

MERCEDES-BENZ 680S '28

TORPEDO ROADSTER - Saoutchik's masterpiece

Text & Photo: RONNIE KRABBERØD / RIGHT ON

"Saoutchik's building quality was just outstanding" Paul Russell, restorer

Mercedes-Benz Type 680S was something of a revolution in 1926. The French vehicle body Carrosserie J. Saoutchik lifted model further to the skies with this Torpedo Roadster.

To get to the northern Italian Villa d'Este Concorso d'Eleganza each year is to get to heaven. In 2013 we were in many ways a double dose. Ralph Lauren had come with his "best in the world" Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantique, yet there was another car that actually made the biggest impression on yours truly.

Paul Andrews had sent the 2012 Pebble Beach-winning 1928 Mercedes-Benz 680S Saoutchik Torpedo Roadster from Texas to Italy. I had seen pictures of 100 points-car in gold confetti at the world renowned golf resort, but the reality was so much better. This was in fact a vehicle so beyond ordinary-ness as one could get.

DAIMLER AND BENZ had merged in 1926, and already late that year launched a communal project Typ S under the new family name Mercedes-Benz. Not only saving money in the merger, they also joined up their technical talents.

Dr. Ferdinand Porsche had started at Daimler in 1923, and with it he parted Hans Nibel from Benz. The successful Model K was replaced by the pioneering Type S. It was low-built with a new frame with kick-up both front and rear. The engine was moved 30 cm further back for better weight distribution. The radiator was much lower, and with this came also lower bodies.

In addition to that, engine and drivetrain included as stiff assembled parts in the frame. Thus eliminating one crossing and lots of weight. Total managed to save about 250 kg on the rolling chassis only, without body, in relation to the Model K.

PREVIOUSLY Daimler and Benz had ravaged against each other in racing, but now opted to only one card - Mercedes-Benz, and the low-built Type S and sequels SS (Super Sport) and SSK (Super Sport Kurz) would definitely make it easier for competitors. It won as well all in its debut at the Nürburgring in 1927. But the new model was not only for racing. M-B even built cars with high quality bodies for street use in Sindelfingen, outside Stuttgart, plus also delivered clean rolling chassis for selected coach-builders around the world. One of them was Carrosserie Jaques Saoutchik in Neuilly-sur-Seine, one of Paris's western suburbs.

"Lines and proportions were so far removed from what was common in 1928. This is coachwork at its finest "

IAKOV SAOUTCHIK was originally from Ukraine, emigrated with his parents to France where he trained as a cabinetmaker. Started in 1906, aged 26, as a private coach-builder company, which probably meant mostly "horse carts" in the beginning. The cars took over and in 1928 Saoutchik was one of the world's most famous and refined in their field and one that Mercedes-Benz showed confidence.

The purchaser of this car was industrialist Charles A. Levine in New York who had started a "junkyard" on war surplus, the brass from the ammunition, after the first World War. In 1927 he started the aircraft firm Columbia Air Liners and tried to be the first to fly non-stop New York-Paris. Due to legal problems,

he was sustained, and Charles Lindberg became world famous when he landed the Spirit of St. Louis in Paris 20 May. 14 days later Levine flew as the world's first passenger - until Germany's own manufactured Columbia aircraft with pilot Clarence Chamberlin, 500 km and nine hours longer trip than Lindberg, yet this hardly anyone knows today.

Levine's fortunes turned, and business was worse, so when his specially commissioned Saoutchik-built Mercedes-Benz 680S Torpedo Roadster came to New York early in 1929 he would not accept the car.

DEALER displayed it at the New York Auto Salon, but it would take a while before the car was sold to Standard Oil director Frederick Henry Bedford Jr.. After his death in 1952, his widow Margaret Stewart, who had "been picked up with this car," parked the Saoutchik in the garage. Without her husband she was no longer interested.

PEBBLE BEACH is one of the finest venues for classic cars. In competition with nearly 200 cars, Paul Andrew won in 2012 "Best in Show" with his Mercedes-Benz 680S Torpedo Roadster 1928.

YEARS PASSED, and the car remained locked up. But in 1980 she decided suddenly to restore the car and give it to their descendants. Relatively fledgling Paul Russell's Gullwing Service Company was among those who competed to get the job, but it would take some 30 years until the next restoration before Paul made use of the pictures he took in 1980. At the first restoration, the original lizard interior was replaced with an ordinary red leather interior. Yes, you read correctly. Saoutchik was keen to highlight the utmost and so entered the lizard skins from French colonies in Asia and Purpleheart wood from French colonies in South America.

That it also used thin "German silver" or kupronikkel (or nickel silver as it might be called colloquially in Norway) as edging, show well at what level the French coach-builder's work was.

It was this, and the outstanding restoration Paul Russell and Company had recently completed, which almost put me out of beauty-saturated Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este. And when it is said that Ralph Lauren's Bugatti Atlantique (as Paul Russell also carefully restored) stood just a few feet away.

After flapping around at the world's finest events the last 25 years, I do not think I've seen the craftsmanship behind this car before. One reason is a Type S Torpedo Roadster's dramatic lines, proportions and extreme low clearance to be a 1928 model. It is really unbelievable how Saoutchik and his craftsmen with simple tools were able to perform this outstanding quality work.

The body had a fit like that which had come out of a CNC milling machine. Doorways were a millimeter without trick or squeak. The sound was like a bank vault: A squelch when the air was squeezed out and finally a deep click of the door lock.

FRONT PANEL between horn framework was one of the most amazing parts I've seen. All vents had different length, and in the two rows at the bottom had one for certain debts taken out of wedges and welded them together so that all air vents got a kink! When Paul Russell restored car it was found that this single component was composed of 11 individual parts that were welded together without any filling afterwards. All corrections including a hefty number of vents had taken place with the hammer and rotation.

The interior had obviously been restored the way it was originally. Paul Russell had seen the car in 1980 and images of the original interior saved the day. They got hold of the necessary 760 (!) lizard skin from Thailand by the same supplier as in 1928, Alpina in Paris. Prepare each skin, cut and sewed them together! What a job!

"That it did not win at Villa d'Este was well pretty weird"

AND THIS NICKEL SILVER. It is an alloy with varying mixes of copper / nickel and sometimes zinc. Studies showed that the material on the car contained 80% copper and 20% nickel. And is no longer produced.

Lots of research seemed a waste to Paul Russell, who by chance came in contact with the president of the association of metal producers, and he could tell that there still existed a single supplier in the world that supplied the mix to 80% copper and 20% nickel that was needed to get the right shade of metal.

The thickness of the moldings was 0.7 millimeters, but the factory supplied only 0.8. After finally receiving the little bit needed to repair the damage to the fender, the material was first rolled out to 0.7 millimeters before it could be shaped.

THIS MOLDING is a masterpiece in itself. So thin and without so much as a wrinkle or slip against all body edges. Do not ask me how. It was just outstanding and beyond. Both of Saoutchik & Co. and Paul Russell and Company.

For me, this is car actually "world's best", but the jury was unable to agree. Too bad!

Special thanks to Paul Russell for pictures and information.

SIDEBARS

MERCEDES-BENZ TYPE S VARIATIONS

MERCEDES-BENZ TYPE S succeeded Model K. The development took a giant step thanks partly to Ferdinand Porsche who was chief constructor of Type S. The new model was significantly lower and easier.

MODEL K was a taller and heavier predecessor to the Type S.

NEW YORK AUTO SALON was used to show car in 1929.

SAOUTCHIK built 12 Type S Torpedo Roadsters. The cars ranged in appearance. Only three had the low windshield, and one specially commissioned by Mr. Levine in New York refused to accept the car.

REPLICA of another Saoutchik 680S Torpedo Roadster which unfortunately went with the fire at the Los Angeles Auto Show in 1929.

COACHWORK was the possibility of "the rich and famous" to do anything extra. M-B delivered therefore complete chassis for senior carrossieries around the world. The example on the right is from the English Thrupp & Maberly.

RACING LEGEND Ralph de Palma in a 1928 Mercedes-Benz Type S Sports Tourer.

RACING was definitely a priority for Daimler-Benz. Ferdinand Porsche's Typ S was first out, and it was all victory in premiere at the Nürburgring in 1927. Later, both the SS, SSK and SSKL and progress continued. It increased the power to 300 hp and drilled holes in frame to save weight. SSK was designated the world's fastest sports car and Rudolf Caracciola became the first foreigner that won the Mille Miglia in 1931.

MILLE MIGLIA in 1931 was won by Rudolf Caracciola in a SSKL

SSK was a shorter version of Type S.

MERCEDES-BENZ 680S SAOUTCHIK TORPEDO ROADSTER

FREDERICK HENRY BEDFORD Jr. was the first owner of the car. It was gray with red stripes

originally, but Bedford painted it yellow. Bedford died in 1952 but his widow kept the car and got it restored in 1980. The heirs sold it in 2006, after the family had had the car since it was new.

PAUL ANDREWS bought this Saoutchik Torpedo Roadster in 2010. Paul Russell and Company was asked to restore the car, and Paul Russell could take out the old paper photos from 1980 when he viewed the car prior to the first restoration.

The car had just passed 31K miles and was, apart from the engine, in very good condition. Nevertheless, the car was totally disassembled and every component restored. The goal was to make it a winning car at Pebble Beach.

It was determined to keep all original components, with the exception of a little wood in the framework under the body, so they did that.

It was decided to recreate the original Saoutchik interior, and they found a supplier of 760 lizard skins from Asia. It was French Alpina which also accounted for the initial delivery in 1928! After lots of research Paul Russell also ultimately found one supplier of "German silver" with the proportions 80-20 to the injured part of the blank moldings on one fender. The restoration took 7,000 man hours of research which required one full-year (2,000 hours).

FACTS

1928 MERCEDES-BENZ 680S SAOUTCHIK TORPEDO ROADSTER

BODY: Designed and hand built in aluminum by Carrosserie J. Saoutchik in Paris.

FRAME: Mercedes-Benz Typ S. Low built in that it had kick-up both front and rear. Engine, gearbox and Torque-tube concluded that stiffer chassis.

ENGINE: Mercedes-Benz 6789 cc, top-vented, SOHC, 2V, straight six, twin carburetors, compressor, dual ignition (both magnet and coil) 120 hk. 180 hp compressor when struck.

TRANSMISSION: Four-speed manual transmission, Torque tube, rear-wheel drive.

FRONT AXLE: Rigid front axle suspended by semi-elliptical longitudinal leaf springs.

REAR AXLE: Rigid rear axle suspended by semi-elliptical longitudinal leaf springs.

BRAKES: Drums front and rear.

WHEELS: Spoke covered with solid-aluminum end caps on both the inside and the outside.

INTERIOR: Fantastic leather interior of Asian lizard. 760 leather skins. Purpleheart wood dashboard and door side. Veigel speedometer and tachometer, M-B gauges, Junghans clock.

PAINT: Original Colours Dove Grey with Burgundy decor.

MISCELLANEOUS: Delivered new to New York in 1929. In the same family ownership until 2006. Later restored to the fantastic original condition by Paul Russell and Company. Overall, it went with 7000 working hours including 2000 hours to research. Hardly any part has been replaced on the car that has undergone only 31K miles since new.

PEBBLE BEACH is a well known venue for such cars and Saoutchik Torpedo Roadster won "Best in Show" there in 2012. Last year the car was then auctioned by RM Auction in Monterey in connection with the 2013 Pebble Beach. The M-B was one of the stars that was sold for impressive \$8,250,000.

NORSK MOTORVETERAN

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