


Pierre Selmersheim. French, 19th century

 *Maquette of car for
Le Concours de Magasins du Louvre*
Original c. 1895, destroyed

When, in the final years of the last century, motor cars began to attract great popular interest, many people were upset by their "hideous forms." The lack of sincerity that prevailed in most architecture of the time was here manifested again. One would have been as reluctant to reveal the car's construction and technical parts as society hostesses of the time would have been to show their kitchens.

At least two competitions were held in Paris in an attempt to find more beautiful forms for automobiles. The first, organized by the newspaper *Figaro*, produced a series of designs principally inspired by eighteenth-century sedan chairs or Venetian gondolas. Their engines were carefully concealed behind rococo gilt-framed panels painted with flowers. The anachronism was perceived, however, and *Figaro* admitted that: "Unhappily, we have not been able to celebrate the hoped-for marriage between Art and Science and are barely able to feel that we have brought about their engagement."²¹

The following year, another competition was sponsored by the big department store, Magasins du Louvre. The

results were not much more satisfactory, and the jury decided not to award the three medals that had been announced but only to give a money prize. This went to M. Selmersheim, who had made the model illustrated above. Considering its date, and making allowance for the collapse of the front (the maquette, now lost, was probably of wax), it is not without fascination. The jury gave the following opinion:

*The jury was happy to offer a prize of 500 francs to model No. 22. One feels that this kind of projectile or moving catapult, fashioned to cleave the air, is quite ready and able to devour space. Placed high, like the watch officer on the bridge of his ship, the driver is not distracted by the conversation of the passengers. If the originator of this project had given his imagination free rein (!), however lacking in poetry his conception may be, there is no doubt that this truly talented artist would have been rewarded with a medal. He is the only one who has manifested a half-hearted desire to leave the beaten track to which we are confined and break old molds."*²²

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