The Art of the Restoration

RM Auto Restorations
This 1931 Daimler Double Six Corsica Coupe was stripped to its foundation and rebuilt before it won the Best of Show at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Élégance in 2006

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THE Best of Show award at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Élégance, which will be presented on Sunday in California, is the most coveted collector-car prize in the country, with almost 200 cars competing. To win, though, owners don’t just take the muscle car they owned as a teenager and give it a shine.

Winning is an art and can be quite expensive. Owners have to start with an extraordinary car that is very rare and beautiful, most often a pre-World War II model. Then it must be restored to an extraordinary level of authenticity that will take years of research and work and can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The corner repair shop is not doing this work. The professionals who specialize in restoring these show cars are a small group. They are forensic researchers, historians, artisans, world travelers and curators.

So what separates a nice, shiny old car from a potential Pebble Beach winner?

“First and foremost is the quality of the project — the car itself,” said Don McLellan of RM Auto Restorations of Blenheim, Ontario, which has done the work on several Best of
Show winners. “It’s got to have the flow of design, history, provenance, rarity. Most are one-of-a-kind cars, such as the 1931 Daimler Double Six we restored. It was a show car when new. You’ve got to start with a great one.”

The Daimler, a 12-cylinder English car with a sleek, dramatic and almost sinister look, won Best of Show in 2006 and is exactly the kind of car that often wins top prizes.

To recreate or preserve what is, after all, a historical artifact, the restorers need to know what is correct for the time period, the manufacturer and the model. So the first stage of a restoration includes research, historical sleuthing and curatorial work. Top restorers have extensive libraries, which include original shop manuals, brochures, parts books and period photographs.

The photographs are used to help guide the work. They can be factory images of the assembly line of the Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing from the 1950s, such as those found in the picture archive maintained by Paul Russell & Company, a restoration firm in Essex, Mass. The photos can show how the cars were put together, and the tools that are used.

Even snapshots taken by early owners can be useful. Restorers search for these photos at garage sales, antique shops and swap meets.

The Nethercutt Collection, a museum in Sylmar, Calif., founded by Jack Nethercutt in 1956 and now run by his son Jack Nethercutt Jr., has won Best of Show at Pebble Beach six times. The museum has a full-time curator who takes pictures of its car restorations to document the methods used and to add to the historical record of the car.

That record is important. A key step in winning a top award is proving to the judges that the proper materials and finishes have been used. Restorers prepare books with a record of the work done and the research that backs up their choices.

“Yes on the field at a world-class concours,” said Alex Finigan of Paul Russell & Company, “you’re guilty until proven innocent.”

What comes from this kind of research is an almost arcane knowledge of how old cars were built, such as knowing that chrome trim wasn’t used before about 1927, when it began to replace nickel or silver plating. Stephen Babinsky, owner of Automotive Restorations in Bernardsville, N.J., said it was important to know what type of screws and bolts were correct.

For instance, Phillips-head screws made their advent in the 1930s, so they shouldn’t be used in a car built in 1928. Some restorers use machinery and tools appropriate to the period, like a Pettingell power hammer from the 1920s, to form flat pieces of sheet metal into the graceful curving fenders of a classic car. Others adopt modern construction techniques, including computer-aided design, which enables them to reproduce parts that are no longer available.
Richard Fass, the owner of Stone Barn Inc., a restorer of antique automobiles in Vienna, N.J., said experience was also invaluable.

“You get to know what’s right and wrong and what the judges at the major shows are looking for,” Mr. Fass said.

There is an emerging interest in cars that have never been restored. Indeed, the Pebble Beach concours has two competitive categories, called Preservation class, for these cars. They are sometimes gently worn and slightly faded cars; others, typically neglected for years and poorly stored, are known as barn finds, with rough paint, faded chrome and split upholstery. What can make these cars extraordinary is that they have the exact paint, trim and parts with which they were built, with little or no refurbishment or replacement parts.

Such cars can be very valuable. A 1938 Bugatti Type 57 barn find sold at auction for $825,500 last year, but buyers have to be careful. Sometimes it takes an expert to tell the difference between an untouched original and an old restoration. Steve Tillack of Redondo Beach, Calif., a specialist in post-war Italian sports and racing cars, was offered what he was told was an untouched original a few years ago.

“Back around 1985 or ’86, we did a restoration on a Ferrari 250 GT Lusso,” he said. “It was a very nice car to start with. The owner drove it home, did one show with it and a while later brought it back to us for some maintenance. Fifteen years passes and he died. I got a call about a perfect, original Lusso for sale. It was the car I had restored.”