BUGATTI TYPE 57SC

"A technical creation can only be perfect if it is perfect from the point of view

BY DAVID E. DAVIS, JR.

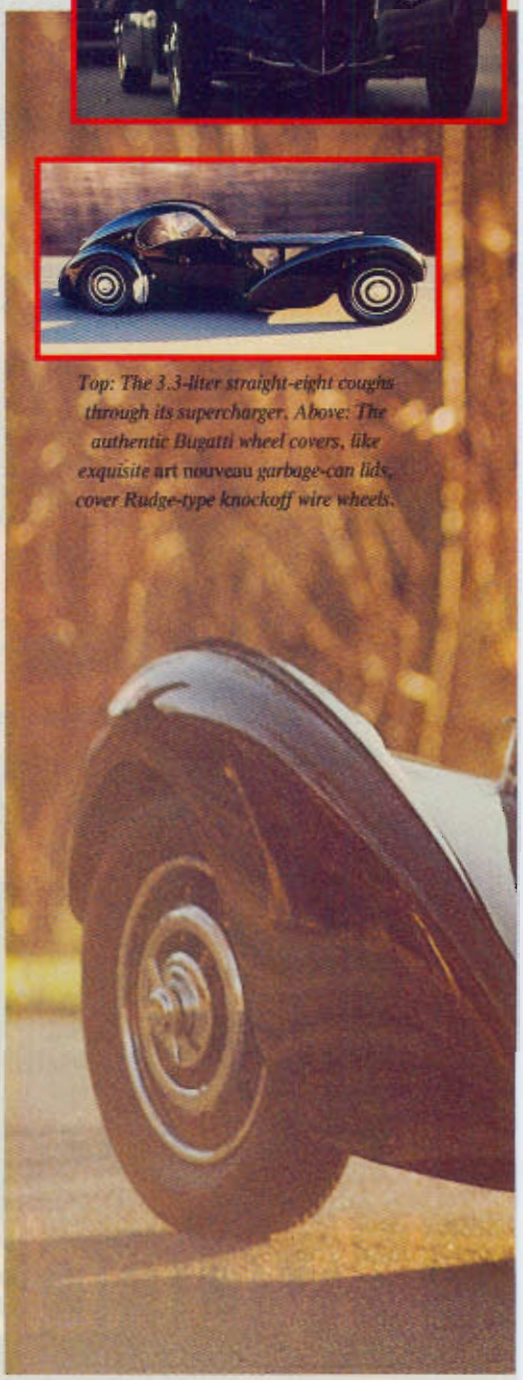
Essex, Massachusetts—

It is two o'clock on a sunny winter afternoon. The road is anything but deserted. We're rolling along through the Massachusetts countryside in the incredible black Bugatti you see on these pages—every raised seam, every exposed rivet reflecting the sunlight like the facets of a jewel. The small cabin is filled with sounds nobody ever hears anymore. Every mechanical process has a voice and every voice joins in a lovely muted chorus, a hymn to the fundamental automotive verities. Paul Russell steers us onto the roadside and opens his door. This is it. Jeez. I've been wondering for a week whether or not they'd actually let me drive this car . . . what's it worth? Twelve million dollars? Fourteen million? Does anybody know? *It's only a car, for God's sake.* But it's a car I've been admiring in pictures since I was a teen-ager. It was sapphire blue then—painted, so the story goes, to match the stone in the engagement ring the owner gave his wife. But who knew? The pictures were always black and white. It's a car that Paul Russell and his people labored over for nigh on to two years. It's the car that won best of show at Pebble Beach last year, the third and last of Jean Bugatti's Bugatti Atlantic coupes, Ralph Lauren's car. It's not just a car. It's an *automobile!*

Nonetheless, I'm an adult with a high-school education and normal reflexes, and I can do this. Paul is not so sure. We're not even moving yet, and Paul is already beginning to hyperventilate. The mirror is tiny. Visibility to the sides and to the rear is hopeless, like turning your head inside the hood of a parka. I can feel each tooth on the gears as I bring them together with a grumbling rattle, but first gear is finally engaged. I flip the little trafficator signal out in warning, hoping that I haven't overlooked an onrushing transit-mix concrete truck in the minuscule mirror, let the clutch pedal rise from the floor, and we're off! Each shift is agony. I pride myself on being good at this, and I don't want to look like a klutz. The steering is positive, and amazingly low effort, partially because of a very large steering wheel. The brakes are smooth and progressive. Handling and roadholding are about what you'd expect from a 1938 car with skinny tires and positively cambered front wheels. It might have been fun to drive in the Thirties, when it was a great automotive bargain for its British owner, but today, with its value way out there in the automotive ionosphere, it is intimidating as hell.

We trundle tentatively up and down the two-lane road a couple of times for the benefit of the photographer, and then, seeking a place to turn around, I inadvertently turn onto a parkway on-ramp and find myself and the gorgeous black car out there among the civilians at seventy miles per hour, getting farther away from the photographer—who has no idea where I've gone—with every revolution per minute. Guys in crummy pickup trucks zoom up alongside to stare. A twelve-year-old solemnly gives me the finger from the rear window of the family station wagon. Madonna would get less attention if she were out here jogging naked with her hair on fire. After thirty minutes or so of this, I've made no mistakes worse than the turn onto the parkway, but Paul is about to implode. The 3.3-liter straight-eight engine has begun to cough through the supercharger pop-off valve. Somebody back at the shop is going to have a little soot to wipe away from the engine and the wire mesh hood panels (known as

Top: The 3.3-liter straight-eight coughs through its supercharger. Above: The authentic Bugatti wheel covers, like exquisite art nouveau garbage-can lids, cover Rudge-type knockoff wire wheels.



ATLANTIC COUPE

of aesthetics." —Ettore Bugatti

PHOTOS BY AL SATTERWHITE

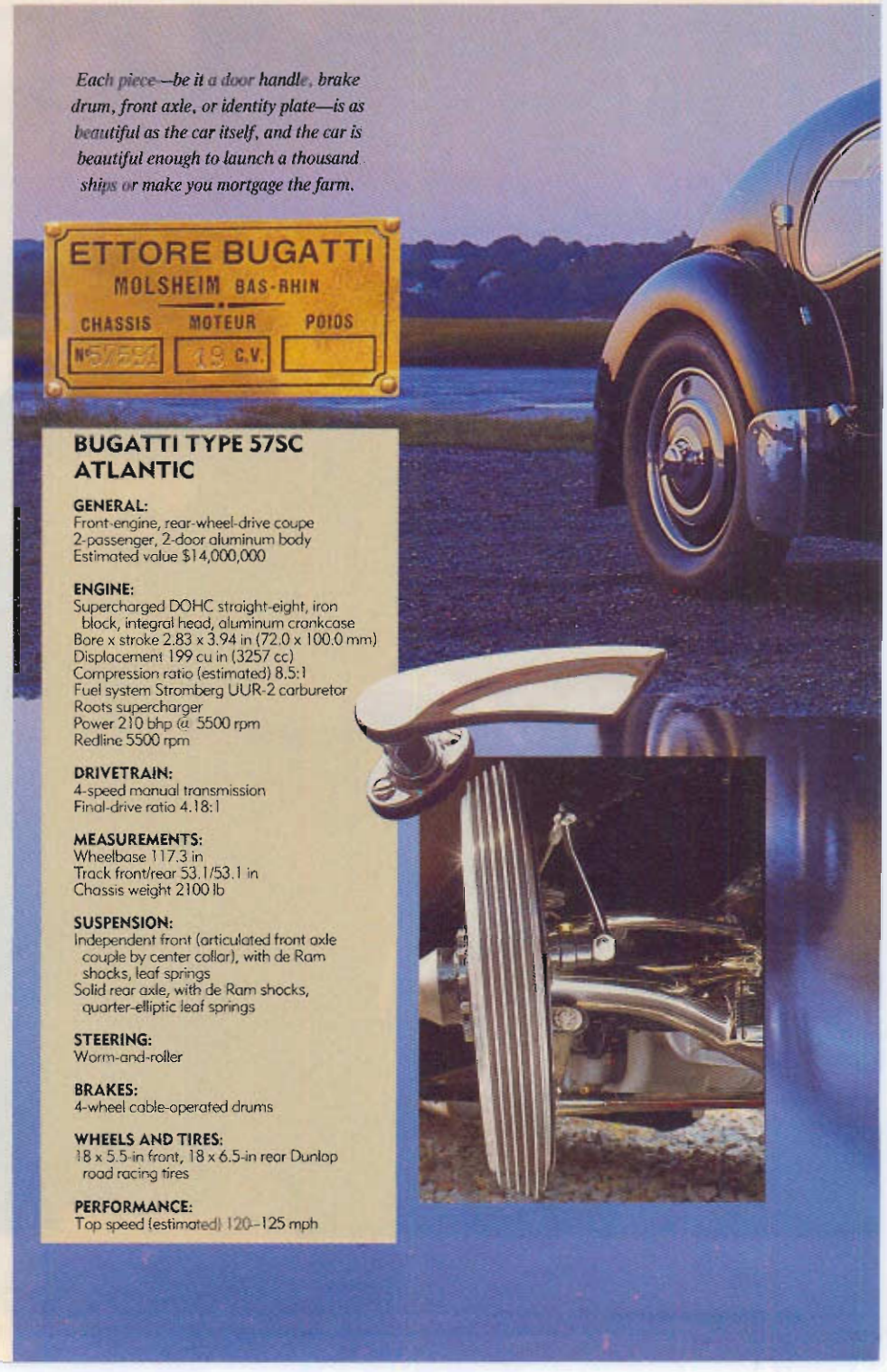
"gauze" to Bugattistes). "Would you be more comfortable if you were driving?" I ask, innocently. "YES!" snaps Paul, and I stop the car. Shucks, just when I was learning how to manipulate that long, whippy shift lever. To be honest, I'm a little relieved to be out from under the responsibility.

The Atlantic (pronounced At-lan-*teek*) coupes have been described in loving detail by dozens of writers, but here's a little background. The prototype, called the Aérolithe, first appeared in 1935 on a standard Type 57 chassis, fitted with a magnesium body. The unique raised and riveted seams that give the Atlantic its one and only identity apparently grew directly out of the great difficulty in joining that material. Due to that difficulty, and the related costs, subsequent versions were built of aluminum, but the cars are still sometimes called "Elektron" coupes, that being the commercial term for magnesium in Europe at that time. They were built on the Type 57S chassis, which lowered them by allowing the rear axle to pass through large oval holes in the frame rails. Only two cars were delivered as Type 57SC (supercharged) models. Most often, cars were returned to the factory sometime after purchase for the supercharger installation. An SC of the quality of the Lauren car is probably capable of 120 to 125 mph, with a 0-to-60-mph time of less than ten seconds.

To appreciate the special character of the automobiles built by Ettore Bugatti, we have to understand something about the man and the times in which his creative genius flowered. He was born in 1881 to an artistic, well-to-do Milanese family that divided its time between the salons of Milan and Paris. His father, Carlo, was a painter, a silversmith, a sculptor, and a designer/manufacturer of fine furniture who insisted that his sons, while training as artists, should also learn to work with their hands. Ettore learned cabinetmaking in his father's studio, while studying painting and sculpture. At age sixteen he announced his intention to "give up art," and shifted his interest to industrial design, but industrial design uniquely skewed by his artistic training and inclinations. Underscoring the point, he said, "A technical creation can only be perfect if it is perfect from the point of view of aesthetics."

At the end of his 1910 catalog we read, "I have tried to put on the market a car that its owners will enjoy working on." A clear warning. Later in his career he would become more high-handed and autocratic. To a customer whose car wouldn't start, he suggested that Bugatti owners should have heated garages. Later, when someone complained about poor brakes, he sniffed, "My cars are built to go, not stop." He was an artist, not an engineer, and practicality was not a particularly high priority. He once refused to sell a car to a prospective customer because he disapproved of the unfortunate man's table manners. He lived like royalty, surrounding himself with châteaux, blooded horses, hunting dogs, beautiful things of every kind, yet the great French champion René Dreyfus—himself a Bugatti team driver—tells us in his autobiography, *My Two Lives*, that Bugatti was always broke. Car sales alone could not support Bugatti, the man or the marque. The firm nearly went under in 1929 and 1930 as a result of his obsessive commitment to the enormous Royales, and was only bailed out by his son, Jean, who engineered a government contract

Each piece—be it a door handle, brake drum, front axle, or identity plate—is as beautiful as the car itself, and the car is beautiful enough to launch a thousand ships or make you mortgage the farm.



BUGATTI TYPE 57SC ATLANTIC

GENERAL:
Front-engine, rear-wheel-drive coupe
2-passenger, 2-door aluminum body
Estimated value $14,000,000

ENGINE:
Supercharged DOHC straight-eight, iron block, integral head, aluminum crankcase
Bore x stroke 2.83 x 3.94 in (72.0 x 100.0 mm)
Displacement 199 cu in (3257 cc)
Compression ratio (estimated) 8.5:1
Fuel system Stromberg UUR-2 carburetor
Roots supercharger
Power 210 bhp @ 5500 rpm
Redline 5500 rpm

DRIVETRAIN:
4-speed manual transmission
Final-drive ratio 4.18:1

MEASUREMENTS:
Wheelbase 117.3 in
Track front/rear 53.1/53.1 in
Chassis weight 2100 lb

SUSPENSION:
Independent front (articulated front axle couple by center collar), with de Ram shocks, leaf springs
Solid rear axle, with de Ram shocks, quarter-elliptic leaf springs

STEERING:
Worm-and-roller

BRAKES:
4-wheel cable-operated drums

WHEELS AND TIRES:
18 x 5.5-in front, 18 x 6.5-in rear Dunlop road racing tires

PERFORMANCE:
Top speed (estimated) 120–125 mph

and racing cars and utterly pedestrian sedans. It was also his personal atelier, the place where he created lovely pieces of cabinetry, and horse tack that would rival anything ever done by Hermès or Gucci. René Dreyfus recalls that it was not unusual for the racing cars to be shunted aside, despite approaching deadlines, so that the Bugatti workmen could be pressed into service on some impeccably tailored Ettore would conduct these outings from atop a horse as elegantly turned out as himself, and the quality of the birds, the hospitality, and your fellow guests would knock your hat in the creek. He built a sort of inn/clubhouse next to the Bugatti works, called the Hostellerie du Pur Sang, where customers and shooting guests and team drivers stayed.

be involved in wild midnight revels, drunken chases through the halls, bizarre and dangerous practical jokes, and hair-raising midnight rides to distant venues that promised more wine, better-looking women, more outrageous jokes. Other car companies, even the French ones, didn't operate this way.

Obviously, a company run like this could not produce ordinary cars, nor

PHOTOS BY MARTYN GODDARD

would it attract ordinary customers. Thus, Mr. Ralph Lauren is probably the perfect owner for Atlantic coupe number 57591. His car collection—which includes a breathtaking array of other Bugattis, historic Ferraris, Mercedes-Benzes, Porsches, Alfa Romeos, and one Blower Bentley—has been thoughtfully assembled and lovingly restored. Ralph Lauren represents style, in an era that has been consistently misled by the dictates of mere fashion. Bugatti's taste, his sense of style, his unwillingness to allow current trends or mechanical difficulties to deflect him from his chosen course, would all find a sympathetic reception in the idealized environment where Ralph Lauren's clothing and home furnishings are meant to be seen.

Mr. R.B. Pope, the original owner of this car, would also find himself right at home there. The Atlantic was his tenth Bugatti, painted, as noted above, to match his lovely wife's engagement ring. He was a British attorney and successful amateur tennis player, and he enjoyed driving his Bugattis between London and Monaco. Mr. and Mrs. Pope could easily be gazing back at you from the elegant pages of the next Lauren Polo insert you see in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Mr. Pope took delivery of this car in 1938 and returned it to the factory in 1939, where it was upgraded from Type 57S to Type 57SC by the addition of a supercharger like the one fitted to the same basic engine in the Type 59 Grand Prix cars. This was probably when the roof was modified to give Mr. Pope an extra inch of headroom. It's not difficult to imagine an agitated R.B. Pope firing cables off

to Molsheim in 1939, begging them to finish modifying his car and get it out of there before the onset of World War II and the subsequent German invasion of France.

Because of a pound/franc exchange rate that was increasingly in Great Britain's favor through the Thirties, Brits could buy Bugattis very inexpensively, and, because of those favorable prices, Brits became the backbone of Bugatti's new-car business. They were, until quite recently, the backbone of the cult that grew up around old Bugattis. More than any other group of vintage-car enthusiasts, except perhaps the Bentley Drivers' Club, Bugatti owners used their cars, and used them hard. Now, Japanese and American speculators are buying Bugattis and parking them out of sight, waiting for the next major price escalation.

This is tragic, and we're fortunate indeed that Ralph Lauren admires cars as machines for human enjoyment first, and only secondarily as works of art, or investments. Like any discriminating Bugatti buyer, he was very specific in his instructions to Paul Russell and his technicians at the Gullwing Service Company. The car's engine and chassis and performance had to be restored to original Bugatti specification, but the interior and exterior had to meet the rather exacting Lauren aesthetic standards. Mr. Pope's blue car with tan goatskin interior and exposed wire wheels became Mr. Lauren's black car with black garment-leather interior and authentic Bugatti metal wheel covers. The result is a joy to behold and an epiphany to drive.

AL SATTERWHITE

MARTYN GODDARD

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—Ettore Bugatti

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