

HOW DOUCE THE COUPE

BY DENISE McCLUGGAGE
PHOTOS BY PETER OGILVIE

Sculptural, certainly; aesthetically compelling, often. But are cars art?

Perhaps it is their utilitarian aspect that raises the question. Cars are meant to move, and not like Alexander Calder mobiles stirred by breeze, but self-powered and over distances. They tote people and stuff to and fro—to the bank, the dry cleaner, Home Depot. Yet such usefulness is suspect in art. Venus de Milo from her Parisian perch would certainly pass the aesthetics test, but a reproduction with a clock in her belly? Kitsch!

Yet ultimately, such debates—art or not?—turn meaningless if one looks at the contexts that have demonstrated cars artfully. Eight Automobiles at New York City's Museum of Modern Art in 1951 launched the museum show of the car. The Guggenheim 47 years later, under the sponsorship banner of Hugo Boss and the promotional flair of museum director Thomas Krens, drew opprobrium for trailing two-wheelers down Frank Lloyd Wright's ramps. The Art of the Motorcycle was the most popular show in the museum's history.

The style and sculptural beauty of the automobile

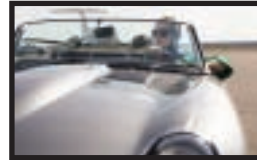
Okay, then consider cars nontraditional art—and also consider how many people respond to the Giacometti-like sparseness of a Miller racing car or the Rubenesque curves of between-the-wars French coachwork.

Cars are collected as fervently as sculpture or paintings, despite what they ask of their owners. A Matisse need not be removed from the wall and run about the neighborhood to keep its fluids fluid. Nor does rust threaten the Frank Stella stripe—though artist Stella, for that matter, was one of the first to paint, not a picture of a BMW, but on a BMW. Other noted artists who have swelled the BMW Art Cars collection over the years by using production cars as their canvas include Alexander Calder, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and David Hockney. But we speak here of collectors.

Collectors of cars vary as widely as collectors of paintings, pens, watches, Fabergé eggs, or Princess Diana memorabilia. Some are mere amassers, buying anything that gets bid up at an auction. I'm reminded of a strip-mall developer from Dallas who wore plaid pants and a cowboy hat (among other vestments) at a sale of the late Bill Harrah's vast car collection in Sparks, Nevada. He was in quest of anything Duesenberg as long as it cost at least a million dollars. For some, money, to be real, needs demonstration.

More serious collectors may specialize in a type of car, a particular era, a style, a theme, or a single producer. Harrah was, indeed, trying to acquire a sample of every Ford model ever built. After his death several auctions scattered the Fords again.

Santa Fe boasts its own collection of collectors. Some have cars like Imelda Marcos had shoes; some possess an ever-changing handful of machines; some cling to one special example. The collectors here are unique but representative.



Tom Mittler is drawn to sport and speed in his cars. The Ford GT40 (see page 61), now on the block for \$1.8 million, is one of seven built for road use that were based on the race cars that won Le Mans, first in 1966. Mittler continues to race many of his vintage favorites in such internationally esteemed events as the Porsche Rennsport at Daytona, and the Rolex Monterey Historic Automobile Races at Laguna Seca, in California. He has assembled an important thematic collection of sports/racing cars, each one uniquely symbolizing the country of its origin. The U.S. is represented by a [[need adjective?]] 1951 Cunningham C-2R; Great Britain by a [[need adjective?]] 1958 Jaguar D-Type; and France by a feisty, rasping 1959 Deutsch-Bonnet Le Mans prototype.

Mittler's book-worthy collection (literally: See *Art of the National Sports Car* on amazon.com) is housed largely in Indiana with a changing handful kept in Santa Fe, where he keeps a second home.

Mittler also has a taste for the one-off oddity manifested in his affection for the monster Wisconsin Special, which was outfitted by Sig Haugdahl, its imaginative and daring creator, with a modified aircraft engine. Mittler displayed the car in March at the Amelia Island Concours in Florida alongside other historic machines that had in their day ripped at speed along the sands near Daytona Beach. The Wisconsin Special topped an astounding 180 miles per hour there in 1922.

Last year the Wisconsin Special was taken to England, where Mittler blasted it up the famous hill at Goodwood to whoops and applause.



Above: The minimalist and monochromatic theme communicates itself instantly on walking through the Markows' front door. *Untitled* by Timothy Litzman hangs to the right of the door. In the foreground, the bright yellow square, #236 *Giallo*, is by Alfonso Fratteggiani Bianchi. Right: Mitchell and Joan Markow in front of their pair of David Simpsons. Preceding pages, left and right: Simpson's *Hazy Days* and *Fade*.



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Joe Valdes works daily at his Valdes Paint & Glass shop and was mayor of Santa Fe from 1972 to 1976, but he is probably best known as owner of the red-and-white 1959 Ford Skyliner (see page TK) that swallows its hard top to become a roadster. It's among the cars on display on the Plaza every Fourth of July, and it's a crowd favorite.

"Either everyone used to have one, wished they'd had one, or would like to get one," Valdes says. He was attracted to the car's "uniqueness" at an auction in Albuquerque 18 years ago, and he and his wife, Bernadette, drove it home.

Joe was 25 years old and married by the time he acquired his first car, a 1948 demo from the Chevy dealer— despite his family being more Ford-oriented. His older brother Gene, now 90, once owned the Ford Parts Obsolete business in Los Angeles after working for Ford dealers in Santa Fe and Springer, New Mexico.

The mechanical marvel that is the Skyliner was built on a station wagon platform to make room for maneuvering the top.

Now that modern engineering, assisted by computers and lighter materials, has put ingestible hard tops in a number of recent cars, the '59 Skyliner—the first one to work, after reportedly field-testing with 10,000 operations—might not drop so many jaws. Just what does Valdes think about the new cars with retractable hard tops?: "What took them so long?"



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Dennis Little moved to Santa Fe nearly a decade ago, after retiring from General Motors as head of the Cadillac Design Studio. In his 30-year career he was responsible for several presidential limousines (but could never convince the powers that be to specify anything other than dark blue upholstery), as well as the Oldsmobile Aurora, and he came up with that neat red strip of light across the rear deck-lid of a Cadillac that answered the decree for higher brake lights in 1986.

His early taste for cars was stirred by watching a childhood neighbor every day hand-wash a VW Beetle he'd brought home from Europe. Little, as a teenager, won a Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild competition for designing and building a model concept car.

In college his distaste for math turned him away from the engineering career he had anticipated and directed him toward art classes. As for his attraction to the E-Type Jaguar (see page TK): "It's the shape." And such a shape—the used-soap smoothness of it, the way the wind whittles at it—finds designers walking around an E-Type in a trance. Little bought his in the late 1970s and used it in instructing his apprentice designers at GM.

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One would expect the owner of Santa Fe's Peyton Wright Gallery to utter the word "sculpture" about cars sooner or later. No disappointment: "Cars are sculpture that's functional," raves John Schaefer.

Cars—"the way they smelled, the noise"—captivated Schaefer from the time he was 4 or 5, and from 7 he could identify any car on the road from its silhouette. It helped that he was a child in North Dakota, where everything then was either a Chevy or a Ford. "But I could tell whether a '57 Ford was a 312 or a 292" (i.e., which engine it came with), he says.

Kids in the Midwest get licenses early. At 14, Schaefer was already an experienced go-kart racer. His first car was a 1948 Plymouth Business Coupe—"three on the column." He hot-rodged it until "it sounded like a tractor."

He bought—at the PX, no less—another memorable car while serving in Vietnam. For maybe \$100 over cost, servicemen could order the car of their dreams, checking the option boxes, to be delivered when they got home. Schaefer's checked boxes "built" a muscle car from American Motors, a hot 1969 AMX image-booster. "Two-door, midnight-blue metallic, four-barrel, four-speed," he remembers.

Today German cars win Schaefer's favor. And they all—some ten cars are with him at any time—are personalized with tricked-out engines, special features. The 1997 BMW 850 (see page TK), one of the last of the 8 Series, has 500 horsepower that can kick it to 60 in around four seconds. Schaefer calls that "remarkable." Certainly, for a piece of sculpture.



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JACK KRIETZBURG was living in Las Vegas, Nevada, and operating a commercial printing business when the car bug bit him. And that took him to Pomona, California, in 1990 and its famous hot rod show.

Though his friends seemed intent on buying fancy bits and pieces to put together rods of their own, he wanted something he could "drive and enjoy" right away. His wife, Sharon, fell for one. Krietzburg was dubious: "A Buick?" She pulled him along to have a look.

The upshot: They drove back to Vegas in a black 1950 Buick Special Sedanette (see page TK). Its grille represented the chrome mania that marked Harley Earle's flamboyant tastes. He had been the creator of outré vehicles for Hollywood stars before he came to General Motors. Earle, a big man, thought big. He brought to the automobile industry the very concept of a "styling department." Before then it didn't exist; now it's called "the design studio."

Krietzburg has had as many as 15 to 17 Buicks at one time. Now it's only six in his garage just south of Santa Fe. (He retired to the City Different in 1997.) Now Krietzburg isn't looking for more old Buicks (though he is open to more) so much as old Buick parts. He has grown fond of working on his cars as well as driving them.

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Bill Agnew grew up in Southern California, where breathing the air was enough to waken car consciousness. A neighbor of his had a Triumph TR3. Car clubs for everything from classics to European sports cars abounded.

As a Santa Fe architect (the Bradbury Science Museum in Los Alamos is his most visible work in the area) married to Flo Perkins, a glass artist, Agnew is interested in the structural elements of a car. But function is also important to him. From that information a car buff could well surmise that Porsches fuel the Agnew passion. (Though he wouldn't mind owning an Audi R8. Or, in a dream, a Ford GT.)

Agnew acquired his 1995 "collector" Porsche (no style letters/numbers okay?) (see page TK) in 2000, drawn to its rare, though factory-standard, Riviera Blue color. So the paint isn't structural; it's pretty.



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Tom Linton got into cars through model building and into racing through go-karts. As an adult he discovered a way to use cars to finance his business. To do that, a collector must be willing to locate a car with provenance, wait out the owner's reluctance to sell, restore it to reflect its history, and then liquidate the equity after it has appreciated.

That's what Linton did with an RSR Porsche (fortunately, vintage Porsches are apt to increase in value), a factory team car that boasted eight Daytona 24-hour races and nine Sebring 12-hour races in an active past. What it brought when sold in 1998 financed the start of his new business—a secure storage facility near Airport Road to house other people's cars. The handsome garages-cum-clubhouse were designed by Albuquerque architect Don Dudley.

Linton's next Porsche project was the 1974 Carrera RSR that Peter Revson drove at Riverside in the inauguration of IROC (International Race of Champions). The series was designed to pit drivers against each other—skill to skill—by providing them with interchangeable, mechanically identical cars.

Years after that race, Linton discovered the car "disguised in new paint" in the California garage of Vasek Polak, a noted Porsche mechanic-dealer. Linton "de-flared" the fenders to their original silhouette and returned the car to the yellow it wore before it was painted white. He had in mind an avid Porsche collector who would appreciate the car and contacted the collector's "scout," whom he had known for 25 years. That's how Jerry Seinfeld came to own the IROC RSR. And how Linton got yet a new building for his business. ❁