

The Allure of the Automobile: Driving in Style, 1930-1965

Ken Gross

Peter Harholdt, Photographer

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"I love Duesenbergs," said Jay Leno, host of the *Tonight Show* and owner of eight "Duesies." Tyrone Power, Gary Cooper, and Greta Garbo were other Hollywood denizens that owned these luxurious motor cars.

The Allure of the Automobile accompanies an automobile exhibition at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, organized by the museum's curator of decorative arts and design, Ronald T. Labaco. His introduction, "The Art of the Automobile: The Supreme Creation of an Era," discusses the place of automobile art in museums and continues with a history of the "golden age of the automobile."

Labaco's essay is followed by Ken Gross's detailed presentation of eighteen rare and distinctive motor cars. Former director of the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles and contributor to *Automobile* and *Road & Track* magazines, he encapsulates the history of the models and notes the beauty of their design. The autos were lent to the exhibition by museums and private owners.

In 1951, New York's Museum of Modern Art presented "Eight Automobiles," an exhibition that placed the design of the motor car on a par with modern art and architecture; "Automobiles are hollow, rolling sculpture," said the curator of architecture. He made a distinction between the functioning parts and the body's design.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, automobiles were boxy and boring, but in the 1930's coachbuilt autos, automobile bodies made by independent design companies, became popular among the wealthy. Aristocratic Europeans used to parade their horse-drawn coaches of "high-quality sculpture and the finest decorative arts" down park avenues. The legacy continued in coachbuilt cars.

Desiring to make fine automobiles, Errett Lobban Cord asked for the help of two brothers from Indianapolis, Fred and August Duesenberg. Between them they conceived the 1935 Duesenberg JN Roadster, pictured with chromed English hunting-shaped horns below large headlights and with the car's creamy custard contours. "America's Mightiest Motor Car," powered by engines made by an aircraft company, sold for tens of thousands of dollars; Fords were \$450. Ads for the car in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* never showed an actual car, only a drawing of a debonair man or woman with the tag line: "He (or she) drives a Duesenberg." Clark Gable owned one, a present from film star wife Carole Lombard, who died in a plane crash in 1942; afterward, he never drove it again.

The silver 1937 Dubonnet Hispano-Suiza H-6C "Xenia," with its body resembling the fuselage of an airplane, its slender shape tapering at the end, was made by Andre Dubonnet, aperitif maker. "Sleek and elegant," it was said to evoke "yesterday's vision of the future." The model was named after his first wife, Xenia, who died young; his second wife "took a dim view of the car's haunting and sentimental name."

"The [1938] Alfa Romero 8C2900B remains one of the fastest, most technically advanced, and most beautiful of all prewar sports cars," writes Gross. The coachbuilder, Carrozzeria Touring of Milan, incorporated side louvers the length of the elongated hood, sweeping front fenders, and slotted skirts covering the rear tires. The side view photograph is of a black car silhouetted against a black background with chiaroscuro play on refined chrome details.

Adorned with "discreet shark-fin rear fenders capped with chrome" the 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham had horizontal chromed accents and a brushed stainless steel roof. Futuristic with "memory" seats and dual zone heating, it had a luxurious glove compartment. Inside were magnetized silver drink tumblers, a cigarette dispenser, holders for lipstick and powder puff, and an "Arpège cologne atomizer with Lanvin perfume." Often finished in black, "the

Brougham,” remarks Gross, “was a tuxedo on wheels.”

Also included: a 1934 yellow Packard LeBaron Runabout Speedster with “imposing” chromed grille; a 1959 silver Chevrolet Corvette Sting Ray with “taut, razor-edged styling”; and a 1961 Aston Martin DB4GT Zagato with sneering grille built by Carrozzeria Zagato—the forerunner of 007’s silver beauty in the movie *Goldfinger*.

Improvements to the book could’ve been made by including at least one red car (the Ferrari 250 GT Berlinetta is silver). Otherwise this chronicle of kinetic art and artistic photography is a doozy of an allurements to automobile enthusiasts.

ALEX MOORE (July / August 2010)

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