

Four Days of Listening to the Artifact

For a car restoration to work, the forensics must be dead-on — and the poetics must be preserved

by Philip Richter



David Swig and Scott George discuss the importance, care and feeding, character and design specifics associated with the 1958 Scarab, chassis 003

Cars have a narrative that tells us of the time from which they came.
— Keith Martin

In March, I drove from Palm Beach to Naples, FL, in my SL55 AMG to attend the ninth Biennial Revs Institute Symposium on Connoisseurship and the Collectible Car.

The drive across Florida's Alligator Alley in an overpowered German beast turned out to be the perfect appetizer for what became an extraordinary four-day gourmet automobile buffet.

Revs is an acronym that stands for Researching Evolution of Vehicles in Society. Miles and Parker Collier host this event, and it is held at their spectacular car museum in Naples.

This unique conclave occurs every two years and covers collecting, restoration, legacy and the future of automobiles.

There were several elective sessions, and we were free to design our own tours with

the help of expert faculty. Presenters, speakers, panel members and symposium attendees represented the gold standard of influential collectors and key players in the collector car world. Pulitzer Prize-winning automotive journalists dined beside world-renowned restoration experts.

A banquet of cars — and ideas

On opening night we dined at the museum amid Enzo Ferrari's personal 1962 Superamerica, a 1929 Mercedes-Benz SSK, and a gaggle of rare Porsche race cars from the 1960s.

The meticulously maintained building is a state-of-the-art, purpose-built facility — a hurricane-proof architectural masterpiece. The walls are adorned with beautifully reproduced period photographs. Every car in the collection is significant. Each has a detailed description and is either completely original or has been meticulously restored to a condition that is precise to its date of manufacture.

Lectures and interactive sessions covered topics from estate planning for collections to the rise of modern collectibles. Industry luminaries such as Keith Martin, Donald Osborne, Miles Collier and David Swig led sessions.

An artist sketched each lecture in real time on a huge tapestry-like canvas, in a process called "graphic recording."

Thinking, questioning and talking

The presentations sparked serious thoughts and spirited and charged conversations.

Some questions that arose for collectors to consider:

When is a car too valuable to use?

Are replicas acceptable?

Do you use a car or save it? How important is originality?

What is the future of the preservation class?

Am I getting a good deal on a car and am I making a



Images courtesy of the Revs Institute

Visitors got a taste of the multi-year restoration of a rare Porsche 907 racer

friend in the process?

Buying a car is a personal decision. How much should we rely on key experts versus making our own decision?

Advice can often be a double-edged sword. None of these questions have absolute answers. Participants commented with candor — a reflection of the relaxed nature of the symposium.

On the topic of the growing demand for delivery-mile collector cars, one participant exclaimed, “The concept of an unused new-old car is like saving your wife for her next husband!”

A noted collector contrasted himself with strict preservationists by referring to himself as a “car molester.” “In my early years of collecting I immediately painted every car I bought red,” he proclaimed unabashedly.

Why we collect cars

One session covered the seven engagement factors for collectors: nostalgia, aesthetics, mastery, technical, history, competition, and fellowship. Participants were polled on these seven points and data were collected and sorted. After lunch, we reviewed the statistical output to contemplate the median, mode, standard deviation and average of these data.

The goal was to gain a further understanding of the diversity of our collecting habits, preferences and beliefs. It was a fascinating exercise, and the data demonstrated the dramatic variability in our tastes, views, priorities and preferences. Days at Revs often began with a statistical audience polling that was followed by rigorous analysis at the end of the day.

Research before restoration or preservation

The Revs Symposium exposed participants to what it really means to perform forensic automotive research. We learned how true professionals complete a historically authentic restoration on a vehicle.

As a group, we gained an understanding of the stark difference between a weekend hobbyist and a fanatical connoisseur.

The key to a proper restoration is “listening to the artifact” and “using what the car tells us.”



“Graphic recording” — an artist sketched the lectures in real time as they occurred

One speaker nailed it: “Don’t let your Platonic ideal ruin the artifact! The artifact tries to tell you not to mess around with it!”

The key to performing a proper restoration is noticing factory overspray, studying blueprints, viewing period photographs, looking at all historical documentation and carefully looking at old film footage.

Restoring a race car is particularly difficult because our human instinct is to make everything perfect. But real vintage race cars left the factory with paint and panel fit that were not to production-car specifications. Paint added weight to the car, and lightweight fenders were approximately fitted.

Manufacturers have left us fingerprints on each car, and these details should be respected and studied. As one speaker aptly put it, “A proper race car restoration is one that makes the car as big a piece of shit now as it

SCMer list



A gaggle of 1960s-era Porsche racers provided a wonderful backdrop to the proceedings

was then.”

In the case of rare race cars, this means that things are not symmetrical and the paint is generally poor in quality. While you can never get a car back to its originality, you cannot substitute modern paint for old paint. Race cars with real patina are preferable to perfect cars. For a restoration to work, the forensics must be dead-on — and the poetics must be preserved.

How important is this car?

With less valuable, higher-production cars, you have certain license to do things that are reversible. If you are going to modify something, find a sacrificial car and build a tribute car.

Some questions to ask yourself when embarking on a restoration project: How important is the car? What’s your goal? Are the modifications reversible? What are your responsibilities to future generations with a legacy artifact?

Details

If you find yourself heading to the west coast of Florida, do not miss seeing the Collier Collection at the Revs Institute. Visits are scheduled by appointment only, so visit revsinstitute.org or call 239.687.REVS. Also, visit the website for the fascinating, enormous (and growing) database of automobile literature and memorabilia. You will keep coming back, over and over again.

Scott George, the encyclopedic curator of the Revs Institute, took us through a physical tour of the multi-year restoration of a rare Porsche 907 race car. This car was acquired from a one-owner family in Switzerland. It had been lightly raced and then put away for 40 years. It was a very original specimen — save for one problem: At some point the owner tried to convert it to a street-legal road car, and in the process, made several alterations that needed to be undone and forensically corrected.

The most troublesome modification was made to the lightweight fiberglass body panels. It is still not exactly clear why, but the prior owner added layers of fiberglass on top of the original bodywork. These modifications may have been done to strengthen the body or perhaps

were an attempt to make a mold of the 907. Nobody knows for sure.

The restoration group at the Collier Collection spent hundreds of hours carefully removing and correcting the fragile, paper-thin body panels. The prior owner had also spray-painted the entire engine bay and interior with heavy black paint. This non-factory paint was all carefully removed.

The most nerve-wracking thing about doing this restoration was preserving the original five-millimeter-thick windshield. It was very difficult to restore and remove the excess fiberglass without damaging the windscreen.

A world-class research library

We also were given a tour of the Collier Automotive Library, which has to be the most extensive and thoughtful automotive library in the world.

This experience was totally overwhelming; the extensive artifacts almost eclipsed the impact of the cars themselves. We donned white cloth gloves and handled rare race posters and car brochures from the 1920s. We browsed the seemingly endless shelves of rare books, manuals, posters, blueprints and magazines. It would take years to even scratch the surface of all the contents.

The museum is always engaged in acquiring more rare material. The team at Revs searches for entire collections that often take people a lifetime to create. Each month, Collier’s team archives more than 6,000 images and documents and adds them to the website. Eventually, all of the major library contents will be available online via a robust searchable database.

A thoughtful approach with friends

Words fail to describe what the Collier Collection has created in South Florida. The experience was simply unparalleled. The Collier Collection might not be largest car collection in the world (it’s very big!), but it certainly is the most thoughtful.

Miles and Parker Collier have a deep respect for history, research, authenticity, and fellowship, and their collection as well as the event itself is a reflection of these core values.

The Revs Symposium is rich in education and camaraderie. Over the course of four days, I met and befriended so many extraordinary people.

Everyone was eager to learn from each other’s specialties and particular interests. A shared passion for the collectible motorcar brought us all together to this remarkable place for an immersion in the best of the collector world.

In short, it was this collector car fanatic’s idea of heaven. ♦



Never forget that they were meant to be driven



The quality of the food matched the quality of the camaraderie