There's a bright future for auto paint

HENRY FORD'S adage — "any color you want, as long as it's black" — has been laid to rest.

Since the all-black Tin Lizzies of the automotive industry's infancy, a rainbow of colors has exploded upon the scene making the highways, byways and auto shows of the world a Technicolor affair.

"Cars are what people are or what they want to be," said Robert S. Daily, color marketing manager at Du Pont Automotive Products' Finishes Division. "As a result, we are seeing a wider range of colors that range from somber tones to more flamboyant shades."

Those who attended the 1989 North American International Auto Show in Detroit witnessed the flowering of these new shades, a trend that will be continued into the 1990s. The Quasar Blue of Ford's Splash and the Bright Lime of Pontiac's Stinger concept vehicles appeal to the sport-minded baby boomer while Honda's palette for its Acura boasts a bright teal, a honey blend color or a distinct canyon "blaze" red.

ALTHOUGH THE RANGE of colors available on new cars is greater than before, cost cutting in the mid 80s has actually reduced the number of paint options for consumers. Subtle changes in color have been replaced by a broad representation of the spectrum.

Whereas automotive companies once offered as many as 18 color choices per car, according to Daily, most carmakers today offer between eight to 12 colors. The narrowing of choices better enables carmakers to coordinate car interiors and exteriors, Daily said.

"What we are saying is a common car platform with several different nameplates is usually offered in eight common colors," he said. "Each different nameplate may have one or two extra colors that are exclusive to that particular car."

New technologies, environmental concerns, automotive cost consciousness and aerodynamic automotive designs are stimulating the rapid changes in automotive finishes. Vivid paint jobs came about partly because of the increasing use of plastic body parts and the environmental hazards of paint by-products such as volatile organic compounds (VOCs) solvent emissions.

VOCS ARE REQUIRING the paint industry to change paint application methods to reduce hazardous waste. The need for paints that can be cured at a lower temperature is necessitated by the expanded choice of plastic, composite and other metal-substitute material.

The industry is responding with several alternatives, the most prevalent being water-based paint systems. Waterborne basecoats reduce pain solvent emissions from assembly plants while resulting in more durable, long-lasting and true-to-color finishes when used with state-of-the-art clearcoats. Waterborne basecoats also cure at lower temperatures required by metal-alternate body parts.

"Waterborne technologies are opening up a new realm of color options and effects for auto designers and colorists," Daily said. As an example Du Pont's waterborne finish technology produces metallic finishes that are brighter, more reflective and more flattering to aerodynamically styled automobiles than traditional high-solid paints.

"Waterborne paints combine durability and aesthetics with cost effectiveness and environmental and energy conservation," Daily said.

"New coatings chemistries and latest state-of-the-art technology will be setting the color pace for the '90s," said Brian Stewart, assistant manager, PPG Industries Troy-based Advanced Color Styling Center for Automotive and Industrial Coatings.

"It is our responsibility as color designers to create new and exciting aesthetic effects through the use of new technology and accurate color forecasting." According to Stewart this is accomplished by studying color trend information from the fashion industry on a global basis.

STEWART ADDED THAT color stylists in workshop sessions in such associations as the Color Marketing Group and the International Color Authority also are used in establishing color directions. These associations consist of many stylists from a wide variety of industries that deal specifically with color for their products. At these workshops, they discuss and share color trend information and work out a published color palette that serves various industries with a bases for future color direction.

Car colors usually are decided three to four years in advance. Because of this enormous lead time, industry specialists like Stewart and Daily are forced to predict public tastes.

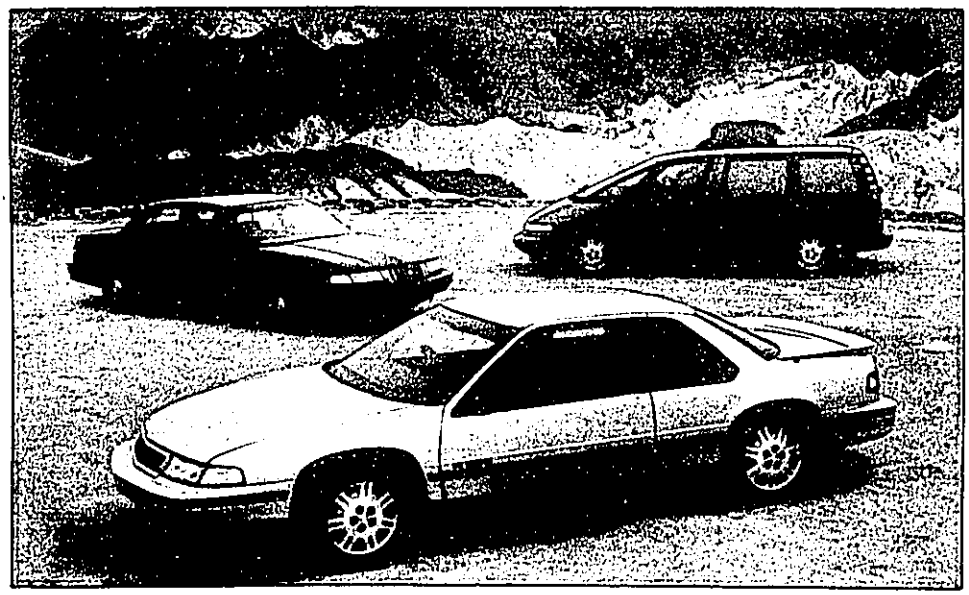
"Generally we look to the world of high fashion," said Daily. "That's where new ideas and new trends seem to start. We also have an experimental factor relying on staff creativity to produce new colors that might spark future trends."

What will be fashionable in the 1990s?

"The evolution of green coming back to the automotive color palette," Stewart said. "True greens absent from the marketplace for almost 20 years, riding in on the crest of greener blues. There also will be a continued popularity for redder blues pushing their way right through violet."

Daily forsees a continuation of the '50s retro look: turquoise, pinks and aquas.

"We'll be seeing a lot more European and Japanese imports with colors appealing to North American niches," he said. "The Japanese market will continue their obsession with all things American, and carmakers will respond by offering cars with more pronounced colors rather than the traditional white. European colors for the most part, will be somewhat livelier than the somber tones of the past. Increasing use of waterborne paints will give added glamor to traditional hues."



Lighting the way

Chevrolet's 1990 Lumina family of vehicles will be on display at the auto show. Shown here is the 2-door coupe (front) as the Europ-model; the Lumina APV (left) and the Lumina 4-door sedan. Standard features include Scotchgard fabric protector, rack-and-pinion steering, four-wheel power disc brakes, four-wheel independent suspension, AM/FM stereo radio with digital clock, two-side galvanized body panels, intermittent wipers, dual mirrors and composite halogen headlamps.