The 1963 Thunderbird "Italien" Show Car

The Incredible Italien

The one-off Thunderbird Italien show car was born from the beginnings of two groundswells growing within the Ford Motor Company in the early 1960s. One was the emerging and undeniable influence of all things Italian, as Henry Ford II attempted to acquire Ferrari, wooed the glamorous Italian woman who would soon become Mrs. Ford, and admired the fashion and brio of Gianni Agnelli. On the other was the rise of what would become Total Performance, a company-wide dedication to motorsport and horsepower, supported in no small part by Dearborn Steel Tubing (DST), which would build the company's lightweight Thunderbolt drag-racers and many of its high-performance engine components.

Inspired by Italy and birthed at DST, the Italien looked like a custom car because it was—part of the Custom Car Caravan, a Ford factory tour that visited the Autoramas and major dealers between 1963 and 1964. The Italien was not a concept vehicle, as it was not intended to forecast or test future styling direction; rather it was a show car, demonstrating that Ford was paying attention to the burgeoning "kustom kulture" that celebrated unbridled, colorful creativity.

Construction began with a brand-new 1962 Thunderbird convertible, shipped directly from the factory to DST's facility. There, under the direction of the highly talented Vince Gardner, it underwent a transformation that included a sleek fastback roofline, drawn at Ford Styling and molded at DST from a customizer's favorite material, fiberglass. DST added 1963 Thunderbird front fenders and doors, reshaped the rear fender openings around the wheels, and installed some 80 custom trim pieces, including a Ferrari-inspired egg-crate grille that partially concealed the turn signals, a chrome-plated hood molding, side vents blended into engine-turned metal flourishes on the flanks, and an interior with faired-in rear seat headrests, chrome-plated moldings, and extensive use of leather, even on the headliner and rear package tray. All of it was topped off with a bright paint job in candy apple red, of a deep, almost wet luster familiar to any Autorama-goer of the time.

The completed Italien took part in the Custom Car Caravan, as well as the Cavalcade of Custom Cars at the 1964–1965 World's Fair. It was also featured in numerous magazines, including as the cover feature of the June 1963 issue of *Speed and Custom*.

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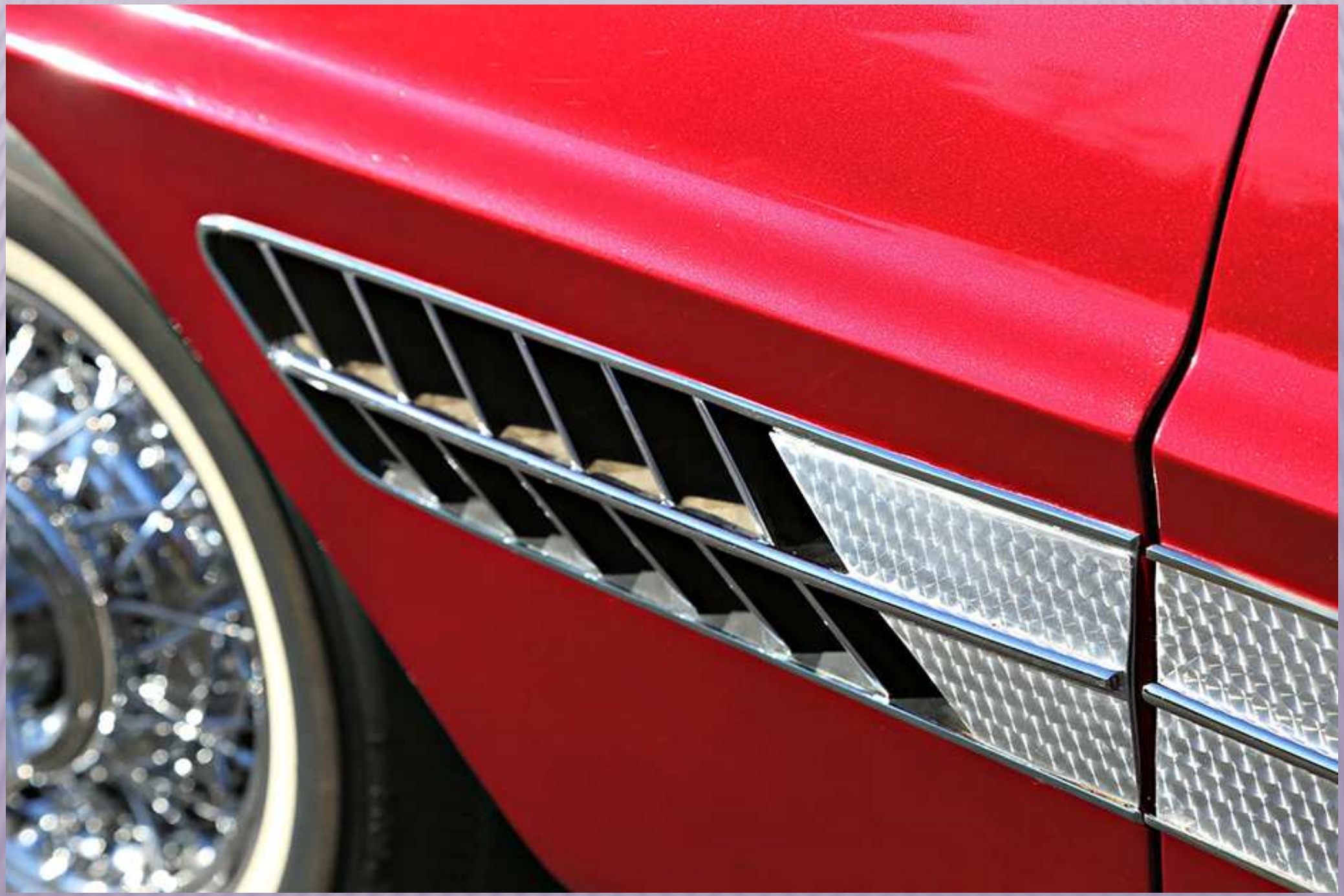
After its tours and photo shoots were over, the Italien was scheduled to be crushed, a common fate for concept and show cars at the time, and even listed as such in some Ford communiques. Instead, it was divested back to DST, then acquired from them by film and television actor, Dale Robertson, star of *Tales of Wells Fargo* and other popular Westerns of the time, in what may have been a bid to extend its public life. (Gardner was known to be protective of his work and to make every effort to ensure that it survived.) Robertson used the Italien in Southern California until 1965, then passed it to his gardener, William Warner, who sold it in 1974 to Joe Navaro. Navaro had the car refinished in a more subtle dark blue and used it regularly for years as a daily driver in Los Angeles. Finally, in 1989, he was persuaded to sell it to Don Chambers, who had known of the Italien and chased it for years. It is legend that Chambers had at one point offered a Thunderbird-for-Thunderbird trade—his Thunderbird Motel for the car. Navaro, in the end, apparently took cash instead.

Don stored the Italien in his climate controlled garage, along with his other collector cars.

Chambers unfortunately never got around to the car's restoration, and after storing the Italien for 16 years, sold it to enthusiast Tom Maruska in 2005. Maruska undertook a complete restoration of the car, which was quite weathered but complete save only for the hood lip molding, which he skillfully reproduced. The interior was properly restored in the original-type materials and patterns, with the metal trim restored and engine-turned as-new, and the body refinished in numerous coats of correct deep candy apple red. Several months after its restoration was completed, the Italien was sold to the current owner in January 2008, and has since been preserved in their private collection. Its restoration has been recently freshened, and it remains utterly striking to behold.

Born from the forces swirling within Ford at the dawn of arguably its most significant era, and one of its very few surviving factory show cars from that time, the one-off Thunderbird Italien is a watershed moment—set down for history in steel, fiberglass, chrome, and glistening candy apple red.

ITALIEN



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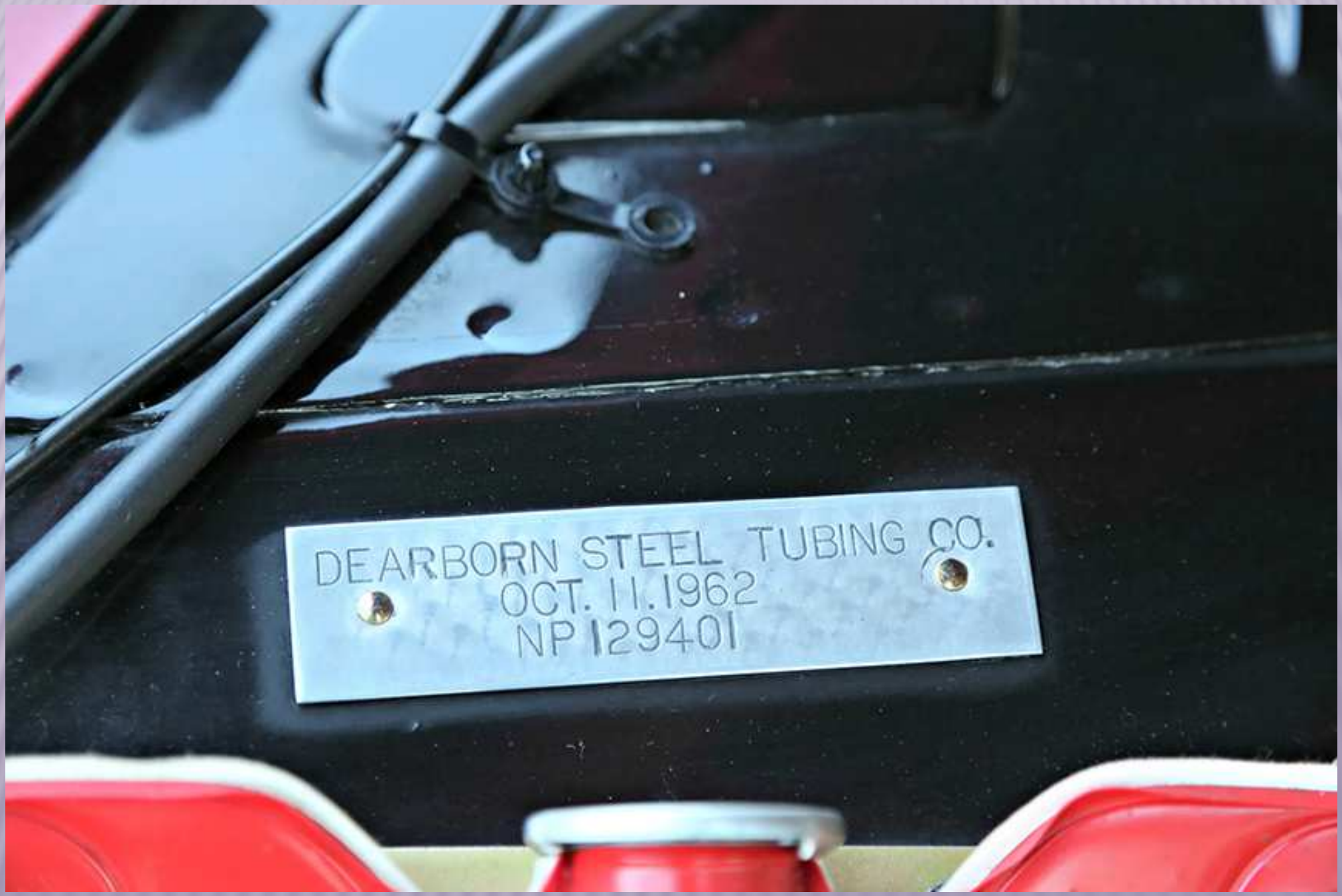
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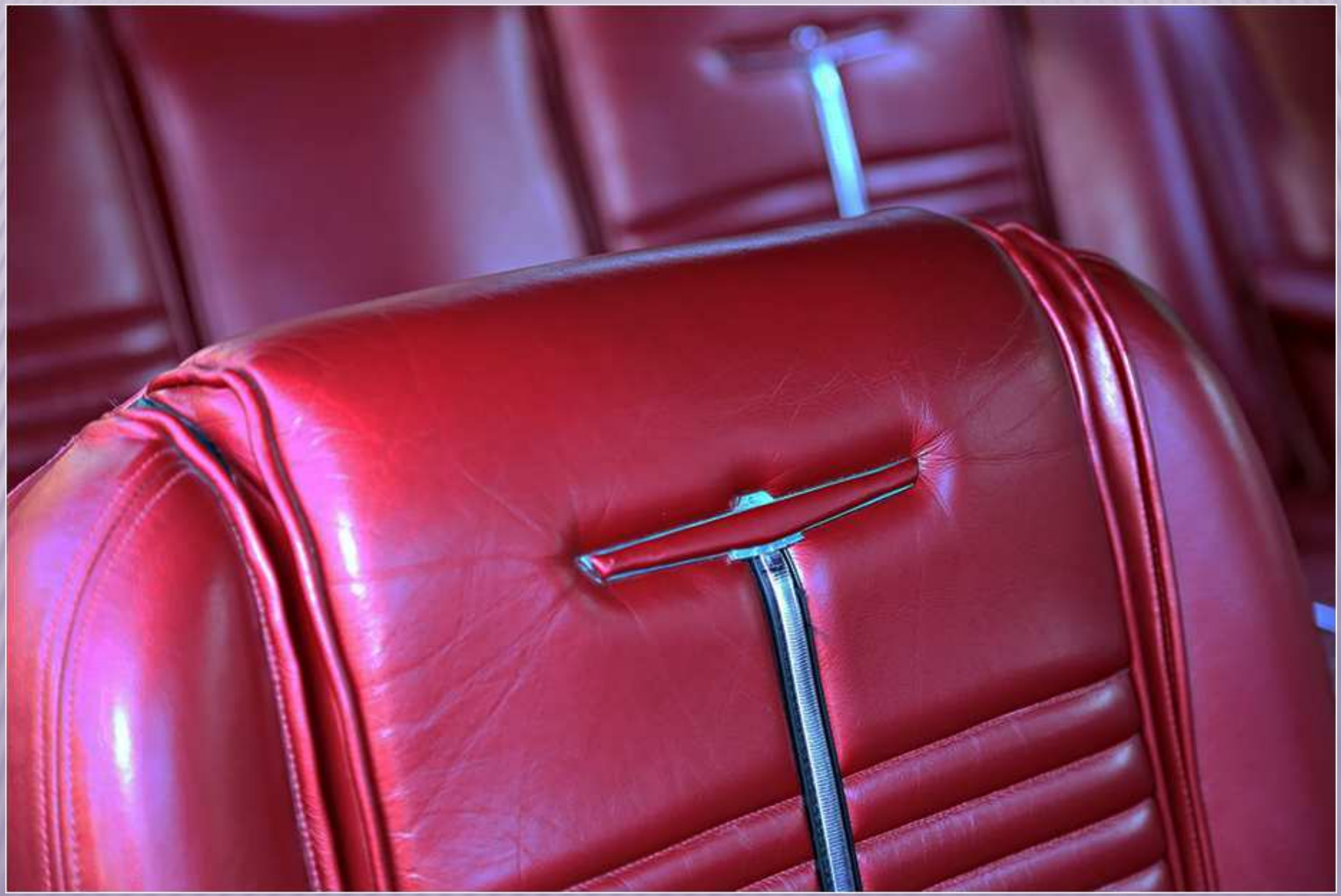

Thunderbird

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