

CAR CUSTOMSING – GETTING IT RIGHT

THE LOOK OF LOVE

There's some risk attached to customising your car. get it wrong and you'll be laughed at. Andy enright finds out how to achieve the right look

We've all seen them; cars that look like they only ever made it as far as the outtake reel of 'The Fast And The Furious'. Ageing hatches with garish stripes, dated wheels and spoiler kits that look as if they've been built from yoghurt pots. Thankfully, it doesn't have to be like this. Even those of limited means can, with a few judicious choices, modify their motor to create a car that turns heads for all the right reasons.



Although many of us would like a tricked up Nissan Skyline, Mazda RX-7 or Toyota Supra, in reality it's not too many of us who can afford to go the whole hog to get a car that looks as if it's just burst out of Gran Turismo 3. Due to crippling insurance costs, the body styling industry concentrates on more modest tackle that younger buyers can budget for. Cars like the Vauxhall Nova and Corsa, Citroen Saxo, Peugeot 106, Volkswagen Golf, Renault Clio, Peugeot 206, Ford Focus and Ford Fiesta represent primetime when it comes to body styling.

There are a number of routes that can be taken. One of the most extreme is to go for a full rally replica look. This involves a comprehensive overhaul which will include authentic alloy wheels, a lowered suspension kit, headlight conversion, laser-cut decals, a roll cage, fire extinguisher and a suitably beefy exhaust. Silver Peugeot 206s and white Ford Focus models represent excellent choices to base a rally replica upon, but don't overlook cheaper options like the Ford Escort XR3i or the Vauxhall Astra GTE.

For most buyers however, this is a rather extreme tack. More interested in having a car that will turn heads at a local cruise, most young buyers instead turn to a set of staple ingredients when it comes to body styling. First up are alloy wheels. Drop by your local wheel shop and chances are they'll have a computer package that allows you to visualise how the wheels will look on your car before you even start wielding spanners. Classic five-spoke designs are always popular but seem to work better with some cars than others. Three-spoke wheels were briefly in vogue during the nineties but have now fallen from fashion although you may still spot them on a few Japanese import cars. Likewise the TSW Venom split spoke design is now seen as passé. Companies such as Fox, TSW, Momo and Speedline offer a dizzying choice and there's a burgeoning used and exchange market if you look in the right places. Make sure you budget for tyres. With alloys, the bigger you go, the more expensive your rubber will work out at. Assuming you've got clearance under your arches, a set of eighteen-inch rims with mid-range low profile tyres tends to work out at around £1,000. Accessories such as locking wheel nuts and wheel lights, however, are reasonably priced.

Fashions come and go quickly in this corner of the market. Underbody neon lights, which were the height of fashion a couple of seasons ago, are now seen as a bit 2002. Likewise, fake aircraft-style aluminium fuel filler caps often look a bit OTT if the rest of the car is bog-standard. Twin light conversions remain popular, especially if backed up with a xenon lighting kit. A rally-style composite headlamp kit is a must if you bought one of the bug-eyed Mk II Subaru Imprezas. Headlamp brows are an inexpensive and subtle way of giving your car a meaner glare.

Spoilers are a minefield. The Japanese-style wing spoilers look the part on Civics, Integras and Saxos but put one on a BMW 3 Series or an Volkswagen Jetta and it will look plain wrong. These cars are best fitted with subtle lip spoilers unless – in the BMW's case – you are going for a full DTM look which includes the low-profile mirrors. It's often best to be realistic when it comes to spoiler kits. If the model of car you drive has an illustrious competition history, chances are you'll get away with a well-judged spoiler kit. A bunch of spoilers on a Ford Probe, however, is never going to look anything but naff.

Lowered suspension is a good look if you judge it correctly. Fresh air between your tyre tops and your wheelarches is often a no-no and bigger wheels are only half the job. Dropping the suspension with modified springs gives the car an authentic Touring Car look but more often than not compromises your ride quality and handling. Fitting a decent steering wheel – by which we mean a Momo – and a drilled pedal set is difficult to get wrong although getting a set of seats that boost appeal can be a costly procedure.

Mesh grille conversions are an inexpensive and subtle way of individualising your car, as are clear lens covers for your side repeaters. Things get a little more complicated when it comes to graphics. The

Gran Turismo style is to go for lots of graphics with manufacturers names stacked up behind the front wheel. White 'Shelby stripes' look good if you've got the power to carry them off but otherwise less is usually more. The same goes for window tinting. The all-black 'thugged out' look will soon become illegal and besides, after spending all that money on your car, you need people to see who's inside. A light UV protective tint will not only protect your peepers but will also protect your interior plastics from going brittle and fading.

Remember that when it comes to getting the right look when customising your car, you're shooting at a moving target. Sit down with a few copies of *Max Power* magazine, find out where your local cruise goes off and take notes. It's an expensive business to get wrong, but a whole lot of fun when you get it right. Good luck.