads to stop work shoes from slipping.

The always-ready steps could give GM an advantage over other automakers in an increasingly competitive pickup market, especially with buyers who constantly are going in and out of the truck bed.

AP Auto Writer Tom Krisher and Associated Press writer David Runk contributed to this report.

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