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Tesla's Model S

## Taking Shape

Tesla's dominance in electric-vehicle technology is clear, but it's the company's formidable design team that may actually be its savior *by JONATHAN SCHULTZ*

On June 29, Tesla Motors went public—in more ways than one. The electric-car manufacturer raised \$226 million in its IPO, conjuring a vintage Silicon Valley payday despite formidable debts, widely chronicled executive shake-ups and a track record of just one profitable quarter in the company's entire seven-year history.

Tesla, however, was not selling dot-com pipe dreams or, as some pundits cautioned, chimerical "vaporware" vehicles. Nor was it sowing revolution, as outspoken CEO Elon Musk would have you believe. Rather, it was broadcasting a message

that even \$465 million in loans (closed in January) from the Department of Energy had failed to convey: For all its audacity, this company is the real thing.

You would be forgiven for missing that. Recent inductees in the broader Tesla saga include Musk's very public, very ugly divorce, which is to Silicon Valley what the McCourt drama is to Los Angeles. Then there is Tesla's acquisition of a portion of the previously shut down New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. (NUMMI) factory in Fremont, where it will collaborate with Toyota, the world's top-selling automaker, on electric-

vehicle development. Skepticism clouds the deal, with some analysts questioning the wisdom of an upstart company sharing proprietary know-how with an international juggernaut.

These stories join the established Tesla narrative of willful auto-industry naïveté. Musk, who hails from South Africa, is nothing if not an irrepressible entrepreneur, having cofounded the online-payment service PayPal, which he sold for a reported \$1.5 billion in 2002. He also presides over Hawthorne-based Space Exploration Technologies (known as SpaceX), which he hopes to develop into the world's leading low-cost space-transport and freight service.

The science-fiction overtones extend to Tesla's electric power train, currently used by the company's sole model, the \$109,000 Roadster. The system uses a 900-pound lithium-ion battery

pack to power an electric motor that produces synapse-snapping acceleration without a wisp of tailpipe emissions—an environmentally responsible alternative for adrenaline junkies.

But it's the visionary design minds at Tesla that may ultimately prove to be the brand's most persuasive ambassadors. As the NUMMI/Toyota partnership suggests, Tesla does not intend to remain a one-model company, though as it begins to target shoppers in sub-supercar segments, it has no plans to relinquish its hold on drivers' salivary glands.

The job of defining Tesla style falls to a crackerjack team assembled by Franz von Holzhausen, a trendsetter who helped articulate what is arguably the decade's most expressive automobile-design language—Mazda's Nagare, which emphasized reptilian



shapes and dramatic surface treatments. Nagare did not weather the transition from concept to showroom, but even low-volume luxury marques were once rendered slack-jawed by Mazda's virtuosity.

Shortly after arriving at Tesla in 2008, von Holzhausen recruited Mazda colleague Bernard Lee to lead exterior-design efforts, following the reveal of Lee's showstopping Furai concept race car. Last October, Nadya Arnaout of Designworks-USA—BMW's global product-design arm—became Tesla's lead interior designer, after debuting her asymmetrical dashboard for the 2010 BMW Z4 Roadster. These maverick designers, all under 42, are the starchitects of Tesla's post-Roadster future.

The group's first effort—slated for delivery in 2012—is the Model S luxury midsize sedan, a lithe, sensuous cyborg of an automobile. It is also Tesla's biggest roll of the dice—a \$56,000 car operating on the \$109,000 technology of its Roadster. Musk has set an aggressive sales target for the S, with goals of up to 20,000 units per year. Production at such a scale cuts the price of electric-vehicle hardware in half, he has claimed.

Of the Model S design, von Holzhausen was faced with “blue sky—just uncharted territory, an opportunity to go crazy.” But, he says, it's a balance not to go too far afield of the company's forging reputation: “Tesla is a new brand at the consumer's level, so the last thing we'd want is to alienate people from our unique power train.”

Restraint is not an instinctual posture for either von Holzhausen or his exteriors man, Lee. Their Mazda collaborations suggest a mutual contempt for segment-defined vehicular form, whether it be a coupe, wagon or the popular but nebulous “crossover.” The tension that arises from playing



Clockwise from top: Von Holzhausen, Lee and Arnaout stand by their ride.

against type has served the duo well, as the striking yet accessible Model S demonstrates.

“It's still an extremely expressive design, but the surface language is controlled,” von Holzhausen says. “Bernard has been instrumental in adding drama through nuances, helping to create this feeling of refinement.”

Lee admits that tempering the more radical tendencies he exercised at Mazda led to a bet-

ter S: “If I'm bringing any flamboyancy, it's in the details—the lighting, wheels, the jewelry of the car. We can't have that overpower the rest of the vehicle.”

Just as Tesla's exteriors team rejects the stale and the expected, its interiors lead, Arnaout, has little patience for design tropes. Like von Holzhausen and Lee, she studied at Pasadena's Art Center College of Design. But she earned her

degree *outside* of the school's vaunted transportation-design program. At DesignworksUSA, Arnaout drafted vacuum cleaners, mobile phones and sports equipment. “I have my diploma in product design,” she says, “which gave me a different point of view when I made the switch to the automotive world.” Her most daunting (and, to hear her

*Continued on page 75*

#### UNCOMMON SCENTS

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Nuit de Noel, a rich, complex example of Old World perfumery. The story goes that Caron's in-house perfumer Ernest Daltroff created Nuit de Noel in 1922 for love and muse Félicie Wanpouille, who cherished Christmas above all other holidays. Daltroff's creation distills the pine's green needles and resinous sap, midnight Mass incense, marzipan pigs, was-sail spices, roasting goose and flowers. It's a superbly blended composition of dried rose petals, jasmine, ylang-ylang, oriental spices, creamy sandalwood, incense, civet, vetiver and oak moss. I prefer the *extrait*, whose Art Deco bottle of jet-black glass is a work of art long after the perfume's gone.

The feast of seasonal perfumes alone should be incentive for being good. And if you are, Santa will be sure to leave you a scented gift under the tree.

**DENISE HAMILTON** is a crime novelist and editor of *Los Angeles Noir*. Her upcoming book features a sleuth who's a budding perfumista.

#### SEEKING SCENTS

All of the fragrances mentioned can be purchased at either high-end department stores throughout Los Angeles or, for the more hard to find, perfume boutiques such as *LuckyScent* on Beverly Boulevard ([scentbar.com](http://scentbar.com)). Online retailers include...

[blackphoenixalchemylab.com](http://blackphoenixalchemylab.com)

[cbihateperfume.com](http://cbihateperfume.com)

[dsh.com](http://dsh.com) (sells Dawn Spencer Hurwitz's Winter White)

[ineke.com](http://ineke.com)

[lorenzovilloresi.it](http://lorenzovilloresi.it)

[maviva.com](http://maviva.com) (sells Pino Silvestre)

#### AUTO DIDACT

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say it, liberating) task for the Model S is the 17-inch computer interface mounted in the expansive tabula rasa where radio and climate-control knobs would traditionally be located.

Along with Tesla's firmware experts and graphic designers, she determines which gauges live digitally on the center stack. "It can take over so many functions that would normally be controlled with hard buttons," she says. "And it's exciting to consider how the consumer can interact with controls in a different way—even customize them."

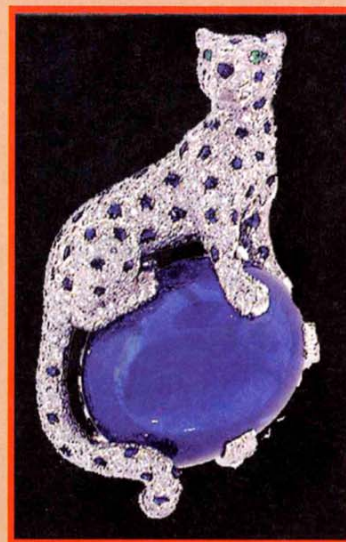
The designers demur when asked what will follow the Model S, though Lee hints at a not altogether surprising radicalization of the aesthetic. "On our next vehicles, we're really going to push our design muscle," he says. "We're going to turn this into a more avant-garde brand."

Ironically, going more unconventional could prove to be a shrewd business move. Nissan, Ford, Honda and even Toyota are leveraging their formidable production volume to enter the electric-vehicle market with guns blazing—albeit with conservative designs and modest battery-range expectations. Tesla can be the player that values adventurous design as much as long-range, gas-free mobility.

"In a sense, the automobile is really part of a wardrobe, especially here in Los Angeles," von Holzhausen says. Such an outlook chafes mightily against green transportation's aesthetic of self-sacrifice and utilitarianism. It also—off-road dramas notwithstanding—could write Tesla's check for decades.

**JONATHAN SCHULTZ**, who writes for the New York Times' automobiles section, profiled the VW Design Group for LA. His favorite vehicle is his single-speed Schwinn.

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