

MUSEUM CELEBRATES A TIME WHEN THE ART DECO MOVEMENT WAS IN MOTION

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LARRY ED/ALL

OXNARD, CALIFORNIA With the only navigable port between Los Angeles and San Francisco, it figured that this agriculturally endowed valley in Ventura County would become a commercial center, home to everything from California's largest strawberry and lima bean fields (and childhood home of Cesar Chavez) to a factory that processed sugar beets and, more recently, the place where BMW automobiles roll off ships and onto West Coast highways.

It also was here, in a nondescript building in yet another nondescript industrial park, that Otis Chandler, long-time publisher of the Los Angeles Times, housed his personal and extensive collection of cars and motorcycles. After Chandler's death and the disbursement of his collection, another car collector, Peter W. Mullin, bought the building.

Except for new signage and a roof that includes solar panels, wind turbines and a living green garden, all designed to minimize the museum's environmental footprint, the building remains nondescript

on the outside. But inside, well, as noted on its tri-fold tourism brochure, the Mullin Automotive Museum is "an oasis of art and automobiles paying tribute to the art deco era when industrial themes blended with design innovations."

Like cracking open a geode, a rock that looks like a mud ball until you open it up and see the sparkling gems inside, to open the museum's glass doors and step inside is like walking into another world, into one of the Paris Auto Salons of the 1930s. The decor is art deco, right down to the riveted steel support beams that hold up that environmentally friendly roof. Actually, the rivets and sculpted ceiling supports are just extremely well done fiberglass covers hiding typical industrial-building roof support posts. But they enhance the theme and are perhaps the only faux aspect of the place.

The furnishings and the art are authentic — Mullin's fascination with pre-war Paris extends to more than automobiles. And the cars on display not only are real, albeit with one recreated exception, but

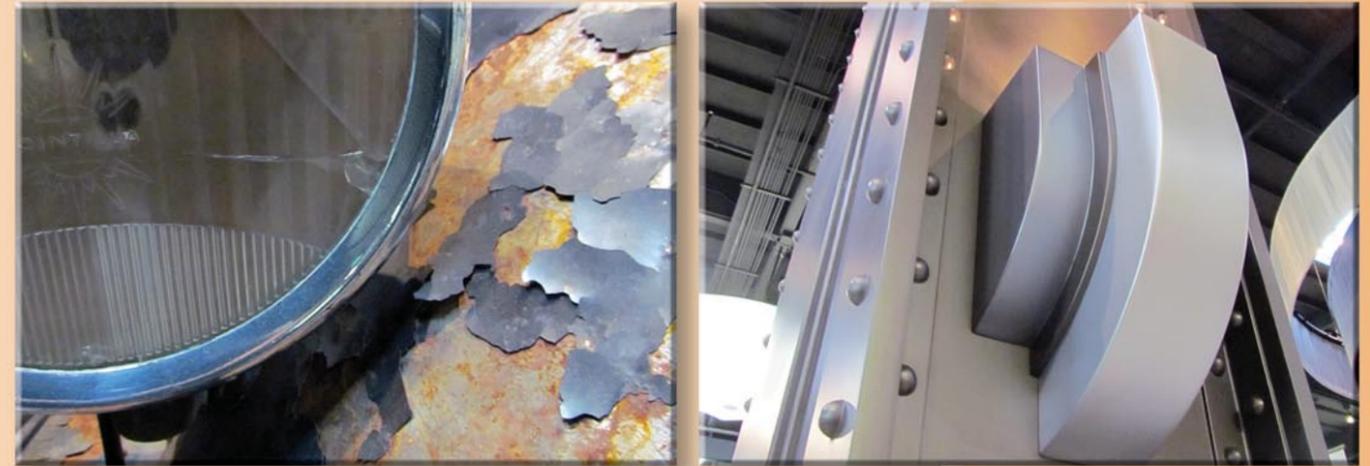
include some of the beautiful and rarest of their era.

Among them is Mullin's 1934 Voisin C-25 Aerodyne, which last summer claimed best-in-show honors at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, and the 1936 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic that won best-in-show at Pebble Beach in 2003 and seven years later set a collector car sales record when it sold for a price in excess of \$30 million.

"For me French automobiles of the 1920s and 1930s represent the pinnacle of 20th Century art and design — the artistic realization in steel, leather and glass of a modern idea created at a moment when hand craftsmanship embraced the machine, and a spirit of optimism fueled an explosion in artistic and technical development," reads a quote from Mullin displayed at the museum's entry.

"As an avid collector, the preservation of these rolling sculptures for the enjoy-

KEEP RIGHT >>



Top left and right: The museum chooses to simply preserve some cars rather than restore them, but its attention to art deco detailing includes covering modern steel-beam roof supports with deco-designed coverings. Clockwise from above: A scale model for a new body being built for a classic Bugatti chassis; this 1946 Delahaye Type 135 MS was long-forgotten in a California body shop; this 1933 Tracta D2 9CV faux cabriolet was designed by Jean Albert Gregoire, a front-wheel-drive pioneer; the black and yellow car is a Gangloff-bodied 1928 Bugatti Type 44 Coupe Fiacre and the green car is a 1939 Bugatti Type 57C.





Racing cars such as this 1922 Voisin C3 Strasbourg Grand Prix (top) and the 1937 Delahaye "Million Franc" Type 145 V12 (third row left) share the museum's mezzanine level with art deco furniture and modern Bugatti automobiles. Art on display includes a wall-sized car tapestry (we provide a close-up of the weave) and art deco-era sculpture (second row right). Reflected in the wheel of a 1934 Voisin C25 Aerodyne is the museum's 1938 Voisin C30 cabriolet (third row right). Perhaps the most unusual car on display is this 1925 Bugatti Type 22 Brescia roadster (bottom) salvaged after 75 years in a Swiss lake.

ment of future generations is both a responsibility and a pleasure. I relish the stewardship and preservation of their exciting histories."

While many of the museum's vehicles have been meticulously restored, others are being preserved as found.

For example, a 1946 Delahaye Type 135 MS coupe is displayed in a barn-like setting.

For another, a 1925 Bugatti Type 22 Brescia roadster is displayed next to what looks like a gigantic photo of the car taken through the wall of an aquarium. The photo shows the car in water because that's where it was parked for nearly 75 years, in a lake in Switzerland. After the car's owner was unable to pay customs fees, officials, required by law to destroy such vehicles, decided they couldn't dismantle such a vehicle so they put it into the local lake in hopes that someday it might be retrieved.

But there was a war and the car was forgotten until local divers discovered it in the 1960s. The "Bugatti in the Lake" became an attraction for divers for decades, but after a local youth was brutally beaten and killed while attending a fair, officials were persuaded to retrieve the historic car and sell it at auction to support a charity working to stop youth violence.

In addition to its collection of classic French coachbuilt cars, the museum's mezzanine features a recreation of pit road for the 1932 24 Hours of Le Mans race, furniture designed by Ettore Bugatti's father, Carlo, and animal artwork by Bugatti's brother, Rembrandt.

The museum is open only two Saturdays per month, the second and fourth, or by making special reservations, and is only one of several reasons to visit Ventura County, which also is home to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Air Force One Pavilion. ■

