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Topics of The Times

Hot Cars

Four-time winner A. J. Foyt qualified for today's Indianapolis 500 at 222.443 miles an hour. Few drivers in last week's American Tour de Sol went over 55. But the Indy 500 is old hat, its cars propelled by the same power system as an ordinary automobile, souped up. The Tour de Sol is the cutting edge. Its cars run on the sun.

Each car in the tour is equipped with a panel of photovoltaic cells that generate electricity from sunlight and store it in batteries. There were 25 entries, up from 15 last year and only 5 in 1989. This year's field included five prototypes from companies that hope to develop a market; others were entered by college and high school students and serious tinkers.

The tour "raced" 250 miles from Albany, N.Y., to Plymouth Rock in five days, with penalties for any car breaking the 55 miles-per-hour speed limit. Most can't go faster than 70 anyhow, but that's beside the point. The sponsor, the Northeast Sustainable Energy Association, of Greenfield, Mass., seeks only to demonstrate workable, non-polluting alternatives to the internal combustion engine. The timing, on the eve of the Indy, was coincidence. The contrast was compelling.

Dancing With Masks

Obedient to the laws of commerce, Sotheby's ignored appeals from two Indian tribes to withdraw three ceremonial masks from an art auction last Tuesday. Yet the gods of the Hopi and Navajo nations in Arizona found an unexpected friend. Elizabeth Sackler, who had never bid at an auction before, paid \$39,050 for the handsome dancing masks — and said she would return them to their rightful owners.

Her generous gesture may open eyes to the offense taken by Native Americans when objects with spiritual significance become investment commodities, trophies for collectors or gimcracks for interior decorators. Congress last November heeded tribal protests by adopting the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which makes possible the repatriation of some cultural properties from museums and collectors.

But the law's provisions did not cover the three masks, their unidentified seller or the auction house. Honor was sustained by Miss Sackler, a daughter of the late Arthur M. Sackler, a prominent collector of antiquities. No doubt some will dismiss as naïve her hope that others will emulate her gesture and return ritual objects to tribes that prize them. Others, however, will take heart from her reminder that Indians are more than a celluloid curiosity; they are real people, a living and sometimes reproachful presence.

Car Cultists' Rituals

Visitors are often mystified by the morning rites performed by New York City car owners who dash out the door at 7:45, jump into their cars, drive across the street and double-park, then dash back home.

The stranger wonders, Why are all these people moving their cars at 7:45? A bystander replies, "No parking 8 to 11 on this side of the street," pointing at the sign. So why 7:45? Because, says the knowledgeable informant, the cop on this block won't ticket a car after 7:50 for double-parking, but if drivers wait until then they won't find a space.

Why then, asks the stranger, did that driver move out of a legal parking space, wait for someone to park a car in the space he had just vacated, then double-park beside it? He probably has to go somewhere before 11, says the informant, recalling a time he was blocked by a double-parked car and arrived two hours late for lunch in the country.

The stranger suddenly notices the "no radio" sign on the nearest car. Is the car for sale? he asks. No, says the informant, that's to discourage people from breaking into the car to steal the radio. He sadly tells how the side vent on his own car was smashed four times in just six weeks the previous spring — at \$81.18 a pane.

Why don't you leave the car unlocked? asks the stranger. Wearily, the bystander tells of a recent dinner party when one of the guests did just that, after carefully removing his Benzi-box radio. When he returned after dinner, the car was gone. Another departing guest suggested he put a "no car" sign on his radio.