



WHAT'S WITH THE FLAMES?

WHEN AND WHERE WERE THEY BORN AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

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In answer to the first question, I can say without the slightest hesitation or equivocation, I have absolutely no idea and neither does anyone else.

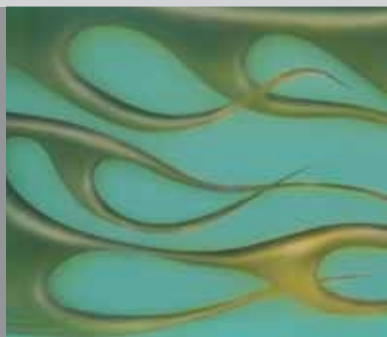
As for their meaning, the answer is both obvious—they look cool—and a bit more complex, involving how we, as human beings, are visually and emotionally hard-wired.

After due research, I've come to the conclusion that the best way to approximate the first 'pyrographic' occurrence is to look at old photographs. Cars have always been a fit subject for the photo-op and rods are no exception. The earliest pictorial evidence of a "flame job" I've been able to find is a shot dated 1938. It shows a rather rough and ready little dry lakes racer named "Skip it." Cobbled together in 1934, the car was redone in 1938 and painted cream with some-what crude and amorphous red flames licking back from the cowl.

Are these the first flames... subject zero? I seriously doubt it. I wouldn't be surprised to discover one from the 1920s. For all I know, old Karl Benz had a flame or two tucked away on that three wheeler. ➡

Above photo

Bike builder Jessie James' custom pickup sports Mike Lavalley's signature TRUfire® paint job.



1. Seaweed



2. Crabclaw



3. Scallop



4. Tribal



5. Realistic

What I do know for certain is that following World War II, snap shots of flame emblazoned cars pop up with ever increasing frequency. By the early 1950s, the dry lake beds of central and southern California were literally infested with garage built roadsters many of which sported flame jobs of varying skill. The time was ripe for true artistic talent to emerge and it did in the form of legendary figures like Larry Watson, Dean Jefferies and Kenny "Von Dutch" Howard. Stand next to one of these masterpieces and you can almost hear Dick Dale furiously hammering out the appropriate sound track.

OK, so much for the 'history,' what's the underlying rationale? And we're not talking just about cars. A perusal of vendor booths at last January's Barrett-Jackson desert extravaganza yielded a plethora of flame festooned product—helmets, hats, shirts, shoes, boxer shorts, decals, pins, pens, sunglasses, mailboxes, tool chests, the list goes on and on. So why are they so darn popular, so pervasive? Answer...flames alone are as much a fundamental and iconic image in car culture as skulls and iron crosses are to the motorcycle set. The later conjure images of pirates and Messerschmitts and play into that 'bad boy' personae that lends a certain spice to the self-image of the biker. Never mind that most contemporary 'bikers' are middle-aged professionals with healthy stock portfolios. The Brando sneer and Steppenwolf howl are never more than a throttle blip away.


Painted flames on the other hand, were never about confrontation and rebellion. They're about achieving 'the right look,' adding the stamp of personal expression to a prized piece of sheet metal. After all, if a rod is really "hot" what better and more graphic way to make that statement? Another compelling feature of flames is that they link so tightly to the very history of rods... hot, street and custom. There they are... in those old, bleached out, sepia-toned photos. Better yet, they're often seen surrounded by the smiling, oil smudged faces of hot rod lore, the Ed "Axle" Stewerts, Wally Parks, Craig

Breedloves and Phil Remingtons. Thus, they were present at the very flashpoint of all that is dear to the car nut. They represent hallowed history—Day One!

This compulsive need to decorate must not be taken lightly. We see it in the paleolithic when precious effort was expended in the non-functional act of carving swirls and geometric patterns on primitive bone tools. It's imprinted on every page of human history from the Sistine Chapel to Betty Grable strutting her stuff on the nose of a B-17. The Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung theorized that all human beings possess a collective awareness of certain fundamental visual forms. He termed them "archetypal images." I submit that the hot rod flame, be it long-lick seaweed, crab claw, ghost or tribal, speaks in that universally understood visual language. It says "I'm fast, I'm fun, I'm a hot rod!"



**I'M FAST, I'M FUN,
I'M A HOTROD!**

With the resurgence of interest in all things retro-automotive, pin striping and flame painting are enjoying a renaissance. The range of styles has exploded along with the number of gifted artists plying their trade, and make no mistake, it is an art form. New technologies and materials have recently entered the fray; computer-cut vinyls and color-shifting paints. I can't begin to categorize every variation, but a few basic approaches tend to dominate. Several of these date to the 1950s while a few are relatively recent in origin. 

Photos: Three classics, aka traditional or "trads," and two more recent styles

1. These late 50s vintage "long-lick seaweeds" were the signature style of Southern California, flame painting pioneer Larry Watson.
2. Another classic style from the 50s, "crab claws," a favorite of Dean Jefferies.
3. An interesting checkered variation on the traditional "scallop" design.
4. These barbed flames show the influence of current tattoo patterns, themselves based on the traditional tattoos of New Zealand's Maori, thus the term "tribal."