

Rationalizing the Lunatic Fringe: Bases of Classic Car Enthusiasm

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Each year since the mid-1970s, during the third week of August, thousands of classic car enthusiasts have descended on California's Monterey Peninsula, for what has become the United States' premier classic car event. Seedy motels charge two hundred dollars a night, require a four night minimum stay, and are fully booked two months in advance. What is simply called "Monterey" began as two formal events, The Concours d'Elegance at the world-famous Pebble Beach Lodge and golf course, and the historic races at Laguna Seca Racetrack (the "Historics"), but has now evolved into an entire week, and even spilled into the week before with the "pre-historics." Today, there are so many events that it is impossible to attend them all, including many car shows, parties hosted by local collectors and enthusiasts, and no fewer than four different auctions, during which over \$140 million in cars changed hands in 2008. Participation in many of the events, including Pebble Beach and the Historics, is by invitation only, and the finest examples of the genre come from around the world, selected from collections in Europe, South America, Australia, and Asia.

Thousands of enthusiasts and collectors come from around the globe and face a dizzying array of options. Because the events are geographically spread out, driving from event to event is as exciting as the events themselves. Cars that are most frequently in the pages of magazines and books are all over the roads, filled with luggage and people, and it seems that every fourth car is a Ferrari. All varieties of exotic and esoteric cars are commonplace, lining the streets, clogging the parking lots, and yes, even spending the night outside. Thus, despite the exorbitant cost of some of the tickets (admission to the concours at Pebble Beach is \$175 per person), it is not necessary to be wealthy to enjoy the weekend. Tickets to the race are still relatively inexpensive as well, though naturally, the demographic of the weekend skews towards the wealthy.

Events comparable to Monterey exist for enthusiasts of American cars (muscle cars and hot rods primarily), but in general, American cars are fairly well separated from the European sports and touring cars with which this paper is concerned. The cars on which this paper focuses are almost entirely European and built, for the most part, between the 1920s and the

1980s. In all cases, these cars are not simply objects of function or convenience for enthusiasts, but fulfill other unique roles in their lives, which are often complementary with regard to “new” cars.

While contemporary cars are functionally superior to classic cars in almost all respects (they are faster, more comfortable, more efficient, safer, more completely equipped), there exists a sizeable and persistent following for old cars. Car enthusiasts feel a strong connection with classic cars for a number of reasons that are varied and not always rational in the conventional sense, including the emotional and experiential aspects of cars, the social aspects of the hobby, and the larger cultural implications of the cars.

Thus, classic cars are objects whose meaning and value exist not only because of their intrinsic scientific and technological properties, but also because of their cultural and social aspects and context. The value of the cars exists in spite of, or perhaps *because of* their technological and functional obsolescence, demonstrating that for many consumers, traditional quantitative metrics and performance-based assessments are an oversimplified model with which to consider products. By taking a more holistic view of products then, designers of all types of technics, from buildings to consumer electronics to furniture, can learn a great deal about creating more satisfying and therefore more durable products.

A High-Speed Survey of the Social and Cultural Significance of the Automobile

The notion of automobiles as more than merely practical objects is hardly new. In fact, early cars were highly impractical, and certainly much less practical than the then-current norm of travel by horse. In addition to being slower than horses, early automobiles required tremendous technical expertise simply to operate. Early motorists were as much mechanics as they were drivers, and automobiles were curiosities of the rich rather than mobilizers of the masses as they would later become. In fact, automobiles were enormously unpopular with all but the very rich, so much so that Woodrow Wilson stated in 1906 that “nothing has spread socialistic feeling more than the automobile” and described the automobile as “a picture of arrogance and wealth” (Kim and Mauborgne, 2004). The first contests of speed occurred during the closing years of the nineteenth century, and during this period, other forms of cultural activity centered around automobiles also emerged. The Concours d’Elegance, a competitive show judged on the basis of elegance, correctness, and preparation, originally came into existence in the context of carriages during the seventeenth century (“East African Concours d’Elegance History,” 2006), but was soon applied to automobiles, particularly since early automobile bodies were built by carriage makers. Therefore, during this period, cars were primarily a plaything of the rich. They were signs of status and social class, and consequently, they represented much more than solely practical devices with only instrumental value.

The arrival of mass-produced and comparatively affordable automobiles gradually brought cars to the masses, with over half of all American households owning a car by 1923 (Kim and Mauborgne, 2004). This trend continued during the postwar years, particularly following the construction of the Eisenhower Interstate System. The automobile was a pervasive sign of the burgeoning American economy and given the American fixation on independence, a new automobile was high on the list of products that every American wanted. The lobbying power and leverage of the large Detroit automakers also facilitated the massive increase in the number of automobiles, as did the suburban built environment, whose existence made having an automobile a necessity for the average person.

With this expanding influence of the automobile came a shift in the way users perceived the product. For the majority of motorists, automobiles were and remain valuable primarily in the instrumental sense: they achieve a particular end, and are useful and “necessary,” rather than being satisfying or indulgent. For most Americans, automobiles also serve some limited social purpose as indicators of status and outlook. Automobile manufacturers try to capitalize on the social relevance of automobiles through a carefully maintained balance of individuality and universal appeal in their marketing and branding.

For most, it remains that practical considerations are paramount when it comes to cars. If a car does not work, then it is not a good car, no matter how “cool,” prestigious, feature-laden, or affordable it is. However, modern cars are so well-developed that for the most part, significant functional differences no longer exist. They all work, almost all of the time (barring operator error), so that most cars are more or less interchangeable for users in terms of functionality. Performance and reliability increases have exceeded the rate at which consumers can absorb these improvements, which has led to automakers differentiating their products on the basis of other metrics such identity, style, or efficiency. More often though, automakers cannot differentiate their products at all: for a full forty percent of car buyers, color availability is sufficiently important to cause them to change their vehicle choice (Gray, 2008). Thus, cars are like most consumer goods, such as electronics or appliances. Most people do not care about the engineered characteristics because all cars are functional, and consumers choose to rely instead on impulse, initial impression, and price when making decisions.

Though most people regard their car purchase as little more important than a washing machine selection, there is a sizable group of automobile enthusiasts that regards automobile selection with great seriousness. A subset of these enthusiasts has a preference for older automobiles that would be considered inferior according to the metrics used by the average modern motorist. These enthusiasts of classic cars gleefully subordinate functionality and utility. To these individuals, the ideal car is likely uncomfortable, uneconomical, unreliable, and may or may not have

sufficient space for the occupants, let alone their personal effects that might take the form of luggage. It is important to point out, however, that these characteristics are not necessarily the basis of such cars' appeal. There are many other complex and interrelated characteristics that help to explain (but not rationalize) the appeal of old cars, and these characteristics are both intrinsic to the cars, and equally importantly, based on cultural and social institutions.

While classic cars have attracted relatively little attention from scholars, design theory helps to explain their appeal. Questions about disposability, user interface, and the role of emotion are frequently covered topics in product design scholarship, and are relevant to the exploration of the appeal of old cars. Because the appeal of classic cars is based so heavily on emotion, it is useful to approach them through qualitative design theory that emphasizes psychology and emotion. The work of Donald Norman in particular (e.g., *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things* (2004)) stresses the visceral character of our interactions with the objects with which we surround ourselves, and how our emotions can often subordinate rational considerations as we formulate preferences and opinions about products.

Jonathan Chapman's *Emotionally Durable Design* (2005) also explores the significance of emotion and attachment in our consumption of goods. It posits that the enduring relationship that results from "emotionally durable design" is an important factor in the sustainability of the future. Classic cars are an example of this phenomenon at play, and have at their core another important characteristic that Chapman (year) considers: our formation of attachments to objects.

The notion of sustainability with regard to classic cars has also appeared in other scholarly literature, including an *International Journal of Consumer Studies* article, "From Banger to Classic—A Model for Sustainable Car Consumption?" (Nieuwenhuis, 2008). This article presents an economic argument that considers old cars from the point of view of sustainability, a perspective that at first seems ridiculous in light of the particularly intense odor of incompletely combusted hydrocarbons that invariably issues from the exhausts of carbureted and smog-exempt classic cars.

My own experience as a participant observer is also an essential part of this paper's exploration of classic cars. As a would-be collector, I have been a car enthusiast since I was born. My parents first properly met because of a car my father was selling, and the earliest memory that I can pinpoint is car-related (the May 1990 acquisition of a pair of cars that are still in the family). My knowledge of cars has been cultivated through reading books and magazines, but also through experiencing them directly. Anecdotal experience from my parents and others has also contributed significantly to my knowledge base as well.

My professional experience at Fantasy Junction, an international broker of collector cars, in sales and as a copywriter, exposed me to

hundreds of collector car enthusiasts, as well as to my coworkers, who have had experience with an aggregated thousands of enthusiasts. As a copywriter, I write comprehensive descriptions of each car, which are then published on the company's website and emailed to clients. In this practice, it is essential to be intimately familiar with all aspects of the hobby and what appeals to enthusiasts. Knowing which features and characteristics make a particular model unique and appealing, and which thus need to be emphasized, is a critical part of the job that requires a nuanced comprehension of collectors, their mentalities, and the cars themselves.

A significant part of the hobby is the social aspect, and Fantasy Junction is a focal point of enthusiast activity at which much socializing occurs. The showroom, which houses approximately fifty cars, is a living museum of sorts, and thus a crossroads for enthusiasts, many of whom regularly stop by to see our ever-changing stock. Part of the work of being a member of the sales team is socializing with the customers in the showroom. Customers are particularly happy to talk about cars since most enthusiasts do not have a regular opportunity to discuss cars and enjoy the opportunity to talk about their hobby.

I have sorted the responses and trends we observe in the industry into three categories to explain why people enjoy classic cars: (1) the experiential aspects of the cars themselves, (2) the social aspects of the hobby (in the sociological sense), and (3) the cultural context of the cars. Enthusiasts of old cars often have a difficult time rationalizing their fondness for old cars, but one of the most universal sentiments expressed by enthusiasts is that old cars evoke emotion. These emotions emerge from any of the three aforementioned categories, but are strongest in the experiential aspects of the cars. In *Emotional Design*, Donald Norman (2004: 65-89) suggests that emotion in reference to objects has its basis in three cognitive processes: visceral (based on the senses), behavioral (based on using and interacting with), and reflective (based on rationalizing and explaining, as might be invoked by technological aspects).

Personal Aspects of Interacting with Cars: What is it Like to Experience an Old Car?

The visceral aspects of old cars are perceived by the human senses (except taste, generally speaking) and are intuitively understood. Since human beings receive the majority of their sensory input through sight, the importance of a car's appearance is self-evident. Enthusiasts value a wide variety of characteristics, which makes systematically describing or analyzing the aspects of various cars that make them attractive difficult.

However, enthusiasts usually value a few basic properties such as proportion and stance. Curvaceousness and proportion when combined are generally quite promising for a car's attractiveness, but the curves must be meaningful in that they are inspired by some function, such as the curve of a fender to enclose a wheel, or the taper of a car's profile to make

it more aerodynamic (see Figures 1-3). Aesthetic appeal may not necessarily equate to beauty, however. Certain cars are attractive because of a rational, angular, and proportional character that is perhaps not beautiful, but attractive nevertheless (see Figure 4).



FIGURE 1. 1938 Talbot- Lago T150SS with Figoni et Falaschi Teardrop bodywork.



FIGURE 2. 1953 Bentley R-Type Continental



FIGURE 3. 1967 Ferrari 275 GTB/4



FIGURE 4. 1967 Maserati Quattroporte

Assessing attractiveness in cars is further confounded by the fact that cars are complex durable goods whose meaning is derived from history, technology, and the culture of cars. Consequently, enthusiasts cannot

objectively assess a car's appearance without considering the contextualized meaning of each component, cue, or feature. For example, a certain component may carry particular meaning because it is evocative of racing, such as the quick-release type fuel filler. Its aesthetic appeal is intensified because it is so representative of the racing cars of the 1950s and 1960s, whose blend of innovative but "streetable" technology and legendary driver personalities has made them some of the most valuable cars in existence (Figures 5 and 6).

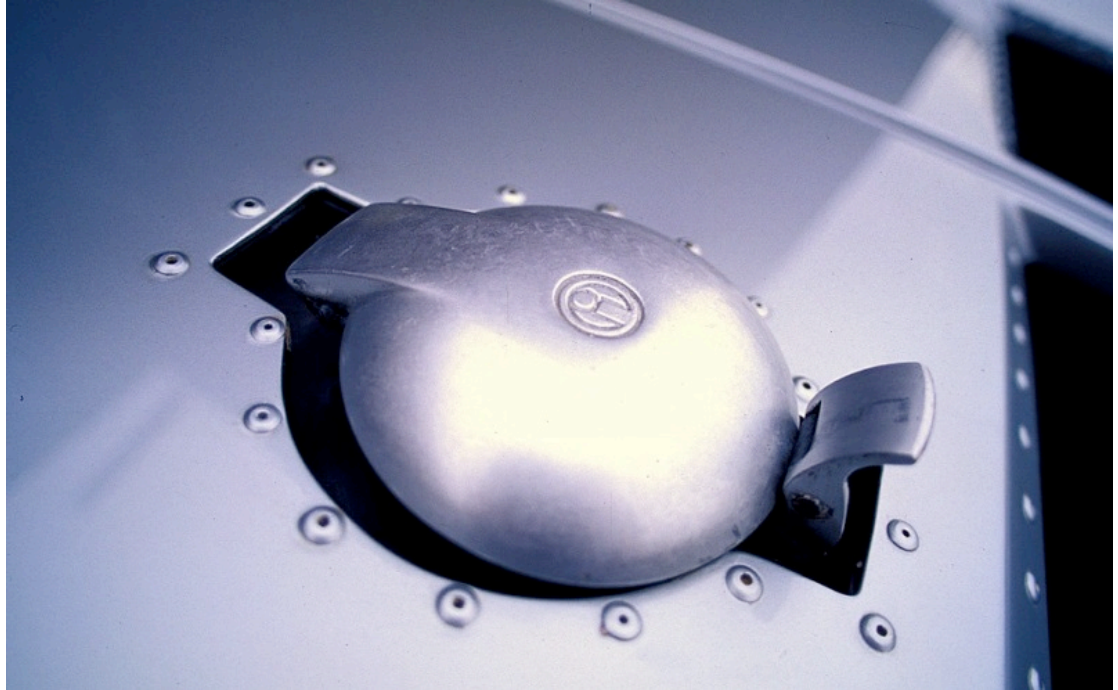


FIGURE 5. Quick release racing type fuel filler (Joe Sackey)



FIGURE 6. 1963 Ferrari 250 GTO, generally regarded to be the most valuable car in existence with a value around \$25 million.

Sound is another extremely important aspect of the sensuous experience of an old car. For an enthusiast, the sound of an engine can quite literally make the hairs on the backs of their necks stand up. In sports cars, the engine sound is the most significant sound made by the car, and analogies invariably draw parallels to music. Every engine configuration has a unique character, appeal, sound, and meaning—the classic V8 sound is rough and uneven, and is representative of a certain crudeness and raw brutish power often associated with American cars. The V12 is a much more sophisticated, smooth, and musical sound. A Porsche 911’s distinctive wail is the result of its six horizontally opposed cylinders and is such an integral part of the 911’s identity that engineers go to great lengths today to engineer engines in new Porsches to sound “right”—that is, similar to the original 911s of the 1960s and 1970s. Again, the meaning of these sounds is based on experience, context, and expertise, and is thus an area in which enthusiasts can exercise specific knowledge and demonstrate group membership. Modern cars are subject to tight regulations in terms of the amount of noise they can make, which begins to hint at one of the reasons why enthusiasts prefer old cars: they represent an unadulterated expression of an “original” design.

The sounds made by other parts of the car are important as well. Another sound that is carefully engineered in modern cars, but simply existed in old cars is the sound of the doors closing. In older cars, this sound is distinctly more metallic and “real”—it is representative of an honesty of materials, of metal against metal instead of a vague and muted “thunk.” Similar examples abound, from the noises of the switches and

controls, to various other mechanical noises such as the whine of the gears in the gearbox and differential.

Smell is especially evocative for enthusiasts because it has a physiological basis that ties it powerfully to emotion. Unlike all other sensory perception modes, the olfactory nerve passes directly into the forebrain, specifically to the limbic system and hippocampus, the areas that control emotion and memory. Smell is the only such sense that has a direct tie into this part of the brain. In contrast, the signals from all other senses must be centrally processed in the cerebral cortex at the rear of the brain before being relayed to the rest of the brain for interpretation. Therefore, the smells associated with old cars, such as the smells of oil, exhaust, wool, or leather, are particularly powerful on an emotional level. Again, as is the case with the other sensory aspects of old cars, new cars are not as sensually rich, because the goal has been to isolate the occupants from the unpleasant mechanical business of conveying people.

Touch is another sense that provides a pronounced source of difference between old and new cars. At the core of this difference is the fact that new cars are extremely plastic-intensive, whereas most classic cars predate the widespread use of plastic in industrial applications. Therefore, there is a certain “honesty” of materials present in old cars—the feel of a wood-rimmed steering wheel, a cold metal switch (which also appeals on the aural level since its “click” is so committing). In contrast, new cars are not as honest about their construction. Fasteners and inner workings are hidden, and often synthetic materials are engineered to mimic something else—wood or leather, for example.

Taken collectively, the sensory aspects of old cars make it clear that classic cars are much more physiologically stimulating than new cars. As creatures that seek and enjoy sensory stimulation, it is no wonder that old cars, with their raucous, unabashedly straightforward execution and expression are so appealing to enthusiasts. Modern cars (especially expensive ones) often attempt to recapture the feel of older ones, yet this never wholly succeeds simply because old cars were not engineered with so much intentionality. Enthusiasts rarely consider this consciously, but it is there, and is one of the many reasons why old car enthusiasts could never derive the same satisfaction from a new car.

Behavioral aspects of classic cars are also extremely important in their appeal. While not as elemental as the visceral aspects, the pleasure that comes from using and interacting with classic cars requires the user to act rather than perceive. Driving is one obvious form of behavioral interaction, and is interwoven with the visceral aspects of the cars. The actual act of driving a classic car is much more involved than in contemporary cars, and requires an initiation of sorts. It is not possible to simply get into one of these cars and drive away as one would do with a new car. One must be familiar with the operation of carburetors, fuel enriching mechanisms (such as a choke), and the idiosyncrasies of old cars (such as turn signals operated by a button in the center of the steering

wheel, or the double-clutching technique required to successfully drive a car with an unsynchronized manual transmission). These cars emerged in isolation from one another, and unfettered by federal regulation regarding markings and the operation of controls, such that tremendous variance between models and marques of cars emerged. Switches in old cars are rarely marked, while ergonomics, if acknowledged at all, seems to vary based on the mood of the designer. Consequently, driving old cars requires particular skill and experience; simply driving around the block can demonstrate the driver to be a “good driver,” whereas in modern cars, such a differentiation between drivers’ skill is not an intrinsic part of the user experience. This requirement of skill is satisfying for enthusiasts not only because of the pleasure that comes from successfully operating an old car, but also because it distinguishes enthusiasts as members of a select group.

Mechanical prowess is another behavioral aspect of experiencing old cars that differentiates them from new cars. Old cars are not as reliable as new cars, and often require finessing to start or operate. Yet their simplicity of construction and lack of computers and complex electrical systems means that enthusiasts can often work on their cars themselves. They do not need expensive diagnostic tools. The engine compartments are straightforward in appearance. This “do it yourself” character pervades the experience of working on cars, right down to changing a tire. On many old cars, the wheel is held on by a spinner with “ears” instead of lug nuts or bolts. To loosen the spinner, one must hit it repeatedly with a hammer that has a head that is softer than the spinner so that it deforms and transfers energy to the spinner, thus loosening it. This process is typical of the more involved character of interacting with old cars and is part of the appeal for owners. It is unimaginable that a routine car maintenance process today would require the owner to repeatedly hit any part of the car with a hammer!



FIGURE 7. A Borrani wire wheel including the spinner on a 1964 Ferrari 250 GT “Lusso.”

The simplicity of the cars is appealing at a cognitive level, which is a demonstration of the reflective level of processing on which enthusiasts regard their cars. Reflective processing, characterized by intellectual and rational consideration, is often intertwined with the other levels of processing, and has an important bearing on other (e.g., cultural) aspects of interacting with old cars.

Technical, engineering, and design characteristics of the cars are also part of the reflective enjoyment that enthusiasts find in certain cars. An example of reflective appeal at a technical level is the marque Lancia, an Italian car company that manufactured some of the world's finest and most innovative cars from the 1910s to the early 1970s. The cars innovated with unusual, complex, and/or elegant solutions to familiar problems. They were built to the highest standards and the company prided itself on how accountants were not allowed to "value engineer" the products (i.e., cut costs). Today, Lancias from this period are highly prized by sophisticated enthusiasts who appreciate the engineering features of the cars and take pride and enjoyment in describing and examining the unorthodox solutions devised by the Lancia engineers, a decidedly reflective pleasure.*

Social Events: People Relating to Other People through Classic Cars

In addition to these primarily self-regarding aspects of experiencing cars, enthusiasts derive pleasure from a wide variety of car events that are social in nature. Like Fantasy Junction's showroom, classic automobiles exist as social focal points for enthusiasts. Events range from the prestigious international shows with corporate sponsors (i.e., luxury-goods manufacturers like Rolex and Louis Vuitton) to the most casual Saturday get-togethers. Each event has a unique character, appeal, and group of participants, though the events are not mutually exclusive.

The most prestigious events are the Concours d'Elegance, in which the cars usually appear by invitation only, and are categorized by classes (for example, sports cars from 1950 to 1959 with a price new over \$5000). Concours always occur on manicured lawns, and the cars are judged on the basis of condition, preparation (cleanliness), and correctness (how closely the car's configuration matches its original factory configuration). Successful entries have invariably been subjected to a comprehensive restoration at a six-figure cost (in U.S. dollars) that could in extreme cases

* Examples of this include the construction of the world's first monocoque car, the Lambda, the placement of universal joints *inside* of the hubs on the Aurelia (hence its abnormally large spinners), the thermostatically actuated radiator blind system and vacuum operated quarter windows in the Flaminia, and the use of front wheel drive and a narrow angle V4 engine in the Fulvia.

approach half a million dollars. The entire car, including the exterior, interior, engine compartment, trunk, and underside (which is often “clean enough to eat off of”) are closely scrutinized, and the car is scored by a panel of judges (usually identified by khakis, blue blazers, and straw boater hats), who deduct points for flaws and incorrect aspects. Correctness is considered at the most minute level—hose clamps, ordinarily parts that cost a few cents, must be of the correct type and produced by the same manufacturer as originally supplied on the car, the car must sit on its original specification tires (often out of production for decades and therefore unsafe to drive on), and original details such as decals in the engine compartment, tool sets, and owner’s manuals and pouches are required with competitive examples. Concours condition cars are rarely driven under their own power (hence the derogatory term “trailer queen”), and are invariably in better condition than they would have been when new. In addition to winners in each class, judges select the “Best of Show,” and the margin that separates cars is often small fractions of points on a hundred-point scale.



FIGURE 8. Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance

Because of the exclusivity of the events and the cost of the cars, Concours exist as an example of a type of car-centered social activity that is elite, and in which status has great importance. For individuals who are surrounded by wealthy peers, having money is insufficient to differentiate oneself, and so the recognition conferred by owning a winning car is a way to increase status as a sort of answer to the question “what do you get for the man who has everything?” Often, cars that have won repeatedly on the show circuit are sold shortly thereafter since the owner has done

everything they can with the car, and would like to move on to something else.

Perhaps at the opposite end of the spectrum are races and rallies—events where the car (usually a sports or racing car) is put through its paces and actually driven, either on a race track in competition (races), or on scenic public roads. The cosmetic condition of the cars is secondary in these cases (but the cars are often in superb order), and it is the skill of the driver and the mechanical preparation of the car that lead to success in these events. Frequently, these races are not about winning, but more about seeing and using the cars in motion in activities that are primarily about fun and visceral pleasure. Races often occur in series during a season, so that one comes to recognize other competitors and their cars, which builds a sense of community and a social aspect.



FIGURE 9. A representative scene from the Monterey Historics featuring a pair of Alfa Romeo 8C 2300s.

Races and rallies range in prestige, from carefully regulated invitation-only events that stipulate specific eligibility requirements, to entirely casual events that are fundamentally about getting as much pleasurable driving done for the least amount of money. Certainly one of the most prestigious events is the California Mille (named after the Mille Miglia, [“thousand miles”], a one-thousand-mile Italian road race run until the 1950’s), which is an annual invitation-only event open to cars built in 1957 and earlier that starts at San Francisco’s Fairmont Hotel each April and covers a thousand miles of Northern California’s scenic roads. The stops are carefully planned at the finest wineries and hotels, and the

participants are pampered in exchange for the approximately five-thousand dollar entry fee.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the California M  le, whose name is a jab at the Mille, but whose philosophy is open entry to any pre-1976 car for a modest fee (\$299), and includes decidedly more basic accommodations. On their website, they claim that they “have always believed an event shouldn’t cost more than a set of used tires or a homemade wiring harness” (Guzaitis and Welch, 2005), demonstrating a more democratic and inclusive side of the classic car hobby. Interestingly, in addition to the less prestigious cars that would never be admitted to the Mille, there are often high caliber cars valued at several hundred thousand dollars that would be equally at home on the Mille. In this way, the M  le permits enthusiasts from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds to converge at the same point, from the owner of a \$4000 1970 BMW 2002 to the owner of a half a million dollar AC Cobra.



FIGURE 10. A scene from the California M  le depicting a 289cid AC Cobra and BMW 2002.

The reasons why an owner of such an expensive car might participate in a lower-budget event vary; it could be based in the simple desire to get out and enjoy the car as often as possible, or the decision may be political. The crowd and topics of conversation at the high-budget events are decidedly different from those at lower-budget ones because of the demographic differences, and an owner’s decision to participate in one event rather than the other might center on which group the owner

identifies with more strongly. The high caliber events tend to be excessively formal and pretentious, at the expense of fun in the eyes of many enthusiasts.

There are several other types of events that classic car enthusiasts attend, including auctions at which cars change hands (in a way very similar to art, and sometimes by the same auction houses such as Christie's), and more informal weekend get-togethers that include working on cars, talking about cars, or going on group drives. The common thread of these events, which is central to their appeal and meaning, is the socialization that occurs. The common pose at any of these events is to be standing, usually in a semicircle, facing a car and talking about a range of topics, both car-related and not. This happens at events of all types, from the most prestigious Concours to the most informal "wrenchfest". There is no set topic—it could range from technical topics (a fix for a particular problem, a good source for finding a particularly difficult to find part), to storytelling ("...and the next thing I knew, there was a crowd three deep as I desperately tried to find my fire extinguisher in the trunk..."), to discussions of value trends and the idiosyncrasies of particular models.

Thus, while all events are ostensibly centered on cars, the convergence of like-minded people for socialization is an integral part of why enthusiasts participate in these events. The geographic concentration of old car enthusiasts is generally low enough that they do not ordinarily get the opportunity to socialize with other enthusiasts, which makes the events an intentional way to "get a car fix." The resulting social groups are surprisingly resilient, despite the fact that they do not necessarily convene that frequently. For enthusiasts, having a social group independent of other fluid factors, such as one's job or neighborhood, adds a layer of social security and stability, in addition to a satisfying sense of group membership. These groups often extend into cyberspace through online discussion forums and boards.

In social circumstances surrounding cars, enthusiasts prize a wide variety of information and interactions. There is a particular fixation on obscure and esoteric information of the sort that would be deployed in Concours events. Apparently irrelevant knowledge is highly valued—there are enthusiasts who can tell you what month of 1973 the "Shell Motor Oil" sticker on the engine of the Porsche 911 changed styles (it's March if you were wondering). This is a particularly pedantic example of the fixation on "correctness," of which an extreme variety is called "originality."

An "original" car has never received any restorative work—it still wears the paint that was applied at the factory, the interior has never been modified or reupholstered, and as many of the original consumable mechanical parts as viable are still installed on the car. Original cars can range from like-new time warp condition to decidedly worn ("patina" is usually the euphemism of choice), but original cars are prized for their "honesty" and faithfulness to the original construction and configuration

of the car. Since the majority of cars have covered many miles and lasted several decades, it is very rare to find one that is unadulterated in this way (“unmolested” is another often-used and value-laden word), which is another reason why enthusiasts prize originality. Enthusiasts often repeat that “a car can be restored over and over, but it is only original once.” Therefore, enthusiasts prize originality, and it is often a major selling or bragging point when socializing.

Alternatively, there are enthusiasts who prefer to alter their cars for any number of reasons. Modern technology has created the potential to improve the operation of old cars, so many enthusiasts prefer to alter their cars discreetly, taking advantage of modern technology to make the cars more pleasurable to use and more reliable and usable in modern traffic. Most commonly, modernizations are applied to safety systems such as the tires, electrical systems, brakes, and cooling systems. In these cases, there is always tension between maintaining the original feel and ethos of the car, and making it usable in modern traffic, a subjective decision made by the owner to reflect their personal views.

In this way, alterations to cars also represent opportunities for self-expression and individuality. Individuals vary with regard to what they consider appealing and appropriate in cars. The changes that they make can range from fairly simple functional improvements to wholesale reworks of the entire car such that it becomes appropriate to describe the car in terms of a “creative vision.” Often, this work requires working within a certain framework of what is “appropriate.” For example, changes that are consistent with the car’s original design philosophy are more highly valued by enthusiasts, and it is thus necessary to have a detailed working knowledge of both the norms in the hobby and the original design intent of the car.

Contextual Ties: People Relating to Culture and Society through Classic Cars

The importance of being familiar with the context in which the car was originally conceived is essential to the social and experiential aspects of interacting with cars. This subtle point is not frequently considered by enthusiasts in an explicit manner, but it often guides the hobby and its values. Within the hobby, there are countless variations—often, individuals are fanatically devoted to a particular marque or genre of car - and these individual variations are based on a wide variety of factors that can almost always be traced back to a particular culture, society, or philosophy. Different individuals identify with different companies and varieties of cars, and this is a driving factor behind their particular interests.

In this sense, classic cars are a highly representative example of the social construction of technology. National differences present a striking example of cars as “congealed social interests”: German cars are different from Italian cars, which are different from British ones, in ways that are

surprisingly stereotypical. Attractive cars emerge from all of these countries, but they are attractive in different ways that reflect their national origin.

German cars are typically restrained and rational in their beauty, and there is usually a strong functional basis for design decisions. Almost every element of the design exists for a reason. When they are outlandish, it is on the level of engineering, which is always top notch, to the point that the cars are even a bit sterile. They are well-built and generally reliable, if expensive to maintain.

Italian cars are much more expressive, gorgeous, and temperamental. Even the expensive ones such as Ferraris, Maseratis, and Lamborghinis were not always built to the highest standards, nor are they reliable or logical in their design and execution. Oftentimes, close inspection causes the observer to ask “why?”, and there is not always an answer to this question. Italian cars are also famous for the changes that were spontaneously made during the production run. Simply because a particular part or wiring diagram applies to one example, it does not mean that it will apply to another example built a month later. The Italian approach tended to be much more haphazard, using whatever materials were handy at a particular moment. Italian cars do, however, embody a certain soulfulness that is highly romantic and is visible in Italian designs of all types, be it shoes, clothes, or household wares. Therefore, most enthusiasts would agree that if a German car is a faithful and reflective wife, then an Italian car is an impulsive mistress. These characteristics color all aspects of the cars, including the visceral experience, so that even the intrinsic characteristics of the technics themselves actually have their bases in the cultural peculiarities of certain societies.

Another cultural aspect of the cars that underpins a significant portion of their appeal is how they are direct representations of a particular era. For older users, this may directly evoke a sense of nostalgia, and for those who did not actually experience the cars when they were new, they experience a peculiar sort of imagined, remote, and transferred nostalgia. Again, the significance of the cars is rooted in the cultural and social context of the original period. The cars exist as particularly powerful artifacts of the period in question because they have been plucked, “verbatim,” if you will, from another period. In this respect, the cars become a way to re-experience the past, or in the case of younger users like myself, experience the past through a primary artifact. This experience of the past is often romanticized, which adds another facet to the emotional nature of interacting with classic cars.

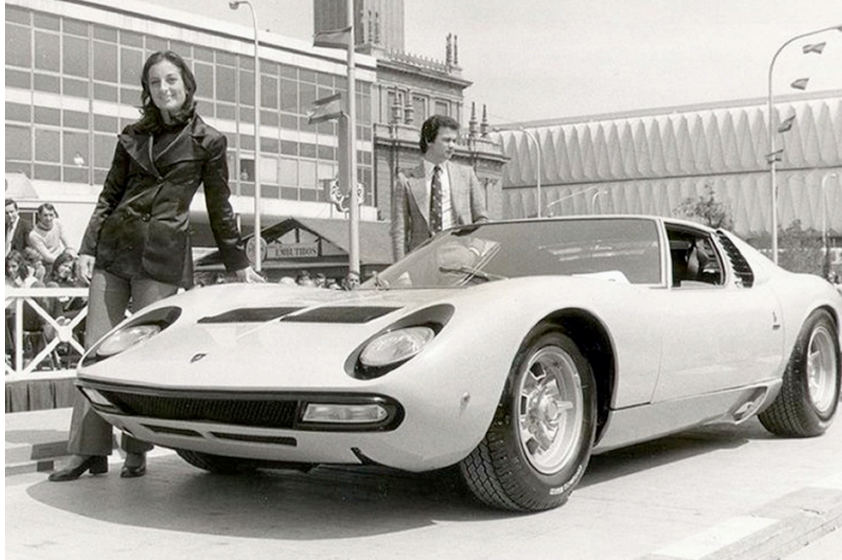


FIGURE 11. A period image of a Lamborghini Miura SV from the 1972 Barcelona Motor Show (Joe Sackey).

The market values of the cars are also heavily influenced by cultural factors. Generally speaking, the most valuable classic cars are race cars, and it is their involvement in the cultural activity of motorsport that confers their exorbitant values. Given two race cars that are identical in terms of condition and specification, the car with the “better” history will be worth definitively more. In this case, “better history” could mean that the car participated in more events, participated in more prestigious events, was more successful in these events, or was driven by more famous drivers, which are all extrinsic factors imparted by their involvement in cultural activity.

Connections with noteworthy people of all types also add value to a car, such as having been featured in a movie or owned by someone famous, ranging from racing drivers to movie stars to royalty. Ingrid Bergman received more than one Ferrari as a gift from her husband, Roberto Rossellini, and Princess Lilian de Réthy of Belgium was a noted Ferrari enthusiast who commissioned several unique one-off Ferraris. Clark Gable and James Cagney both owned Duesenbergs, and cars that previously belonged to Steve McQueen routinely fetch several multiples of what otherwise similar cars are worth, as evidenced by the sales of his Mercedes-Benz 300SEL 6.3, Porsche Turbo, and Ferrari 250 Lusso. In these cases, cars that belonged to noteworthy owners are worth tremendous amounts of money.

The appeal of old cars is also the result in certain societal shifts in how we design and manufacture objects. Modern cars are heavily regulated by the Department of Transportation and Environmental Protection Agency, in addition to being constructed to high tolerances with materials that are largely synthetic. The design of the cars is also influenced by outside factors, including feedback from dealers and

consumer preferences as described by market research. The corporate organizational structure of car companies often has considerable impact on the final product as well, and the resulting cars are at once complex and diluted.

Mechanically speaking, the increasing demands of the market and capabilities of technology have made cars much more complicated; however, the tremendous number of individuals that influence the creation of a car almost always results in the dilution of the creative vision behind the original design of the car as compared to the past. Classic cars were often built by small companies dominated by a single visionary who was able to directly influence the character of the cars in a way that would be impossible today. Consequently, enthusiasts of classic cars find the majority of new cars to be incoherent, both in terms of design, and in terms of the execution of the physical product. Nevertheless, practical considerations are relevant to enthusiasts of old cars, so many owners have new cars in addition to their older cars, preferring to leave them for fun or as a sort of therapy, and to enjoy the peace of mind provided by new cars on a daily basis.

Another by-product of the comparative simplicity of old cars is the old car enthusiast's ability to maintain control over and comprehend his (and less frequently her) car. The user of a new car is necessarily alienated from its operation because of the complexity of new cars—there are countless microprocessors and sensors in new cars. At a cognitive level then, the old car allows the owner to assert control over his environment in a way that has become increasingly rare, and to those who care, increasingly precious. For those struggling with the complexity and multiplicity of the modern world, in which artifacts are brimming with post-normal scientific technology, this modicum of control is emotionally relevant. The increasing pervasiveness of technology in just about every consumer product has made those who are not as adaptable feel increasingly obsolete – even as though they were at the mercy of the technics in their lives. As exceptions to this trend, collector cars act as a welcome escape that is emotionally satisfying and rewarding.

Owners' connections with classic cars extend well beyond the cars' ability to mediate the owners' relationship with modern technology, however. Classic cars can be relevant to their owners in a variety of ways, ranging from the visceral experience, to the personal experience of the past (nostalgia as an example), to the ability to evoke feeling based on the cultural context they represent. The appeal can be emotional, sensory, intellectual, social, or cultural; usually, it is several or all of these things at once. It is no wonder, then, that collector cars are a lifelong passion for so many people. The multiplicity of the appeal means that interacting with them is an ever-changing process with tremendous depth and breadth; classic cars are truly a case of "the more you look, the more you see." This multi-faceted appeal also means that collector cars offer something

for almost everyone, such that the appeal is simultaneously universal and highly personal.

The remarkable power of the collector car hobby exists despite the fact that the cars are not functionally perfect in their original intended role as cars. In fact, their technological obsolescence is the very thing that imbues the cars with much of their appeal. Since the appeal of the cars is fundamentally based in their non-technological properties (even when considering their technological properties, it is really the *absence* of contemporary technology that makes them appealing in a contemporary context), the hobby exists as an example of the concept of the social construction of technology. Much more so than technology, society (in the form of individuals, social interactions, and contemporary culture) provides the background and context in which collector cars have their value. Certainly, the example of collector cars indicates that for many people, technology is about much more than rationally instrumental value, and when these characteristics are too overpowering in modern technology a return to “obsolete” technology can be comforting and fulfilling.

This line of reasoning suggests an interesting possibility for our future consumption patterns. If we could cultivate the permanent and enduring relationships with other objects that classic car enthusiasts have with their cars, then we could create a dramatically more sustainable consumption model. We would no longer feel so compelled to dispose of possessions to acquire new ones (which we often do before they have even worn out (Chapman, 2005: 47)), so the material and environmental impact of human activity would be decreased.

We must take caution when considering how to cultivate these enduring relationships with objects, however. To recreate the functional inferiority of classic cars in new objects would be foolhardy and impossible, because it is the higher-level appeals and interactions that make old cars special. Moreover, these attempts would read as contrived, and would thus be unconvincing, perhaps even bordering on kitsch. Distilled to a single concept, the idea of the collector car can be summarized by the notion of taking pleasure in forming deep relationships with personally meaningful objects. This is the antithesis of disposability, and when abstracted to this level, it is clear how classic cars can be held up as an example to consider in designing future products. The means by which classic cars achieve their character - visceral pleasure, social interaction, and cultural relevance, for example - are elusive but powerful. When applied to new products, the qualities that have made collector cars so captivating to enthusiasts will help to cultivate permanent and emotionally significant relationships to artifacts in a way that has great potential for far-reaching social changes.

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