

Motoring 'Goddess' will soon be 60 🖨️

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Ahead of its time, and yet timeless: Still regularly cast by Hollywood as a car of the future.

At its launch 59 years ago, the Citroën DS stopped the automotive world in its tracks, with a stunning visual design inside and out, and under-the-skin engineering that hasn't been matched since in terms of taking the industry forward. Its jaw-dropping introduction occurred at the 1955 edition of the City of Light's car salon.

But slightly ironically, the space age Citroën DS will be celebrating its 60th birthday at London's premium classic car show, as there is no Paris event next year.

"Space age" is no overused description for this car, as in recent years Hollywood has used well-preserved examples of the Citroën to illustrate vehicles in what they often call: "some time in the not too distant future."

To some it is the most beautiful car of all time, a "Goddess". To others, it was the most technically advanced car of its era, a revolutionary machine that was years ahead of its time.

Today, the Citroën DS still has the ability to turn heads like few other classic cars. When the DS was launched in Paris, its avant-garde design stunned show-goers. Some 743 orders were taken in the first 15 minutes of the show's opening and by the end of the first day that total had risen to an incredible 12,000.

At a time when most cars were rear-wheel drive and running on old-fashioned "cart springs", the DS19's futuristic specification featured front-wheel drive, hydropneumatic self levelling suspension, a semi-automatic gearbox and even a fibreglass roof to lower the centre of gravity.

To celebrate the diamond anniversary of the car that, according to French philosopher Roland Barthes, looked as if it had "fallen to earth", the DS will be enjoying several significant birthday parties during 2015. These special celebrations will kick off when the original DS takes centre stage at the inaugural London Classic Car Show in January.

The homage to the DS and its sibling the ID will include a number of different examples including the Break or Safari estate car and the highly collectible convertible, or decapotable.

And bringing the story right up to date, the London Classic Car Show marks the UK debut of the new, stand-alone DS brand. The separation of Citroen and DS was announced on June 1, and the two marques exhibited side by side as two distinct brands for the first time in Europe at last month's Paris Motor Show. The aim of DS is to return the French automotive industry to the ranks of the premium carmakers, which could mean some future classics along the way.

When the design of the DS was laid down, it was created by Flaminio Bertoni in close co-operation with Andre Lefebvre, an engineer with an aerospace background. It was designed to replace Andre Citroen's already much-admired Traction Avant model, but the sea-change in engineering and styling values meant that the DS's Citroen predecessor was as philosophically removed from the new DS as everybody else's.

The car followed decades of traditional black Traction Avants and from day one, the DS's stunning aerodynamic lines could be enhanced by colours that included champagne, daffodil, spring green and aubergine.

Combining comfort and safety and for the first time, the public found itself - to paraphrase the headlines of the time - looking at a car of tomorrow that was "Here and now!" The DS entered politics on August 22 1962, when terrorists of the OAS - the Secret Army Organisation - made an attempt on the life of the French leader President Charles de Gaulle. They believed de Gaulle had betrayed France by yielding Algeria to the Algerian Nationalists. As dusk fell, de Gaulle's black Citroen DS was speeding down the Avenue de la Liberation in Paris at 120kmh when 12 OAS men opened fire on the car.

However, because they saw the open-fire signal too late, most of their bullets hit the Citroen from behind, bursting its tyres and causing it to go into a front-wheel skid. Some shattered the rear window as chauffeur Marroux wrestled with the wheel and accelerated out of the skid, but de Gaulle and his wife emerged unscathed by keeping their heads down. Thanks to its hydro-pneumatic suspension, the DS was able to limp safely to Villacoublay, where a helicopter was waiting to take the de Gaulles to their country retreat.

These events were the basis for Frederick Forsyth's book (and subsequent film starring Edward Fox) *The Day of the Jackal*.

The car would gain front page headlines for decades, appearing in domestic and Hollywood movies.

The DS has played opposite an impressive line-up of actors, and continues to do so today. The DS's main film credits in France include *Fantomas* (1964) with Louis de Funes and Jean Marais and *The Brain* by Gerard Oury with Jean- Paul Belmondo, Bourvil and David Niven (1969). This film was a huge box-office success, viewed by more than five million filmgoers.

The DS has also played in Hollywood, in *Back to the Future 2* (1989) by Robert Zemeckis, with Michael J. Fox, *Gattaca* (1997) by Andrew Niccol with Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke, and *Catch Me if You Can* (2002) by Steven Spielberg with Leonardo Di Caprio, Tom Hanks and Christopher Walken. Leading photographers and graphics artists represented the DS in pictures.

On the motorsports front, the DS claimed victory in the Monte Carlo Rally, the Neige et Glace (snow and ice) Criterium, the Tour of Belgium, the Liege-Sofia- Liege, the Road Marathon, the Tour of Corsica, the Alps Cup and the Morocco Rally.

It also turned in a brilliant performance in the East African Safari and the London-Sydney, Wembley-Mexico long distance events, winning on all types of terrain - snow and ice, gravel and asphalt - driven by the greatest drivers of the time. A stunning demonstration of its on-road qualities.

With innovative suspension, brakes, steering and roadholding, the DS set new standards in comfort and safety. The high- pressure hydraulic power unit was at the heart of these innovations and any cut-away exemplifies exactly how complex - and modern - the original DS was.

Citroen launched more than 150 different versions of the DS in its 20 years of production and fortunately, the model is still on the road, and driven by thousands of collectors, including those in New Zealand.

Among the accolades afforded the great DS, was a "product of the century" award at the FX International Design Awards in 2000. The DS beat off competition from the Boeing 747, the Apple Macintosh, the Baygen wind-up radio, the Bic Biro and the lunar landing module to win the accolade.

The DS also made the top three in the international Car of the Century contest which climaxed in Las Vegas in late 1999. Finishing behind the Model T Ford and the Mini, the DS finished ahead of the VW Beetle and Porsche 911. Most in the CoTC committee, which included this writer, agreed that without the dominating British and US voting lobbies among the 100 journalists involved, the Citroen could well have finished top of the tree. But that first public reveal was an event that made an impression on all those who were present. Almost 60 years on, people still talk about it and when you see one wafting quietly by, you can easily see why.