

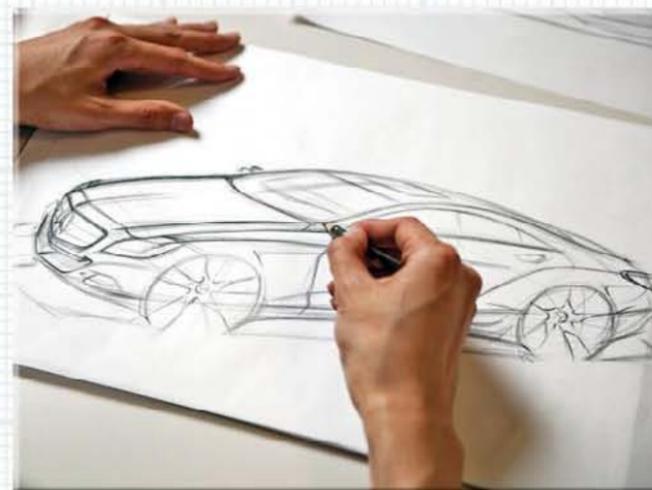
BRINGING DREAMS TO LIFE

BY JOE SAGE



CLS550

A HIGH-TECH GAME-CHANGER LIKE THE MERCEDES-BENZ CLS FOUR-DOOR COUPE STILL STARTS OUT AS A WINNING SKETCH



The four-door coupe: does such a thing exist? When the Mercedes-Benz CLS was introduced in 2004, no shortage of purists objected to the concept, or at least to the term, as a coupe is a two-door, end of story. However, nobody insisted the CLS be called a four-door coupe at all. It's just such an obvious way of looking at its stylish shape and counting its doors. Imitation remains the firmest form of flattery, and the market has now seen plenty of that, from the Porsche Panamera and Aston Martin Rapide at the high end, to the Audi A7 and upcoming BMW Gran Coupe, to the Volkswagen CC at the affordable end. Concept: confirmed. (And rolling the clock in the other direction, some say the four-door coupe has existed since at least the '40s, in the form of the Tucker Torpedo.)

Be all that as it may, the Mercedes-Benz CLS has been a big hit. And when any automaker has a popular, stylish and immediately recognizable hit on its hands, it knows that developing the next generation will be a big challenge. Moving the ball forward while not losing any brand equity can be a dangerous business.

On the plus side, Mercedes has been working through its whole lineup, modernizing styles and technologies (including technologies that impact style, such as headlights), and their bag of idioms for the next generation provides a solid foundation for evolution.

MERCEDES-BENZ VISIONARY

Also on the plus side, the company has a phenomenal team of designers. One phenom on the team is Hubert Lee, Creative Director for Mercedes-Benz Advanced Design, working out of the North American studio in Carlsbad CA—the first Daimler design studio outside Germany (originally in Irvine, before moving to north San Diego County). Lee is also the penman of the 2012 CLS. While in Napa for the US launch of both the CLS550 and CLS63 AMG, we had a chance to join Lee for a look at his process and the results it produced.

Huey Lee started out like many kids, scribbling cars in the margins of his notebooks in school and spreading out sketchpads on the living room floor. Born in Glendale CA, Lee grew up as a Southern California surfer and car freak through middle school, at which point his family moved to Korea for his high school years. Back in the US for college, Lee studied at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), then went to the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and "started all over again." It was all worth it—a background he says helps him be more open and try new things. It has helped him take his passion the full distance, to say the least.

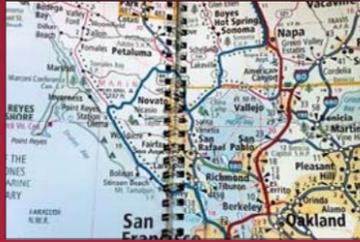
Huey Lee sees a big mission in his work with Mercedes-Benz: that the brand should be the "ambassador of European design."

Hubert Lee, Creative Director for Mercedes-Benz Advanced Design, is as hands-on as they come, while also being a big-picture strategist. At the Mercedes-Benz Advanced Design of North American studio in Carlsbad, California, Lee is definitely living the dream—while making them come alive for Mercedes-Benz customers worldwide, as often as not before they even dream them.



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We flew US Airways to San Francisco International and drove the 2012 Mercedes-Benz CLS63 AMG north on US 101, first on freeway then through city streets, across the Golden Gate Bridge, up Highway One through Marin County as far as Olema, across to Petaluma and Sonoma County on two-lane roads, then over to Napa Valley wine country. Lodging was at the Bardessono Resort in Yountville.



Design of the new CLS ran the gantlet, with an internal competition involving three advanced design studios and one production studio, starting with sketches and proceeding to 1:4-scale clay models. Three of those went on to 1:1-scale clay, then a full-scale mockup of the car was milled.

Besides the first-generation CLS, Lee draws inspiration from what he considers the prettiest and most glamorous era of automotive design: the 1930s. Inspiration derived from this can be seen in the dropping belt-line and emphasized rear fender haunch of the CLS. He also acknowledges that pretty much every designer is very inspired by the female form. "The S-curve is a natural attraction," says Lee. "You can't go wrong with it." In fact, he says inspiration is found everywhere: in music, movies, nature, women, even other cars. Other cars? "Oh yes, it happens all the time!" exclaims Lee, but he emphasizes that this is a matter of inspiration, even influence—but never copying.

"I'm very proud of the dropping line on the side of the car. It creates an elegant dynamic. The front has a very proud, wide, big, upright grille—there is no mistaking when you see this car coming, that it is a Mercedes-Benz," says Lee. The CLS is distinguished by many factors, but he emphasizes the glass: "The windows define the car," with the DLO (Day Light Opening) bringing home the distinctive presence of a four-door coupe.

And all of this works anywhere. "It is fair to say," Lee tells us, "that the new CLS is the first US-designed global car." (This does not include SUVs.) By global, he means not just manufacture or distribution, but that the car will look good when exposed to the design sensibilities of the US, or Europe, or China, or anywhere. While important that it is unmistakably a Mercedes-Benz to a

prospective customer. Dr Dieter Zetsche, Chairman of Daimler AG and Head of Mercedes-Benz Cars is, after all, the design team's "first and biggest client."

During the sketch phase, everything is exaggerated, with vehicles drawn overly wide and sporting very large wheels. This is not done to pursue the impossible or delude the judges. It's done because the stylists know they will experience pushback from the engineers. Lee says designers consider themselves "lucky if we get five percent" of what they've started with. So they start big. "Push first," says Lee, "or you can't have anything new." This may seem like a broad-brush approach, but you'll not find anyone more detail-oriented. "A millimeter affects so much" in the final development, says Lee. "You have to be crazy," he mostly jokes. The work is extremely focused and very absorbing.

But it's very self-satisfying form of crazy. As the workday winds down and Huey Lee heads for home, he has an experience few do: he can see his work by the thousands, in traffic. "It's a dream come true," he says.

Huey Lee was a "tuner kid," self-described. How does he feel when he sees his work aftermarket-modified? "It's annoying," he laughs, "but it's flattering" that people find an inspiring basis for modifying. "You always have to believe in what you do. That's *all* you can do."

The new CLS, in summation? "If you can imagine a cheetah, crouching before takeoff, that's it—that's the car," says Lee.

As night descends over the Napa Valley, there is a gleaming lineup of brand new 2012 Mercedes-Benz CLS550 and CLS63 AMG four-door coupes awaiting us outside. The morning beckons. We are crouched and ready for takeoff.

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CLS NAPA SCRAPBOOK



Day two benefitted (in a way) from the trip having been set backwards on our nav. Driving clockwise on a counterclockwise route got us to the De La Montanya Winery three hours early for lunch, so we headed down the Russian River to Guerneville, doubled back for outdoor lunch, then went deep into overtime on the original route. Dinner was both hilltop and underground, at Hall Winery.



CLS550

TWO VERSIONS OF THE NEW CLS

What the fleet waiting outside doesn't know is that the next day's drive is not our first rodeo. We drove the CLS63 AMG at its global launch in San Diego earlier this year (see our March/April 2011 issue), and we had driven it again for hours before dinner, taking the long way from San Francisco International Airport to Napa.

The 2012 Mercedes-Benz CLS lineup is simple, blessedly so. (For comparison, there are 15 different E-Class models.) There is a 550, and there is a 63 AMG. No 350, no 55 AMG or 65 AMG. And really, no need (not to say there may not be a niche to be filled down the road).

The CLS550 sports a new direct-injection 4.6-liter biturbo V8, with an output of 402 hp and 443 lb-ft of torque. This connects to a 7-speed automatic transmission for increased fuel efficiency, and the 550 rides on Mercedes-Benz AIRMATIC suspension. A 4MATIC all-wheel-drive version arrives this fall.

The enhanced-performance CLS63 AMG upgrades to a new direct-injection 5.5-liter biturbo AMG V8, with 518 hp and 516 lb-ft. (So, actually, this could have been a CLS55 AMG, but, long story short, it's not.) To offset any increased thirst, the AMG version also comes with ECO Stop/Start technology and an AMG 7-speed MCT transmission. Rear suspension is AIRMATIC. If you need to take it to eleven, there is an optional Performance Package upping the ante to 550 hp and 590 lb-ft.

Both versions have a new color instrument cluster display, multicolor ambient lighting and a central controller for multiple functions. The first car to have full LED headlights, the CLS also has LED taillamps. Tech features include PARKTRONIC with Active Parking Assist, available Active Lane Keeping Assist, Active Blind Spot Assist, 10 standard airbags and standard Attention Assist.

The 2012 Mercedes-Benz CLS550 starts at \$71,300, and the CLS63 AMG at \$94,900, which makes them bargain-priced about \$5000 lower than last year.

ON THE ROAD IN THE NEW CLS

We flew in to San Francisco International Airport, where we were shuttled to our first lineup of CLS550 and CLS63 AMG four-door coupes. Since we had driven the AMG a few months earlier, you might think we'd go straight for the 550, but we decided to save that for the full day, taking another CLS63 AMG for the drive to Napa. When we say to Napa, we actually mean through the streets of San Francisco (as US 101 doesn't carry through as a freeway), across the Golden Gate Bridge into Marin County, then up Highway One—one of the finest roads anywhere—as far as Olema, before heading inland and over to Napa for the night.

In our earlier AMG drive, we had noted that the car was "a screamer—a luxurious and comfortable one, but



a thrill nonetheless. Despite its two-tons-plus mass and four-door-full-back-seat nature, it flies. Simply adding horsepower to weight is not enough: the AMG formula of suspension helps, the well-balanced Mercedes-Benz basis helps and the AMG application of aluminum helps, not only by saving weight but in redistributing it a bit." We had also experimented with its electronic engine management and suspension options, as well as Sport, Sport Plus and Manual modes. This day, despite a couple of significant construction waits—Highway One is being heavily reworked to stay one step ahead of erosion—we were able to really nail the famous twists, turns, hills and dales of this classic two-lane. All in all, it's a heavenly driver. We did notice a minor amount of hypersensitivity in the steering on a couple of turns, but it was quickly eliminated by giving it what it wants: more throttle.

For our full day, we moved to the CLS550, the model that delivers 78 percent of the horsepower for 75 percent of the price of the AMG. Would we expect any less from this than from the AMG? For the price, the horsepower difference, and some technology and feature differences, sure. Did it deliver less? No. It, too, delivered a heavenly drive, just with different characteristics. This is not the first time we've found advantages in the model with a smaller and lighter engine, or for that matter, even with a lighter touch on electronics and tech. The CLS550 was a smooth and exciting car on a wide variety of roads, as we headed north through wine country, into distinctly more mountainous terrain with challenging climbs and curves, out the other side into a broad valley and back to Napa on a combination of a bit of freeway and quite a bit of open two-lane. In some ways we welcomed the more sedate steering characteristics, and the 4.6L V8 made it a nimble handler.

Which one would we take home? If you put either one in our garage with all obvious clues removed, or if we'd never driven both, we'd be delighted with either one, long term. For those who like to drive aggressively—not just faster overall, but with some throttle and a real bite to their cornering—the AMG offers plenty. And with the clues not removed, from the prominent brakes to its exhaust note to its sheetmetal and badges, the AMG63 makes the more powerful statement in, for example, the competitive roads of the northeast Valley. For those who would just as soon take the other 25 grand and put it into a little low-mileage roadster, a small crossover SUV, or keep it in their pockets, the CLS550 will never disappoint. Check your wallet, then do as we did: drive them both. ■

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