

Jay's Custom Cars

The history of custom cars

part 1: the start and the first modifications



A custom car is a passenger vehicle that has been either substantially altered to improve its performance, often by altering or replacing the engine and transmission; made into a personal “styling” statement, using paint work and aftermarket accessories to make the car look unlike any car as delivered from the factory; or some combination of both. A desire among some automotive enthusiasts in the United States is to push “styling and performance a step beyond the showroom floor - to truly craft an automobile of one’s own.” A custom car in British according to Collins English Dictionary is built to the buyer’s own specifications.

Although the two are related, custom cars are distinct from hot rods. The extent of this difference has been the subject of debate among customizers and rodders for decades. Additionally, a street rod can be considered a custom.

Custom cars are not to be confused with coachbuilt automobiles, historically rolling chassis fitted with luxury bodywork by specialty body builders.

A development of hot rodding, the change in name corresponded to the change in the design of the cars

being modified. The first hot rods were pre-World War II cars, with running boards and simple fenders over the wheels. Early model cars (1929 to 1934) were modified by removing the running boards and either removing the fenders entirely or replacing them with light cycle fenders. Later models usually had fender skirts installed. The “gow job” morphed into the hot rod in the early to middle 1950s. Typical of builds from before World War II were 1935 Ford wire wheels.

Many cars were “hopped up” with engine modifications such as adding additional carburetors, high compression heads, and dual exhausts. Engine swaps were often done, with the objective of placing the most powerful engine in the lightest possible frame and body combination. The suspension was usually altered, initially by lowering the rear end as much as possible using lowering blocks on the rear springs. Later cars were given a rake job by either adding a dropped front axle or heating front coil springs to make the front end of the car much lower than the rear. Immediately postwar, most rods would change from mechanical to hydraulic (“juice”) brakes and from bulb to sealed-beam headlights.

