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# Mitsubishi: Portrait of a Car Brand

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## Introduction

Mitsubishi: Portrait of a Car Brand is the story of a remarkable journey—one that began at the dawn of the 20th century on the docks of Japan and continues today, shaping the future of global mobility. This book chronicles the evolution of Mitsubishi Motors, tracing its roots from an ambitious shipbuilding company into a pioneering automotive giant, celebrated worldwide for its spirit of innovation, resilience, and unwavering commitment to engineering excellence.

The Mitsubishi name carries a legacy deeper than automaking alone. Born within one of Japan's preeminent industrial conglomerates, Mitsubishi's early ventures reflected a nation eager to emerge as a technological powerhouse. Its first automobile, the Model A, may have been modest in production, but it was monumental in symbolism—heralding the birth of Japan's mass automobile industry. Despite early setbacks, Mitsubishi's adaptability and pursuit of advancement would propel it through times of war, economic disruption, and fierce global competition.

Throughout the decades, Mitsubishi has consistently pushed boundaries—pioneering technologies that have reshaped both its own trajectory and the wider automotive landscape. The introduction of Silent Shaft engines, all-wheel control, turbo diesel powertrains, and, later, groundbreaking work in electric vehicle technology, exemplifies the brand's innovative spirit. Models like the Galant, Lancer, Pajero/Montero, Eclipse, and the revered Lancer Evolution became cornerstones of the Mitsubishi legacy, beloved by drivers, motorsports enthusiasts, and engineers alike.

This book also explores Mitsubishi's approach to design, manufacturing, and its deep relationship with motorsport—a crucible for testing the limits of performance and reliability. From spectacular victories at Paris-Dakar to the rally stages of the world, Mitsubishi's motorsport exploits have galvanized its reputation for toughness and ingenuity, with lessons learned on the track filtering directly into everyday vehicles.

Yet, as the global industry transitions towards sustainability, electrification, and digitalization, Mitsubishi again stands at a crossroads. Its ambitious environmental strategies, investment in EV and hybrid technology, and commitment to corporate responsibility showcase a forward-thinking vision rooted in its historic values. The interconnectedness brought by the Nissan-Renault-Mitsubishi Alliance further amplifies its influence and capacity for reinvention.

Mitsubishi: Portrait of a Car Brand is more than just the account of a corporation. It is a testament to resilience and imagination, to the people and ideas that have steered Mitsubishi for over a century. By tracing its path—from humble beginnings to

international icon—we uncover not only the unique story of Mitsubishi, but the broader narrative of innovation, transformation, and hope within the automotive world.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Mitsubishi Origins: From Shipbuilding to Automotive Dream**

The story of Mitsubishi Motors, like many tales of industrial giants, doesn't begin with the roar of an engine or the gleam of polished chrome. Instead, it starts with the lapping waves against a ship's hull and the keen vision of a man named Yataro Iwasaki. In 1870, during a period of rapid modernization and industrialization in Japan, Iwasaki founded a shipping company. This seemingly humble beginning would, over the next century, blossom into a sprawling industrial conglomerate known as Mitsubishi, a name that would eventually become synonymous with everything from banking to heavy machinery, and, of course, automobiles.

Iwasaki's shipping enterprise, initially named Tsukumo Shokai, quickly diversified. He possessed a shrewd business sense, recognizing opportunities in the shifting economic landscape of Meiji Japan. What began with a few steamships soon expanded to include mining, banking, and trading. This early diversification laid the groundwork for the unique structure of the Mitsubishi zaibatsu – a family-controlled industrial group that would grow to become a formidable force in the Japanese economy. This foundational period, marked by a relentless pursuit of new ventures, instilled a multifaceted approach that would later prove crucial in Mitsubishi's automotive ambitions.

The transition from a shipping and mining conglomerate to a car manufacturer wasn't a sudden leap but a gradual evolution, driven by a spirit of innovation and an eye for emerging technologies. As the 20th century dawned, the horseless carriage, once a curious novelty, was steadily transforming into a symbol of progress and a vital tool for transportation. Japan, eager to catch up with Western industrial powers, recognized the strategic importance of developing its own automotive industry.

Within the vast Mitsubishi network, the seeds of automotive development were sown within Mitsubishi Shipbuilding Co., Ltd. While their primary focus remained on naval vessels and large cargo ships, the engineering expertise and manufacturing capabilities honed in shipbuilding provided a fertile ground for exploring new frontiers. It was this very division, with its deep understanding of complex machinery and precision manufacturing, that would take the audacious step of producing Japan's first truly mass-produced car.

The decision to venture into automobile manufacturing was not a light one. It required significant investment, a new set of specialized skills, and a willingness to compete in an nascent but rapidly evolving global market. However, the inherent drive for diversification and technological advancement that characterized the broader

Mitsubishi group meant that such a challenge was not only welcomed but actively pursued. The engineers and designers within Mitsubishi Shipbuilding, accustomed to tackling large-scale, intricate projects, began to turn their attention to the internal combustion engine and the chassis that would carry it.

This period was characterized by a pioneering spirit, a blend of ambition and pragmatism. The automotive world was still in its infancy, and there were no established blueprints for mass production in Japan. Every step was a learning experience, from sourcing materials to refining manufacturing processes. The early engineers at Mitsubishi were not just building cars; they were building an industry, laying the foundation for what would become a cornerstone of Japan's economic might.

The broader industrial context of Mitsubishi at the time was one of immense growth and strategic mergers. In 1934, a significant consolidation occurred when Mitsubishi Shipbuilding Co. merged with Mitsubishi Aircraft Co. This union formed Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI), an entity that would become the largest private company in Japan. MHI's diverse portfolio included aircraft, ships, railroad cars, and various types of machinery, all requiring high levels of engineering prowess and manufacturing sophistication.

While MHI's primary focus was on large-scale industrial and military equipment, the automotive seed continued to germinate within its vast operations. The collective knowledge and resources of such a colossal enterprise meant that even experimental ventures, like developing a new type of vehicle, could be pursued with significant backing. This internal ecosystem of innovation and cross-pollination of engineering talent was a distinct advantage for Mitsubishi compared to smaller, more specialized automotive startups.

It was in this environment of expansive industrial capability that Mitsubishi developed a prototype sedan in 1937, known as the PX33. This vehicle, while primarily intended for military use, represented a pivotal moment in Mitsubishi's automotive journey. It showcased advanced engineering for its time and demonstrated Mitsubishi's commitment to exploring new automotive technologies. The PX33 was not just another car; it was a testament to the cumulative engineering expertise residing within Mitsubishi Heavy Industries.

Critically, the PX33 was notable for being the first Japanese-built passenger car to feature full-time four-wheel drive. This was a remarkable technological achievement, especially considering the era. While many might associate four-wheel drive with off-road adventures and rugged SUVs of later decades, Mitsubishi was experimenting with this capability decades before it became widely adopted in consumer vehicles. This early foray into four-wheel drive technology would prove to be prophetic, becoming a signature characteristic and a cornerstone of Mitsubishi's identity in the years to

come. It was a clear indicator of Mitsubishi's propensity for forward-thinking engineering, even in its formative automotive years.

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