

The Corvair Line: Styling Sensation Of The 1960s

by James Kraus



Chevrolet Corvair 700 Sedan

The Corvair Line is an accent line that circumnavigates the entire vehicle, front, sides and back, visually dividing the body into upper and lower sections. It can rise and fall, curve and bend, but must be unbroken, with neither beginning nor end.



Volkswagen Transporter

While the Corvair popularized this motif, it was not actually the first to make use of

it. While there were a number of separate-fender era examples like the DKW Wanderer, 1937 Ford Model 74, Peugeot 202 and VW Beetle, the first modern appearance was on the Volkswagen Transporter of 1949.



Fiat 500

In 1957, the Fiat 500 made its debut with a single concave character line encircling the perimeter. This was the first use of such a line in a single relatively flat plane, roughly parallel with the ground on a ponton, envelope body design.

The idea of a such a single character line uniting the front, sides and rear was a concept that was clearly in the air at the General Motors styling studios in the late '50s. The 1960 Pontiacs and Oldsmobiles featured partial Corvair Lines, but the new 1960 Corvair incorporated the full all-round treatment in the form of a crisp deeply-drawn crease, deviating from complete linearity only by way of a slightly dipped section between the headlamps.



1960 Pontiac Bonneville: a Corvair Line fading at the centre sides and intersected by quad tail lamps. Fitz and Van illustration

While the Corvair was not the first to incorporate the 360-degree accent, its sharp, well-delineated expression of the feature had an immediate marked influence on automobile designers the world over.



Chevrolet Corvair Monza Club Coupe
In addition to its popularity, the Corvair Line proved remarkably adaptable; usually highlighted, but occasionally sharing

billing with multiple other character lines, and at times simply playing a minor supporting role. While many automotive designers appropriated the line in its entirety, other stylists incorporated the line in part, either bisecting it along the sides or terminating it at the front or rear.



Volkswagen T34 Karmann Ghia. Here what looks similar to a Corvair Line actually originates as two discrete arcs beginning at the front and stopping at the door handles. The lines then resume with an upward kink, uniting at the rear. Paul Peeters photo
The Lancia Fulvia Coupé, Daf 44 and Volkswagen T34 Karmann Ghia are good examples of partial Corvair Lines. Here is a look at some of the designs that incorporated the line in its entirety.



NSU Prinz 4

An early and well-known example is the NSU Prinz of 1961. Though the top surface of the luggage compartment lid has the dipped centre section of the Corvair, here they elected to maintain the leading-edge of the Corvair Line straight across.



1961 Chevrolet Bel Air. An undulating Corvair Line partially accented by brightwork on Bel Air and Impala versions. Less noticed was the use by Chevrolet on their 1961 full-size lineup. Here the line runs along the top of the grille, drops along the flanks as it heads rearward before suddenly jutting upward and going across the

back where it dips down sharply, echoing the dip at the front of the VW Transporter. The line is most effective and most easily discerned on Biscayne models where it is unadorned by partial accent mouldings.



Rambler American. The Corvair Line forms the lower edge of the white slash on this two-tone convertible.

That same year, American Motors launched the restyled 1961 Rambler American.



Fiat 1300

The Fiat 1300 and 1500 used a unique interpretation: echoing the Corvair, the line dipped between the headlamps, but Fiat also added a symmetrical matching dip at the rear between the tail lamps. The line was

accented by trim moulding that incorporated the door handles, lending a very polished appearance.



BMW 1500

In 1962, the first of many BMWs to utilize the line made its debut. Over the following decade, BMW would take the full Corvair Line and make it its own. By the end of the sixties and through the seventies, it was featured on nearly every car they introduced.



Renault R8

In France, the Renault R8 launched. Like the 1961 Chevrolet, there is a lot happening here but the Corvair Line does exist; it is the one not emphasised by a trim strip. The

line suffers a further degradation by being intersected by another character line just aft of the rear doors.



Prince Gloria

Last but not least, the 2nd generation Prince Gloria was introduced in Japan.



Chevrolet Corvette Sting Ray

1963 was a watershed year for the Corvair Line. The Corvair's own sistership, the Corvette, became the Sting Ray for 1963; and its dramatic new space age styling incorporated a very effective deeply-drawn razor-sharp line extending around its perimeter.



Hillman Imp

Britain saw the introduction of the Hillman Imp which copied the Corvair Line faithfully, even incorporating the inter-headlamp dip.



Mazda Familia 1000

In Japan, Mazda introduced the 800/1000 range with a strictly interpreted Corvair Line sans headlamp dip. No undulations; perfectly straight and parallel with the ground à la BMW and NSU.



Datsun Bluebird 410

Another Japanese entry was the 4th generation Datsun Bluebird of 1964.



1965 Chevrolet Impala Sport Sedan

1965 saw yet another interpretation by Chevrolet, again on their fullsize models. Ironically, this same model year saw the newly-revised second generation Corvair discontinue the encircling line it made famous in favor of a Kamm-style rear end treatment.



BMW 2000 CS

The next BMW to be graced by the line was the stylish 2000 C/CS. Like the Fiat 1500, Prince Gloria and Mazda 1000, the coupés door handles were adroitly integrated into the trim moulding highlighting the Corvair Line. Further emphasizing the line were the front lamp units which used it to define their upper edges.



BMW 1600-2

A year later BMW announced the 1600. The new entry-level model had clamshell decklids front and rear whose shut lines were effectively camouflaged in the shadow of the bright trim accenting the Corvair Line.



Nissan Silvia CSP311

In Japan, Nissan launched the Nissan Silvia/Datsun Coupe. Here again the designer chose to situate the flush-mounted door handles on the line, lessening their aesthetic impact.



Zaporozhets ZAZ 966

Also in '66, the line showed up behind the iron Curtain on the new ZAZ 966. This was to be the longest-lasting interpretation of the Corvair Line, in production for 29 years.



NSU Ro 80

The most innovative interpretation of the Corvair Line appeared at the Frankfurt Auto Show in autumn of 1967 on the futuristically styled NSU Ro 80.



Ro 80 detail showing the Corvair Line traversing the headlamp lens
Rather than being solely expressed in sheet metal form and passing above the grille and headlamps as in all previous iterations, the line of the Ro 80 bisected the grille and headlamps before continuing along the sides and across the rear.



Renault 6

In 1968, the Renault 6 debuted; the second Renault to carry a Corvair Line.



Lamborghini Islero. The most expensive ticket to Corvair Line ownership. The only manufacturer in Italy other than Fiat to incorporate the line was Lamborghini, where it appeared on the elegant Islero; the preferred transport of Ferruccio Lamborghini himself.



BMW 2800

The BMW E3 Series 2500/2800 debuted with the first postwar BMW six-cylinder engine. In accordance with what was by now becoming a tradition with the Munich firm, the car carried an orthodox BMW version of the Corvair Line.



Saab 99

The Saab interpretation for their new 99 was similar to the Fiat 500, BMW 1500, 1600 and Renault 8 in that the forward section of the line was delineated by the clamshell-style bonnet.



Fiat 130 Berlina

In 1969 the final Corvair Lines of the decade appeared on two Fiat Group cars, the Fiat 130 and Autobianchi A111.



Autobianchi A111

The Corvair Line saw continued popularity into the 1970s and was featured on many new designs including a number of BMWs, the Bristol 412, Porsche 924, Range Rover, Simca Horizon and Volkswagen 412.

The Range Rover carried the Corvair Line

into the 21st century and it remains an integral feature of the current fourth-generation series.

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5 thoughts on “The Corvair Line: Styling Sensation Of The 1960s”

Dave Gardner on [12/01/2015 at 4:19 PM](#) said: Very nice review of a much maligned car! It was really one of GM's better efforts in design, but seemed to suffer in execution. I owned several, from a 1962 Monza, a 1964 Turbo, a 1965 Corsa (4 carb) and a Greenbrier wagon. I loved them all, each in their own way! In all cases, the heater left much to be desired. It's also too bad that the car predated several later evolutionary 'upgrades' such as disc brakes and a leakproof engine! Ralph Nader is 'credited' with the demise of the Corvair, but actually, GM allowed it to degrade and die, to make room for the ponycars...

[Reply ↓](#)

- [James Kraus](#) on [12/01/2015 at 4:41 PM](#) said: You are quite right about the demise of the Corvair; Ralph Nader's book simply pounded the final nail in the coffin. The one-two punch of being outsold by the much cheaper-to-build Ford Falcon followed by the onslaught of the Mustang is what put the Corvair on the ropes. The handwriting was on the wall when the

Chevy II was rushed into production. [Reply ↓](#)

- [lgbpop on 23/01/2016 at 11:48 AM](#) said:

Close, but to clarify two points: 1) GM was dithering in 1966 as to whether they'd allow Ed Cole and the Chevy Division to continue development of the third-generation Corvair. After all, Chevy had hit a home run with the 1965's restyling, and had sold close to 300,000 examples of the nameplate for that model year - hardly a failure. There were well-known plans for adapting the Turbo Hydramatic 3-speed automatic transmission (THM350 or THM400) into a rear-engined transaxle configuration, to replace the antediluvian Powerglide 2-speed automatic. From what I've read and seen, it involved using an innovative hollow output shaft from the engine along with the return shaft running THROUGH it back to the differential (or may it was the other way around?). The engineering was a challenge, and 1966 sales figures were already starting to suffer from Nader's criticisms. A damned shame, really, since by the time that book of his was published the Corvair was sporting a fully-articulated rear suspension that eliminated the rear-wheel tuck-under at terminal oversteer that the original swingaxle exhibited. (The only other American car to use this design was the Corvette.) GM decided the unfavorable publicity was too much to overcome,,,but, due to Nader... 2) GM decided to CONTINUE production of the Corvair, to tell the country they would not be bullied by some lawyer who had never owned a car in his life (Nader didn't even have a driver's

license); however, all development of the third-generation 'Vair was cancelled and refinements of the existing car were limited to Federally-mandated safety standard upgrades. By 1969, the Corvair was down to the base model 500 coupe, and the Monza coupe and convertible. Nevertheless, thanks to Mr. Nader the Corvair stayed in production for three more seasons.

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- [Reply ↓](#)

Neil S on [16/02/2016 at 1:52 AM](#) said:
“The only manufacturer in Italy other than Fiat to incorporate the line was Lamborghini”

When he was employed at Bertone, Giorgetto Giugiaro incorporated the Corvair Line in the very pretty 105/115 Series Alfa Romeo coupes.

- [Reply ↓](#)

[James Kraus](#) on [16/02/2016 at 1:35 PM](#) said:
The Alfa did have a Corvair Line around the front and sides, but the line gently tapers away completely just forward of the tail lamp clusters; it does not wrap around the rear of the car, even though the rear deck lid cut line is approximately the same height as the truncated Corvair Line.