

# RESTORING HISTORY

## MY INSIGHTS ON RESURRECTING A BUGATTI ATLANTIC

*By Paul Russell  
with assistance from Stacy Puckett*

The history of a classic car is often long and storied. Cars survive many historical events that their owners do not, including wars, accidents and just the passing of time. They may bounce from owner to owner and lose parts along the way. They are found in fields, barns and even junkyards. Sometimes because of their timelessness and former glory someone will take it upon themselves to make a car whole again—to research it, learn its history and return it to its former self. This is very much the story of Bugatti chassis No. 57473—a 1936 Type 57S Atlantic.

As a restorer, I have been privileged to work on some of the most beautiful, unique and important cars in the world—and I count Bugatti 57473 among them. When I was first approached to restore this car, I knew it would be a controversial project; many people considered this car to be “destroyed” after a tragic accident long ago. But some cars are worth saving, and I felt this project could be a great one depending on the customer’s goals and expectations. Before we take on any restoration project at Paul Russell and Company, we believe it is important to find common ground with a customer, to jointly decide upon the ultimate goal of a project. In this case the customer and I agreed. We had shared expectations for the end result.



There was no undoing the tragic accident, but we both felt that relegating the car to the scrap heap would be a greater tragedy than doing what we could to resurrect it. The original car was the vision of one of the automotive world’s great artisan families. Moreover, this car differed from the other Atlantics—it was unique—because it had been restyled in period, and evidence indicated the restyled car was done not merely by a local body shop but by a set of renowned craftsmen who had their own unique ideas about flowing surfaces and shape. We had an opportunity to honor these craftsmen by bringing their vision back to life, thereby allowing the world to appreciate it in the present and the future. We felt this was important despite the likelihood that there would be ongoing debates over the originality of certain car parts and panels. After all, the car is the important thing here, not a few dissenting opinions. It was a project that could not be passed up.

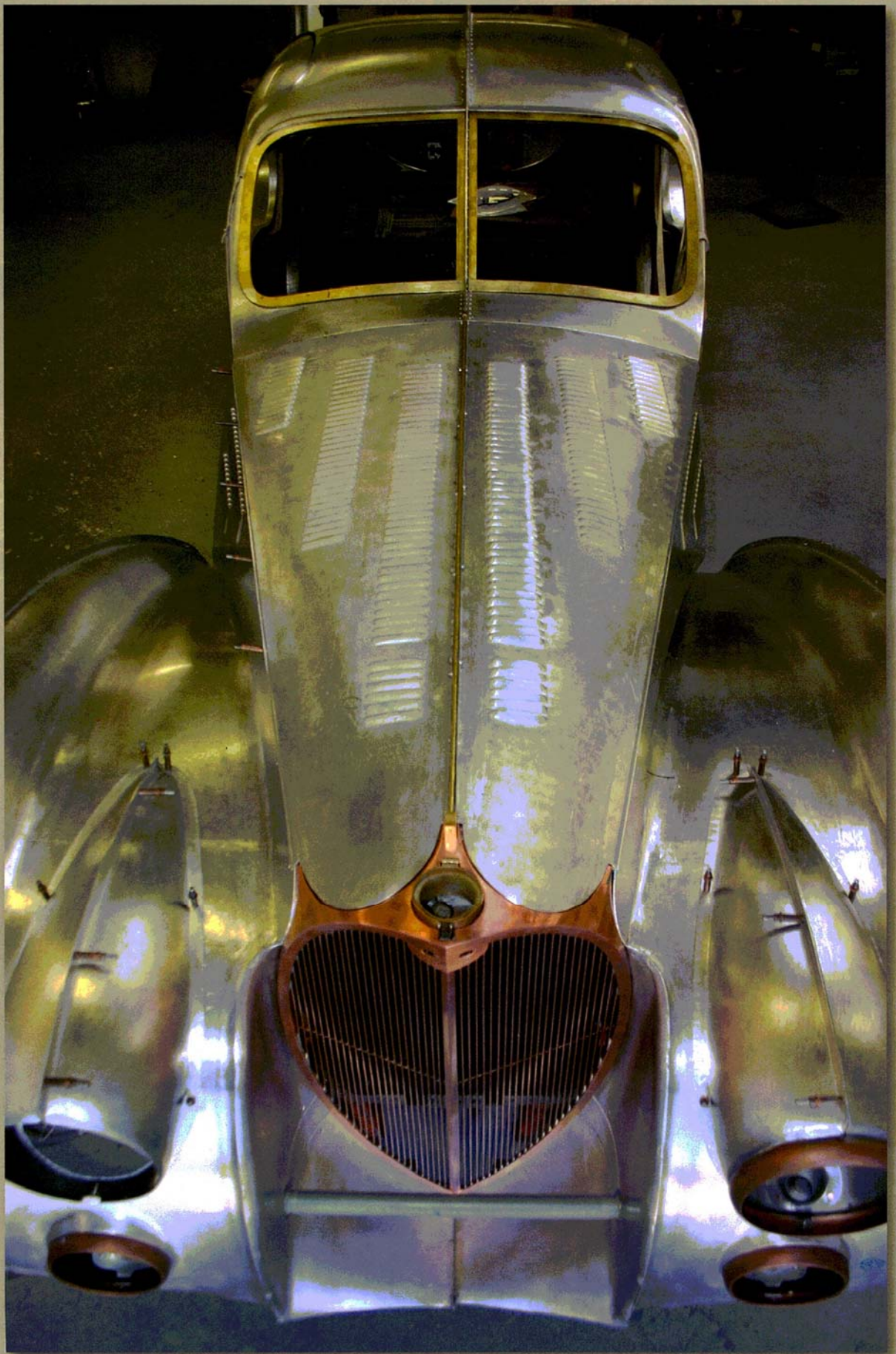


Left: The Atlantic body, now incorporating as many of the original panels as possible, nears completion.

Top: Madame Holtzschuch at the Concours d'Elegance de Juan les Pins, the fashionable resort on Cap d'Antibes, in 1937. At the time, the new Bugatti was only a few months old.

Bottom: Jeanine Vacheron with the Bugatti not long before the tragic accident.









**Bugatti 57473 in 1977—after being restored by owner Paul-André Berson and before being sold to Nicholas Seydoux.**

Before I tell more about our restoration efforts, let me offer up a bit of history on Bugatti Atlantic 57473:

In December of 1936 Jacques and Yvonne Holtzschuch took delivery of Bugatti Type 57S Atlantic chassis No. 57473. In the earliest known photograph of the car, taken at the Concours d'Elegance de Juan les Pins in 1937, the body was black with a light beige pigskin interior. In the next known photograph of the car, taken in 1951 at the Circuit International de Vitesse de Nice, the body and interior had been significantly restyled. In order to participate in the race, the body had also been repainted blue in accordance with the Code Sportif International de la F.I.A.

After exchanging hands several times, the car was eventually purchased in 1952 by René Chatard, the owner of a chic

Parisian clothing store named Fashionable. Chatard had several Bugattis and because neither his wife nor his daughter thought he needed another he put this car in the name of his mistress, Marguerite Schneider. The car was stored at the Haras du Pur Sang and was repainted gray near the end of 1954.

On August 22, 1955, Chatard and another young lady, Jeanine Vacheron, were traveling in Bugatti Atlantic 57473 on Route 44 near Gien when they were struck and killed by a passing train. A long court battle followed, and it finally ended in 1963 with Chatard being held solely responsible for the accident. During this time, the damaged car was sequestered by the train company in a Gien railway station warehouse. After the case was settled, Ms. Schneider sold the car to a scrap dealer in Gien. It was there that Paul-André Berson found the remains of Atlantic 57473 in 1965.

Berson then began the long task of restoring the Atlantic. He chose not to try and use the damaged left-side panels, working instead with the intact right-hand coachwork and re-creating the damaged parts. It took him until 1977 to complete the project, after which he sold the Atlantic to collector Nicholas Seydoux. Several years after purchasing the car, Seydoux had it restored again by André Lecoq. In later years, Mr. Berson also began to construct an Atlantic replica.

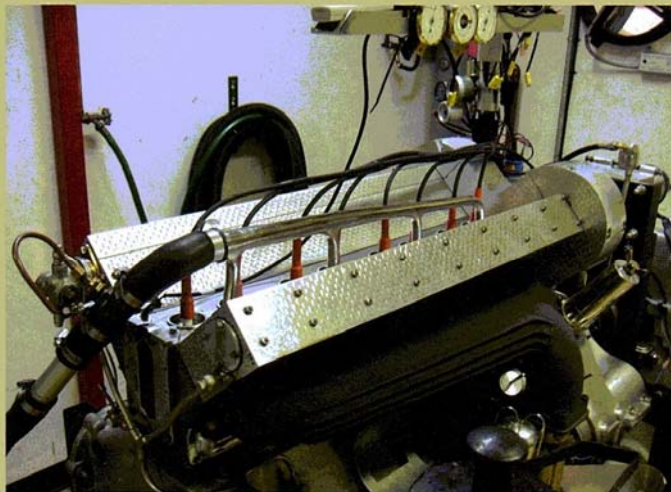
Before the current owner purchased Atlantic 57473 from Mr. Seydoux, he hired the French historian and authority Christian Huet to survey the car and investigate its provenance. He also learned of the Berson replica project and arranged to purchase both the replica that was under way and the additional original 57473 panels that had been



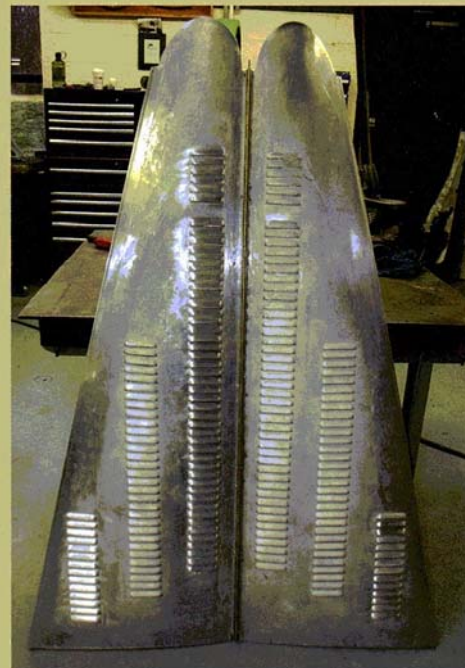
**As much of the original metal as could be salvaged has been painstakingly reassembled over the new wooden frame.**



The rebuilt engine, incorporating the original crankcase, is dyno tested.



The majority of the hood retains its original panels from 1936.



deemed too damaged to use. These included the dashboard, trim pieces, the engine block and various mechanical parts. After consultation with Huet, Antoine Raffaelli, Pierre-Yves Laugier and David Sewell, a plan was formulated for the next chapter in the continuous history of Atlantic 57473. Soon thereafter the Seydoux car and the newly purchased original parts were shipped to Paul Russell and Company.

After carefully studying the styling changes to the bodywork and the interior, Huet had concluded that they were commissioned by the car's original owners and completed by the renowned coachbuilders Figoni & Falaschi. It is these styling changes, made in period, that make this Bugatti unique from the other two existing Atlantics. It was this that led in large part to the current owner's decision to purchase and restore the car. This was also one of the reasons that I wanted to be involved in this project.

Our goal is to return the car to its 1955 configuration. The car that will be displayed at the 2010 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance will be a faithful representation of what the car looked like before the accident.

The work presently being done on Atlantic 57473 has been guided by extensive research utilizing the excellent

period photographs from the Bugatti Trust and the Pierre-Yves Laugier collection, as well as the evidence obtained from the original parts and panels. As the Seydoux car was stripped down, it became clear that the majority of the hood incorporated original panels. The existence and availability of the additional original panels and parts that were not used in previous restorations has also been a great help. We have incorporated as many of these pieces as possible, and even the smallest of surviving pieces have been used as reference.

There will be ongoing—and legitimate—discussions regarding this car's authenticity, and it is true that not every panel on this car is original. But I do not agree with those among us who say that a car this unique and this important is not worth saving. Many a race car has been saved from the scrap heap because it was a car with "provenance." This car is worth preserving if not for its beauty alone then certainly for the same reason that any unique historical object is saved: to continue its history, to honor the craft of the original builders and to tell a story to those who may not know it already.

