

The Thunderbolt and Newport Show Cars, 1941

“Concept cars,” a term sometimes used interchangeably with “dream cars,” “idea cars,” “show cars” or “experimentals,” are seldom intended for manufacture. Instead they give free play to the imaginations of designers, test the market for future designs and draw crowds to a company’s auto show.

One of the first concept cars was created in 1939 by the flamboyant Harley Earl, the director of Art and Color at General Motors since 1927. After his Buick Y -job was unveiled to the public at an auto show in 1940, other American automobile companies were quick to pick up the challenge. Chrysler was among the first to respond.

In 1941, Chrysler built two concept cars: the Thunderbolt and the Newport. No mere flights of fancy, these automobiles were based on solid engineering and proven technology, as would be many of the advanced Chrysler design concepts in the coming years. Chrysler concept cars were usually automobiles that could have been built and in some cases, except for quirks of history and economics, would have been built. Instead, their radical designs and advanced features influenced future, less fanciful and more practical production models — and not only at Chrysler.

The Company built six Thunderbolts based on an original design by Alex Tremulis and executed by Ralph Roberts, who worked with both Chrysler and the coach builder LeBaron. Inspired by the streamlined racecars of the day, the all-steel body of the Thunderbolt that rolled into auto shows was based on a Chrysler New Yorker chassis. It was lauded for its aerodynamic design and hailed as “the Car of the Future.” Chrysler called the car a “convertible roadster” because of its fully retractable, electrically controlled steel hardtop, which anticipated the Ford Skyliner by 16 years and the Mercedes SLK by half a century. Still surprisingly fresh looking today, the Thunderbolt offered inside a leather-covered dash, door panels and seats, flush fenders, enclosed front and rear wheel wells, plus backlit Lucite edging along the instrument dials, which made them glow at night. Under the hood was Chrysler’s conventional inline eight-cylinder 323.5 cu. in. engine teamed with the Company’s Fluid Drive transmission. Added to its streamlined looks, which Chrysler touted as “a new high in functional design,” were its hidden headlamps, enclosed wheels and minimal trim made mostly of anodized aluminum.

Like the Thunderbolts, only six Newports were built, and each was painted and trimmed differently. They shared the same engine and transmission with the Thunderbolts,

and like their companion concept car, the Newports came with push-button door handles and leather interiors, Some were equipped with hidden headlamps. But there the similarities ended. The Newport was the natural evolution of the dual-cowl phaeton popularized by independent coach builders in the 1930s. But the phaeton style was already passé, and while the Thunderbolt, even today, has about it the whiff of the modern, the Newport is redolent of the parades of days gone by. The Newport with its four doors, had no side windows, while both the front and rear windshields folded flat forward. Built on the long wheelbase of the Imperial chassis, the Newport had twin cockpits featuring full three-across seating. The Newport was selected as the pace car for the 1941 Indianapolis 500, the only time a non-production vehicle has held that honor.