

A Sunny Day in the Motor City

By Kevin A. Wilson

Photos by Joe Sage and courtesy RM Auctions and Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance



A seminar and panel discussion on Detroit Automotive Design was fielded by the best of the best: Wayne Kady, retired from GM, Bill Porter of GM, Patrick Schiavone of Ford, Bill Mitchell, retired from GM, and Ralph Gilles of Chrysler. Among their picks and pans was the influential Ghia-designed 1954 Fiat 8V Supersonic.

Given a choice of when to celebrate the 30th anniversary of one of the nation's top classic car shows, organizers of the Meadow Brook Concours d'Elegance might have chosen a different year. Any car event in southeast Michigan staged in the midst of Detroit's 2009 summer of discontent—with GM only just emerged from bankruptcy, Chrysler taken over by the Italians and the entire industry on the ropes—might have

easily descended into bathos, mere whistling in the dark.

Instead, August 1-2 was a beautiful weekend launch for the annual two-week "Autopalooza" festival starting with the Meadow Brook and winding up with the Woodward Dream Cruise. Cash-for-clunkers administered a defibrillator-jolt that yielded a detectable pulse in the showrooms even as the classic car lovers, many of whom earned the cash for their

collectormobiles in the new-car industry, were caressing the old paint with carnauba wax. After all, someone remarked, the first show in 1979 wasn't gloom-free: the industry was struggling with the impact of that year's OPEC oil embargo.

The first weekend of August often marks the onslaught of the area's humidity festival, too, making a stroll on the golf course behind historic Meadow Brook Hall (a 1920s Tudor mansion built by the widow of auto pioneer John Dodge) a steamy ordeal. This year delivered a pleasant sunny, warm day that was, if moister than the desert southwest, far short of perspiration-inducing—a perfect day for a

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1929 Rolls-Royce Phantom I York Roadster by Brewster, belonging (along with others) to Patrick S. Ryan of Asheville NC.





Photos: Paul Cannon / Meadow Brook Concours [2]

Concours "Best of Show" winners: 1939 Delahaye 165 Cabriolet, entered by the Peter Mullin Foundation (which also took home the People's Choice award) and a 1934 Packard V12 Sport Phaeton with body by Dietrich, belonging to Ray Scherr.

picnic lunch from a wicker basket on the lawn beside a great-looking car.

Oh yes, cars. Organizers delivered one heck of a show, fully up to the standards that put the words "Meadow Brook" right alongside Pebble Beach and Amelia Island in the pantheon of American concours. Harking back to the show's origins when the committee and judges were populated by major figures from the Big Three design departments (none other than Strother McMinn dubbed it "the designers' concours"), a group of designers both current and retired gathered in the mansion's ballroom to discuss automotive design and swap war stories from the old days. Along the way, they called up an intriguing critique of one of this year's featured cars, the Ghia-designed 1954 Fiat 8V Supersonic that was vastly influential to automotive styling for two decades. That Fiat has been newly ensconced as part of the "home team" didn't hurt any, but Chrysler design VP Ralph Gilles voiced the strongest criticisms of the car's overwrought detailing.

Celebrating Detroit-bred automotive design took several forms out on the show field, including a class called "Best of Detroit" that gathered no less than 80 cars demonstrating the local industry's highlights from the 1920s through the '60s. Looking back exactly 50 years, a circle of 1959 convertibles sported that era's big fins and copious layering of chrome, among which a Cadillac Biarritz copped a coveted "Lion" award while Best in Class honors went to Buick Electra 225. There was also a group of early drag racing cars, led by a '37 Willys Coupe and a '65 Mercury Comet that made the trip up from Tennessee. A 1931 Cadillac V-12 Roadster earned recognition for Nevada owners Steve and Jan Witort.

Meadow Brook has never been a mere "homer" show, though, with a cosmopolitan outlook that is belied only in the decision to award two "best of show" honors, one to a foreign and one to an American-made car. The 2009 winners were a stunning 1939 Delahaye 165 Cabriolet entered by the Peter Mullin Foundation



Photo: Darin Schabel / RM Auctions

This Auburn 851SC Boattail Speedster from the Chicago Auto Salon in 1935 was the RM Auction top earner, at \$462,000. A 2005 Ford GT, provided by Ford Motor Company, was sold to benefit juvenile diabetes, raising a cool \$187,000 for the group.



Photo: image courtesy Ford Motor Company

California show. For 15 years now, RM has staged a single auction on the Meadow Brook grounds that comes nowhere near the intensity of the six auctions vying for attention on the Monterey Peninsula but does draw some noteworthy participants from all over the globe. RM reported \$5.4 million in sales and claimed 79 percent of the 102 consigned lots sold—not bad for peddling expensive iron in the white hot center of a recession town, though the total was down from last year's \$9.9 million and the average sale was in the \$67,000 range vs. over \$110,000 in 2008. An Auburn 851SC Boattail Speedster that had debuted as Chicago Auto Salon exhibit in 1935 sold for \$462,000 to top the sales. A 2005 Ford GT, owned by Ford Motor Company, was sold to benefit the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation and got \$187,000.

Not to be forgotten is that the art show at Meadow Brook was the birthplace of the Automotive Fine Arts Society (AFAS). Unlike Pebble and Amelia, however, Meadow Brook's has remained an invitational art show independent of AFAS though including some artists from the society. A couple years ago, Britain's Gary Whinn was invited to exhibit here and was the poster artist for 2009. And he was on his way to a stint as the honored guest artist at the AFAS show in California when he came to Detroit this time—the invite to exhibit at Pebble is usually a prelude to an invitation to join AFAS itself.

Whinn's paintings are remarkable for the way in which each one tells a tale and includes—as too much automotive art does not—people interacting with cars. While cars are wonderful, it's the way they bring remarkable people together that really draws us to events like Meadow Brook and that part never changes, regardless of the economy, the weather or the geography. ■

Kevin A. Wilson is a contributing editor/special projects at *AutoWeek* magazine in Detroit and a freelance writer. He's also chief judge of the annual Ypsilanti (MI) Orphan Car Show and has judged numerous automotive art and car shows. Kevin resides in Waterford MI with his wife Toni, with whom he raised three adult sons.

(which also garnered People's Choice honors) and Ray Scherr's equally well-presented 1934 Packard V12 Sport Phaeton with body by Dietrich. Such decisions do make one wonder when, if ever, a panel of concours judges will break with tradition and give "best in show" honors to something that doesn't hail from the Classic Era.

Among the special awards, we were taken by Californian Peter McCoy's 1958 Ferrari 250 GT Cabriolet that collected a "Best Driving" award. Also lending a little Italian flavor to the field was the display of a 1934 Alfa Romeo 8C 2300, a one-off alloy-bodied Boattail Speedster never before seen in America that went home with a "Debut" trophy.

Oh, and lest we forget, the show also featured a motorcycle class for "British Twins" well-populated with Vincents, BSAs, Triumphs and a 1938 Brough Superior SS-100 that collected two trophies for its Floridian owner.

Part of what puts Meadow Brook on the calendar for dedicated car collectors is that it precedes Pebble Beach by a few weeks and often serves—though organizers of both events chafe at the suggestion—as a warm-up or preview of the

