



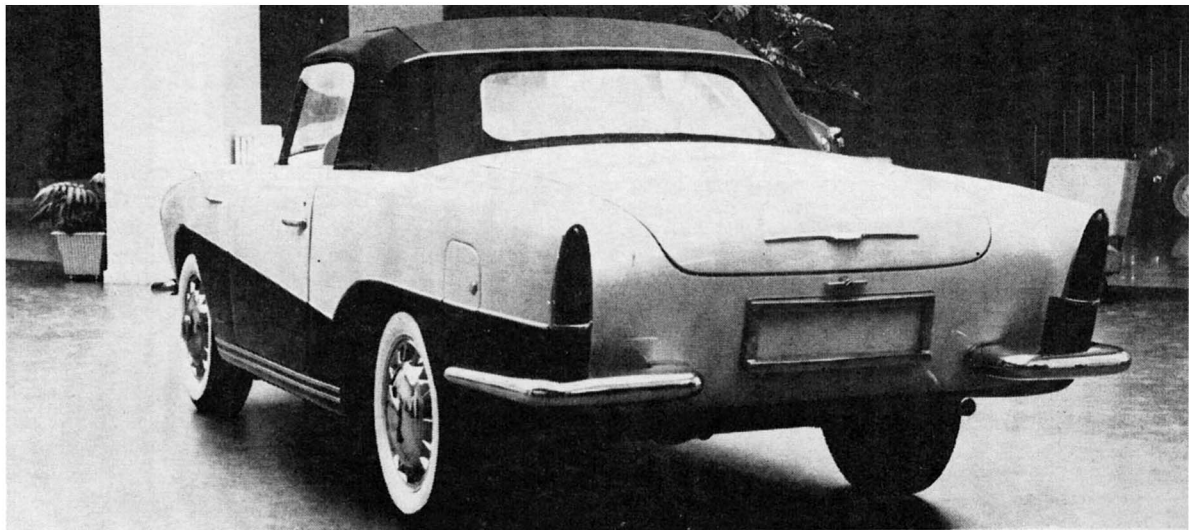
A NEW LATIN LINE

Spain slowly re-enters the styling arena

BY NEIL DOUGALL

PHOTOGRAPHY: GEORGE POHL

Too easily crushed to meet U.S. traffic jams with equanimity, the Seat's front-end treatment is a masterfully delicate solution to the problem of composing myriad elements into a harmonious whole. As for the side of the car, we shall never understand the appeal that dual colors still enjoy. Granted that they are useful where there is a definite break in contours, why must they be used to add cheap glitter to an ineptly molded, uninteresting area?



SINCE the end of World War II, the world's most elegant automobiles have been the product of fertile Italian minds. Now the Spanish, led by a stylist named Jose Serra, are back in the race. Señor Serra's Seat 1400 Sport borrows freely from his Mediterranean neighbors, with success in most points and some slight stumbling in others.

The Seat is Italian underneath as well as in appearance. It is essentially a Fiat 1400, built under license from Italy. A sideline to a big assembly line production of popular workaday cars, the 1400 Sport is still in the experimental stage and troubled with sundry bugs. Most evident is a disconcerting weakness in the midsection of the unit body.

Performance figures with the modified Fiat 1400 engine have been guarded as though miracles were anticipated. The overhead-valve, 4-cylinder powerplant has wet liners and uses twin carburetors, one more than the stock 1400.

At least two features cancel the Seat from any list of true sports cars: its bench-type seat offers little lateral stability on curves, and a column shift means less enjoyment from the 4-speed gearbox (4th is direct drive).

Front suspension is independent, with swinging arms and coil springs. At the rear is a rigid axle with the peculiar combination of coils and semi-elliptic springs used on the Fiat 1400 sedan.

If the inspired front end and simple rear could be joined by a less slab-sided section amidships, and if the dismayingly British two-toning were abandoned, Spain might be on its way to a future place in the styling field. 