



Preserve. protect & defend

By Preston Lerner

Photography by
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An academic-style symposium advises collectors to leave their historic cars alone.

Nick Mason squirms in his seat on the dais, wearing the pained smile of a groom listening to his hopelessly wasted best man offer a wedding toast detailing their recent escapades in a Tijuana whorehouse. Although he's better known as the drummer of Pink Floyd, Mason is also a formidable vintage-car racer and collector. But at the moment, he's onstage at the seventh biennial Symposium on Connoisseurship and the Collectible Car as exhibit A for what *not* to do with cars that are "too important to use."



Attendees gather around an ex-Briggs Cunningham Ferrari 166 (previous page) and the Ford GT40 Mark II B (above) that Dan Gurney pushed across the finish line at Sebring in 1966. Nick Mason (right) holds court in front of a Porsche 917K.

Miles C. Collier, the founder of the Revs Institute for Automotive Research in Naples, Florida, which hosts the symposium, has already weighed in on the subject. (His collection includes a Porsche 917K that still bears road grime from 1971.) Now, panelist Michael Shanks, a Stanford archeologist with a guest lecturer's breezy self-assurance, suggests that the impulse to race a fragile—and irreplaceable—car is essentially selfish. “So it’s a matter of your arrogance and ego that you want that experience for yourself,” he says.

Over to you, Nick!

“This is not a symposium at all,” Mason says with a sheepish smile. “It’s a rehab event. My name is Nick, and I’m a recovering historic racer.” The auditorium erupts into laughter. Then Mason adds: “It’s important to understand that [vintage racing] used to be cheap racing. You could take two Bentleys—a three-liter and a four-and-a-half liter, and you’d put the four-and-a-half in the three-liter and think you were very clever.”

The audience responds with knowing groans. Here at the symposium, the unnecessary modification of a valuable artifact is seen as a crime tantamount to slapping aluminum siding on a Frank Lloyd Wright house or cutting a majestic Matisse canvas down in size to fit over a fireplace. In fact, promoting the philosophy of thoughtful car preservation rather than cosmetic car restoration is probably the single most important reason why Collier hosts the symposium.

“Miles is one of the leaders of a paradigm shift in the collector-car world,” says attendee Cam Ingram, who runs a Porsche restoration shop and co-owns and



manages several important Porsche collections. “Thanks to Barrett-Jackson and all the coverage auctions get, you hear a lot of rhetoric about hard assets and asset strategy. To a lot of people, collector cars are investments, first and foremost. The people here are at the forefront of understanding that some cars ought to be left untouched.”

“It’s easy to say, ‘This car looks tatty. Let’s put a new paint job on it.’ But some cars need to stay as they are.”

Like Ingram, most of the sixty other attendees are world-class collectors or professionals in the collectible-car industry. They’ve come to Naples for three days of lectures, panel discussions, and gallery talks with twenty-four “faculty” members ranging from motorsports historian par excellence Doug Nye and three-time Indianapolis 500 champion Dario Franchitti to restoration maven Paul Russell and Malcolm Collier, chief conservator of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum.

I’d wanted to attend the symposium ever since I first read about it in *Sports Car Market*, which is the bible of the upper-echelon collector-car world. (The faculty here in Naples includes *SCM* editor and publisher Keith Martin and columnist Simon Kidston, an ultra-high-end car broker.) But since the magazine consists mostly of auction reports, I’d assumed that the symposium was concerned primarily with car values—how to evaluate and forecast them.

The first hint that I had the wrong idea came in the schedule e-mailed to me by curator L. Scott George. Yes, there would be sessions dealing with “Current and Prospective Market Observations” and “Foundational Japanese Collecting.” But most titles sounded like course offerings in a university syllabus: “Restoration as Fiction.” “Reversible Techniques and Conservation Practices.” “Critique of Digital Resources.” “Preserving and Activating Historic Competition Cars Under Historical Conditions.”

When I arrive in Naples, I realize that cost is a secondary factor in the way most of the guests think about their cars. As Charlie Nearburg, whose collection ranges from prewar Millers to Cosworth DFV-era

Formula 1 cars, tells me: “Value is the biggest detriment to the appreciation of a car, because it attracts the wrong interest and it discourages its use. Everybody here is a serious student of cars in all of their aspects—performance, design, engineering, and, to a lesser extent, collectibility. There’s an intellectual curiosity here that reflects Miles’s spirit.”

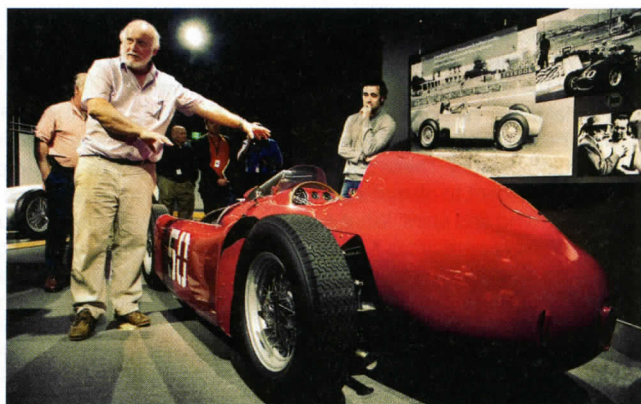
Collier is a silver-haired but well-preserved patriot with a weakness for obscure Latin phrases. Although his erect posture, wire-rimmed glasses, and non-sense manner evoke a military school headmaster, he’s approachable and personable, and he’s got a wickedly self-effacing sense of humor. Two things he won’t ever have to worry about are money and car-guy credibility. Naples is the largest city in Collier County, which was named after his grandfather, Barron, one of Florida’s most successful real-estate developers. Collier’s father and uncle, Miles and Sam, were two of the East Coast blue bloods who brought sports car racing to the United States in the 1930s and later helped found the Sports Car Club of America.

An artist by training, Collier did some racing as a young man and put together a stellar portfolio of Porsche racing cars. Then, in 1986, he acquired the magnificent collection previously owned by family friend Briggs Cunningham. Over the next few years, Collier developed a more profound appreciation for his cars as historical artifacts worthy of the same sort of preservation and veneration inspired by Renaissance frescoes or the statuary of classical antiquity. “It started as one of those inchoate mental itches,” he says. “But once you appreciate the historical nature of an object, you’re changed forever.”

Like many fresh converts, Collier was eager to spread the gospel. So in 2000, he held his first symposium for twenty-five guinea pigs. Since then, the scope and the ambition of the symposium have grown dramatically. Today, Collier says proudly, “We are the only automobile event in the world with intellectual content.” Shortly after I arrive, during his “Restoration as Fiction” lecture, I feel the full academic heft of the symposium.

“In the early days of collecting, the old car was seen

Guests take a closer look at the lovely Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B berlinetta (left) that won the Mille Miglia in 1947, while motorsports historian Doug Nye (below) shows off the finer points of a re-created Lancia D50.





Four-time Indy-car champion Dario Franchitti exercises the Cunningham C-4R, the Hemi-powered race car that won Sebring in 1953. Franchitti, however, was more impressed by the later, Jaguar-powered C-6R.

not as a repository of cultural patrimony but rather as a canvas for the self-expression of automotive hobbyists with a taste for the antique," he says. "Indeed, many of the most beautiful and charismatic restored cars have been historically 'destroyed,' becoming little more than modern replicas utilizing authentic content. By virtue of extensive embellishments or 'improvements' that have overwhelmed their documentary value, those automobiles have been negated as historical narratives." And later: "Our job as conservators of the past is to present historic objects in ways that maximize their documentary value, that is, as exemplars of their most representative configuration in period."

Furiously taking notes in the back of a darkened auditorium, I find myself flashing back to my college days and early-morning survey classes, which I barely passed (or stayed awake through). I'm not accustomed to hearing cars discussed in the formal language of critical analysis. Then again, I'm not used to taking cars so seriously. Which is Collier's principal point—that cars aren't merely disposable commodities, and that if a car is worth preserving, then its owner has to answer

a series of vexing questions before embarking on a restoration.

"Stewardship is a responsibility," major-league collector Bruce McCaw says after the lecture. "It's easy to say, 'This car looks tatty. Let's put a new paint job on it.' But you have to understand what you have. Some cars need to stay as they are. For them, preserving originality and history comes before everything else."

As I chat with McCaw, we stroll past a Ferrari 250LM and an Alfa Romeo GTZ. Sweet. Frankly, if the symposium had consisted of nothing but lectures, it would have been unbearably dry. The beauty of the event is that Collier can use the cars in his museum—privately held but open to the public on a limited basis—as case studies. And what an extraordinary collection it is.

Unlike fine-art shrines such as the Louvre or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Collier Collection doesn't try to be all things to all people. Each of the 115 cars is a jewel, and you float through the holdings in a heady haze of OMG moments. Oh, my god! There's a Mercedes-Benz W154! Is that really an original Vanwall?

CARS 101

Miles Collier's official biography describes him as an artist, investor, retired business executive, and philanthropist. But his greatest legacy may be his work as an educator.

"What's important to me is getting across the idea that the automobile is not a trivial thing," he says. "The automobile was the greatest change agent of the twentieth century. These objects here are a testament to all that's great in the human mind and spirit. What a story, and nobody appreciates it. The academy pays no attention to the automobile."

Collier hopes to right this perceived wrong with the Revs Program at Stanford University. Founded in 2011 and embedded in the school of engineering,

Revs is a multidisciplinary program that brings to bear various academic specialties—engineering, law, art history, anthropology, urban studies, and so on—on the history and future of the automobile.

Courses offered at Stanford through the Revs Program range from "The Automobile and the City" to "Legal Aspects of Autonomous Driving." Meanwhile, Revs researchers are also working on projects from "Understanding Corrosion and Preservation of Automobile Surfaces" to "The Representation of Cars in Video Games."

"We don't try to turn students into gearheads," says executive director Reilly Brennan. "But they can go through four years at college and never hear the word 'automobile.' Our goal is to put the automobile at the center of the university."



A collector with an educational bent, Miles Collier is the man behind both the symposium on connoisseurship and the Revs Program at Stanford University.

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“What good is preserving cars if we can’t enjoy them? I’m a gearhead. I want to hear them running. I’m worried that everything’s going to be put in a display case.”

No way! That’s *the* Spa-winning Gurney Eagle-Weslake!

Before his road-to-Damascus conversion regarding historic preservation, Collier made some mistakes, and he takes perverse pleasure in showing off his 1958 Porsche Carrera GT Speedster. Although the car looks like a lovely concours queen, Collier is still beating himself up for unraveling what had been a two-time SCCA national champion. “This is a good example of how our values have changed,” he explains to a group gathered around the car. “Thirty years ago, this is what people did. I wish I had a time machine so I could go back and save this car.”

In many cases, though, there are no easy—or indisputably correct—restoration choices. Paul Russell runs his hands over the Ferrari 166 Spyder Corsa he’s restoring for Collier. It was the first Ferrari to win a race in the United States. Later, Collier’s uncle was killed when he crashed the car at Watkins Glen. Later still, it raced in South America. “The question is,” Russell asks, “what point in time do we restore it to?”

Meanwhile, Fred Simeone, owner of the marvelous Simeone Automotive Museum, holds court around a partly primed Bugatti Type 35 that Louis Chiron raced to a second-place finish in the 1930 Targa Florio. “This [hood] is new,” he says. “This [frame-rail cover] is new. This [tail] is from another car. It’s never going to be an original car. So is it a better educational piece and more ethically honest if we leave it as it is, or does it make more sense to paint it?”

Not that painting a car, even in the wrong color, is necessarily a disaster. The symposium includes a technical seminar on reversible paint and a host of other conservation techniques that can be undone in the future. This is the kind of class where the Smithsonian Institution’s Malcolm Collum asks, “What are the solubility parameters of different kinds of resins?” No wonder I hear one attendee muttering, as he arrives on Wednesday morning, “Back to school.”

But there are lighter moments. On the final day, Doug Nye narrates an effervescent video biography of Briggs Cunningham. Then several Cunninghams are slowly exercised in the museum parking lot by Dario Franchitti. I’m thrilled to see the old warhorses in action and hear the roar of the hulking Hemis. But I can’t



help wishing that I’d been watching the cars—most of them built to run at Le Mans—on a racetrack.

Earlier, during the Too Important to Use panel discussion, Lee Clark, assistant manager of the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, had objected to the notion that it was irresponsible to risk historic racing cars on the track. “I’d just like to point out that, if it weren’t for vintage racing, most of these cars wouldn’t be here,” he said. “What good is preserving them if we can’t enjoy them? I’m a gearhead. I want to hear them running. I’m just worried that everything’s going to be put in a display case.”

The symposium has been an eye-opening experience. It’s given me a fresh appreciation for the critical role that originality and authenticity play in assessing the importance of historic cars, and I’ll never again look at these machines the same way. But at the same time, part of me remains convinced that race cars are defined by the act of racing. Unlike paintings or pieces of sculpture, they weren’t created to be admired. They were built to go fast, and, like Clark, I want to see them—and hear them and smell them and feel them—at speed.

Of course, I don’t have any skin in the game, so I guess it’s easy for me to say that rare, immensely valuable cars ought to be raced rather than kept under glass in a museum. But I’m hoping that self-help therapy isn’t too effective for Nick Mason and his fellow vintage racers. **AM**

A trio of Cunninghams—C-4R, C-5R, and C-6R (above, left to right)—sit in the parking lot outside the Revs Institute. Inside, attendees take a closer look at solvents, paints, resins, and other high-tech car-care products (top left).

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