

BY DAVID TAYLOR

A Classic Stable

Motor restorer Paul Russell tunes up
Ralph Lauren's other collection.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID A. LAND



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n March 6, 2005, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston opened a new exhibit of 16 20th-century works of art—not from the studios of Picasso, Chagall, Matisse, Pollock or Stella, but from the workshops of Bentley, Mercedes, Bugatti, Alfa Romeo, Jaguar, Porsche and Ferrari—all from Ralph Lauren's personal collection. Among them was the 1958 Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa, which seemed to be doing 150 miles an hour while sitting still, the otherworldly 1938 Bugatti type 57SC Atlantic, with its exoskeleton of riveted spines along the flared fenders and over the swoop of body and hood, and the 1955 Porsche 550 Spyder. Stand next to that one, and you have no trouble understanding James Dean's temptation to put the pedal down in his and blast out the other side of the envelope on that fatal road near Paso Robles. These cars are not the cocoons of metal and glass that carry us silently, belted tight, from



Not quite ready for its close-up, a vintage Ferrari awaits a makeover at the Paul Russell shop.

one place to another while the children are anesthetized by the videoscreen in the backseat and the navigation system makes sure we don't suffer the inconvenience of a wrong turn. They are beautiful, howling, luminous rockets that demand the open road, the double-clutch downshift into the tight turn and a destination too far away to reach in a day.

Of the 16 cars from Ralph Lauren's collection exhibited in Boston, 14 of them are cared for (and 7 of those were restored) by Paul Russell and Company. Russell specializes in handbuilt prewar cars (not that war—World War II) and cars of the '50s, machines of great beauty and/or historic importance. He runs

one of those increasingly rare establishments where meticulous craftsmanship and art intersect to produce something unique.

The company is housed in a workaday, one-story 30,000-square-foot concrete-block facility a few miles from the sea in Essex, Massachusetts. On a cold, gray March day, a couple of '50s-era Mercedes-Benz sedans are parked outside. Their paint is dull, the chrome pitted and flaking, the upholstery worn. They look old and dowdy and a bit defeated. They're the "before" picture.

Step into the building, and you immediately see the "after." Crouched in the corner of the lobby is the sinuous, predatory 1930 Mercedes-Benz "Count Trossi" SSK. Its black paint and

This page: hammer
time. *Opposite:*
'50s-era Mercedes,
post-Russell





chrome gleam. The leather upholstery is immaculate. There are no blemishes on the scalloped aluminum dashboard. The car is as perfect as it was when Count Carlo Felice Trossi, the aristocratic Italian race-car driver, received it from its English coach builders.

The perfection goes well beneath the surface. When the Russell company was restoring the car, workers discovered that the oil pan was stamped with a manufacturer's number that showed it came from another engine. After extensive research, Paul Russell flew to Germany and, flashlight in hand, found

the original oil pan in the corner of an old garage. The Bugatti Atlantic and Count Trossi SSK won Best of Show at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in 1990 and 1993 respectively—the most distinguished award in the business.

The car in the metal shop is a 1949 Ferrari 166MM Berlinetta. It won the 1950 Mille Miglia (hence the MM), that quintessentially Italian form of motor madness: a thousand miles of open-road race from Brescia to Rome and back. The race was run from 1927 to 1957. One of the first restoration decisions Paul Russell and the car's owner must make is: To what year is the car being restored? Is the desired end result the car that rolled out of the Ferrari factory in 1949, or the car that won the race after various modifications? Once they decide, the intense research begins. Factory photographs and records are scrutinized, photographs and documents studied, differences noted. Were there new mirrors for the race? Was the suspension altered? Do the wheels match the factory wheels? All these details have to be replicated to bring the car back to the desired historic moment.

Since cars coming into the Russell shop are 50 years old or more, chances are that they have been repainted at least once. If factory records don't reveal the original paint, the cars themselves can. Often when the mechanics dismantle the car they find the original paint pristine and protected in hidden places, such as behind the rims of the gauges removed from the dashboard. Paint chips are analyzed and the original paint reconstituted. Some restorations brush up against current law: It's illegal now to use asbestos in brake pads, and lacquer paint, not uncommon prewar, is prohibited in most states. Russell and his specialists have contrived a paint that maintains the character of a lacquer-painted body without flouting the law.

The machine shop duplicates parts that can't be found. Today on the premises is a 1933 Alfa 8C 2300 coupe that has been dismantled. The metal skin has been pulled off to reveal the horse-drawn carriage that was the recent ancestor of many of the prewar cars. Unlike the postwar Ferrari here, almost the entire structure of the Alfa's passenger compartment is neatly fitted with joined pieces of hand-worked wood on which the metal sheathing was then hung. Some of the wood has rotted. Some has split. The damaged pieces will be carefully resected, duplicated and refitted by Richard Docking, a member of the English coach-builders guild in his early 40s.

The waiting list to have a car restored here is about two years. Once accepted, owners are consulted at every step and receive written reports and photos of the work as it progresses. It takes about 2,500 man-hours to restore postwar cars, and about 4,000 or more for prewar vehicles. The hourly rates—less than those of your local Mercedes dealership—run about \$95.

What you get at the end is a work of art. Kinetic sculpture, though you wouldn't hang it on a wall. And it will run. Turn the key, heave the crank, hear that engine roar. Get behind the wheel, find first gear, put the pedal down and summon the Count Trossi hidden within you to come out for a run. •

Paul Russell and Company, 106 Western Ave., Essex, MA 01929; (978) 768-6919.