

Wheels Gone Wild: Specialized And Outrageous Rims

(NAPSA)—Today's wheels are the ultimate fashion accessory. They used to be humble pieces of steel that attached the tires to a car. If wheels were dressed up at all, they were fitted with dog dish-shaped hubcaps and maybe, if an owner had a true sense of style, a chromed trim ring around the outer rim.

No single component can change the look of a vehicle faster than a new set of wheels. Wheels can dress a vehicle up or down; be polished, chrome-plated or painted; be delicately styled for agile road use or beefed up to withstand off-road punishment. No matter what vehicle you own and how you drive, there's a set of wheels out there that will fit your needs—and style—like a well-tailored suit.

The number of wheel choices available these days is mind-boggling. Visit any dealership and the car of your dreams is most likely offered with several different types and sizes of wheels. Yet the factory offerings barely scratch the surface of wheel choices. Truly specialized and outrageous custom wheels are churned out every year by dozens of specialty wheel makers.

Parts and accessories to modify cars and trucks were a \$27 billion industry in this country in 2002, and consumers spent roughly \$3 billion on wheels alone, according to SEMA, the Specialty Equipment Market Association that represents the automotive specialty aftermarket.

At SEMA's 2003 trade show in Las Vegas, the group estimated that of the 1,500 vehicles on display, barely a dozen were sitting on their factory wheels—if that. That translates to nearly 6,000 custom wheels—and around 30,000 lug nuts. That number doesn't even include the hundreds of wheels that were on display in the various manufacturers' booths.

As anyone who has seen the movie *2 Fast 2 Furious*, watched



People have an amazingly wide choice of wheels, or rims, to make their cars or trucks reflect their driving lifestyle.

MTV's "Cribs" or the Discovery Channel's "Monster Garage," or even paid attention down at the high school parking lot, the trend in wheels is plus-sizing. The 14- or 15-inch wheel diameters that were standard just a few years ago look positively puny compared to the 16-, 17- and 18-inch wheels now available for most cars. The proportions of SUVs allow wheel designers an almost "sky's the limit" envelope for wheel diameters, going up from 20 to as much as 24 or 26 inches.

"Just five years ago, 18-inch wheels were the talk of our show," mused Peter MacGillivray, SEMA's vice president of marketing and communications. "In 2002, there were sightings of a 32-incher."

Sheer size isn't the only fashion aspect of wheels these days, either. A kaleidoscopic array of finishes is available, thanks to modern polishing, plating and painting techniques, so you no longer have to opt just for mirror-like chrome.

The hottest designs on the market are wheels known as "spinners," which feature hubs or hoops that spin independently of the wheel they're mounted on. So if a brightly plated or polished wheel isn't dazzling enough, your wheels can look like they're spinning even when they're stopped.

All this doesn't mean that

wheel trends have lost their functionality, however. At the other end of the spectrum from 24-inch spinners are those wheels built for competition purposes, like lightweight racing wheels made from forged aluminum or exotic composite materials.

Among off-road enthusiasts, competitive rock crawling is the hottest sport going, no matter how contradictory that sounds. Rock racers routinely climb impassable cliffs, stone faces and waterfalls, and to do so they need sturdy wheels that won't crumble under high-torque punishment. So crawlers (and their fans) use steel wheels on their rigs, and then literally bolt them to their knobby tires with what are called bead locks—rings fitted with bolts that run through the tire's bead.

What does this new generation of wheels cost? Traditional performance wheels in 16- to 18-inch sizes run anywhere from \$150 to \$400 to \$500, depending on wheel type and construction. Step up to 18- to 20-inch rims, and prices go from several hundred to nearly a thousand dollars. Go over 20 inches and add spinners and you're well over \$1,000. Per wheel.

The wheels introduced at the 2003 SEMA show will soon appear at tire stores and specialty automotive shops. Enthusiast car magazines also devote a lot of space to products coming out of the SEMA show, and new wheels will figure prominently in their coverage.

The most convenient way to search for new rims is on the Internet. All the wheel makers display their latest designs on the Web, and SEMA has put together a list of the major wheel manufacturers and retailers on its own Web site, www.enjoythedrive.com. Finding the right set of rims is as easy as point-and-click. Now all you need is a set of new tires to go with those wild wheels, but that's another story altogether.