

ICONS

'Sensuous Steel' Comes to Nashville

Visitors to "Sensuous Steel: Art Deco Cars," opening June 14 at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tenn., may wonder how any stylistic term could blanket the 19 automobiles and two motorcycles featured in the exhibit. By [DAN NEIL](#)

As a critical term, Art Deco is famously imprecise and never more so than when applied to cars.

Visitors to "Sensuous Steel: Art Deco Cars," opening June 14 at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tenn., may wonder how any stylistic term could blanket the 19 automobiles and two motorcycles featured in the exhibit. The Shah of Iran's glorious, idolatrous 1939 Bugatti Type 57C—custom-bodied by the French carrosserie VanVooren, a blown-glass vase of a car with chrome whitecaps licking at the fenders—would seem to have almost nothing in common with the sober, streamlined 1936 Chrysler Airflow.



Peter Harholdt/Petersen Automotive Museum, Los Angeles
[1939 Bugatti Type 57C by Vanvooren](#)

The fault line in Art Deco automobiles is rationalism, the commitment to evidence-based, function-forward design balanced against, and often subordinated to, the chic, the sculptural, the stylish. Critic Bevis Hillier suggested it was the space between Art Deco's "feminine, somewhat conservative style of 1925 ... and the masculine reaction of the '30s, with its machine-age symbolism and use of new materials."

Indeed, it's helpful to consider these objects along a continuum of Art Deco androgyny. On one side is the exhibit's Henderson KJ Streamliner (1930), a low-slung two-wheeler wrapped nose-to-tail in a voluptuous teardrop fairing—unworkable, unrideable and representing mere aerodynamic guesswork.

On the other side is the exhibit's Tatra T97 (1938), which incorporates a decade's worth of applied aero research in Europe between the wars. The T97's integrated fenders, underbody flooring, long fastback roof and remarkable vertical stabilizer all announce the triumph of data-driven function (lowered wind resistance, high speed stability, better fuel economy) over merely decorative streamlining. This was futurism that actually functioned.



1938 Tatra T97. Collection of Lane Motor Museum.

The Frist occupies Nashville's former main post office, opened in 1934 at the height of the Great Depression. On the outside, it is a big, flat-headed mausoleum of a building. On the inside, it's a party, a modest masterpiece of Art Deco design framed in geometrically perfect green-and-oyster marble and lighted with elegant Machine Age chandeliers worthy of a Busby Berkeley penthouse. Most distinctive are the Frist's Deco-themed aluminum window grilles filtering light from the clerestory.

Guest curator Ken Gross was brought in to talk over plans for an auto exhibit with center director Susan Edwards. "She said, 'Well, we have this amazing Art Deco building, we should feature Art Deco cars,'" said Mr. Gross.

Mr. Gross has put together a show that is, among other things, a huge time-saver. These are some of the most indispensable cars in automotive history, all in one place, breathing the same air so to speak. It's instructive, too, to be reminded of the American vision of modernity: Packard,

Cord, Indian (the motorcycle company). The 1933 Pierce-Arrow Silver Arrow, built in South Bend, Ind., is more like a silver spaceship, a magnificent fastback limousine that makes Bugattis of the time look rather quaint.

"The hard part was narrowing down the selection," said Mr. Gross, "There are so many great cars to choose from, so many stories."



1933 Pierce-Arrow Silver Arrow Sedan. Collection of Academy of Art University Automobile Museum, San Francisco.

The daring Silver Arrow wasn't enough to turn things around for Pierce-Arrow. Or maybe it was too much. The demise of the Chrysler Airflow was likewise attributed to stylistic overreach. The public might have been comfortable with streamlined kitchen mixers, but a car was a very public and expensive declaration of personal style. Americans pulled back.

Postwar, with General Motors' styling chief Harley Earl as the chief tastemaker, American car design would again engage aerodynamics and streamlining, but again only superficially. The tail fins and missile-shaped bumper cones that we regard as distinctly American conventions are actually part of Art Deco's trans-Atlantic legacy, inasmuch as they are nontechnical design metaphors that invoke the power of Science without making much use of it.

It wouldn't be until the late 1970s, after the first oil embargo and first round of fuel economy and emissions standards, that the Deco and auto design fully parted ways.

On the Road to 75-Year-Old Luxury

For visitors who catch the Art Deco bug at the "Sensuous Steel" show, two museums provide the cure.



Michael Furman / [Autodom's 'Mona Lisa': The Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic at the Mullin Automotive Museum.](#)

Mullin Automotive Museum, Oxnard, Calif.

Financier and philanthropist Peter Mullin is the foremost collector of classic French cars. Built around his personal collection, the Mullin Museum loaned the Frist three crucial cars—the Voisin C27 Aerosport (1934), the Bugatti Type 46 Superprofile Coupe (1930) and the famed Dubonnet Hispano-Suiza "Xenia" (1938).

One car the Mullin didn't crate up is the Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic (1936), an aluminum masterpiece penned by Jean Bugatti, the talented, tragic son of Ettore Bugatti. The Mullin's Atlantic is one of two extant—the other is owned by Ralph Lauren—and is widely regarded as the world's most desirable and valuable classic car. If car design has a Mona Lisa, this is it, and it can only be seen in Oxnard.

Cité de l'Automobile National Museum Collection Schlumpf, Mulhouse, France

Otherwise known as "The Schlumpf," this sprawling facility has a nutty history involving eccentric brothers who used wealth from the textile industry to corner the market in collectible Bugattis. In the late 1970s, disgruntled mill workers occupied the Schlumpf offices and warehouses, discovering the secret trove of cars. The brothers fled to their native Switzerland. The mill workers themselves briefly operated the museum.

Today, the Schlumpf, while still heavy with Bugattis, has an enviable selection of other great cars, with glamorous custom bodies by coach-builders such as Touring, Figoni & Falaschi and Saoutchik. The collection's undisputed stars are the three massive, majestic Bugatti Type 41 Royales. At more than 20 feet long, the Royales are Art Deco writ large.



1936 Delahaye 135M Figoni & Falaschi Competition Coupe. Collection of Jim Patterson/The Patterson Collection.



1938 Talbot-Lago T-150C-SS Teardrop Coupe. Collection of J. Willard Marriott, Jr.



1933 Pierce-Arrow Silver Arrow Sedan. Collection of Academy of Art University Automobile Museum, San Francisco.



1930 Jordan Model Z Speedway Ace Roadster. Collection of Edmund J. Stecker Family Trust.



1930 Bugatti Type 46 Semi-profile Coupe. Collection of Merle and Peter Mullin.



1937 Delahaye 135MS Roadster. The Revs Institute for Automotive Research at the Collier Collection.



1934 Voisin Type C27 Arosport Coupe. Collection of Merle and Peter Mullin.



1930 Henderson KJ Streamline. Collection of Frank Westfall.



1936 Stout Scarab. Collection of Larry Smith.



1929 Cord L-29 Cabriolet Duesenberg Automobile Museum.



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