
Barn to Pebble Beach in two months

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Classic Driver reader Dennis Nicotra's story of his new acquisition is a collector's dream come true. Nicotra was the buyer of the 1938 Bugatti Type 57C Atalante coupe which, after 45 years in hibernation, was sold by Christie's on 3rd June for \$852,500. The totally unrestored and original car had languished in the same parking spot inside a Pound Ridge, New York barn since 1962 - but the story of the car in the two months since it was sold is just as remarkable...

"As the new owner," explains Mr. Nicotra, a real estate developer from Connecticut, "I was thrilled that the car was invited to this summer's Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in Monterey, California. The car will be shown in the Preservation Class." The Preservation Class is a fast-growing category at Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, as newly-discovered 'barn finds' are brought out into the light of day. This year, the Pebble Beach Concours has even added a post-War category for the Preservation Class.

Given the excitement when the Bugatti was first put up for sale, the invitation to Pebble Beach seems highly deserved. "A buzz went through the collectors' car world when the sale of this car was announced," recalls Mr. Nicotra. "It was described in dozens of news articles with headlines such as 'The Greatest Barn Find Ever' and 'Sleeping Beauty Bugatti'. The New York Times published a half-page article on the car prior to the auction."



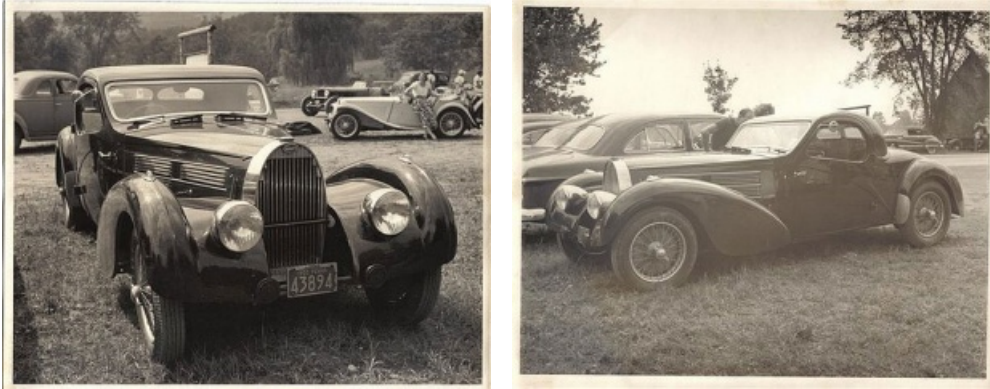
But what was it about the car which persuaded him to bid so fiercely for it that he ended up paying more than double the Christie's estimate? "I wanted to buy just ONE great car, a car without stories and tales, and this Bugatti fits the bill as it has unrivalled provenance." The provenance is, indeed, unquestioned: the car is totally original, exactly as it was when parked up by owner John W Straus in 1962. Now 89, Mr. Straus is the grandson of Isador Straus, the man who built the American department store Macy's into an international household name before being lost at sea, along with his wife Ida, when the Titanic went down in 1912.

Having bought the car, what did Mr. Nicotra do with it? "A good friend and fellow collector, Mark Smith, recommended Scott Sargent to investigate the integrity and verify the car's authenticity. I immediately shipped the car to Sargent in Vermont. Sargent is a highly-respected Bugatti expert and it made good sense to start there. Sargent said the car was as 'pure' a Bugatti as he'd ever seen. Every number matches, no exceptions. It was clearly born a Supercharged Type 57C, chassis number 57766, and has all its original parts. The body, an Atalante coupe, also boasts complete and total originality as every body part from stem to stern has the #32 stamp on it. It's a real honest-to-goodness, pure-bred Bugatti. Straus put it away in 1962 with a full tank of fuel and it hadn't moved since. What a find."



The biggest problem Sargent encountered was leaky seals in the supercharger, a fairly easy fix. The engine was checked, and hand-cranked only after oil was left to sit in the cylinders for a few days to ensure it hadn't seized. The car started straight away. "It runs like a little sewing machine," says Nicotra with pride. The reawakened Bugatti was given new tyres, the hydraulic brakes were overhauled and everything very thoroughly checked over and lubricated. "There was no rust on the body or chassis as the car had been driven quite a lot before it was stored. There was a good film of oil and grease on it, and the barn had obviously been dry."

So, on June 3rd, a car which had not run for 45 years was sold at auction, and on August 19th it will appear 'on the lawn' at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, a functioning - but happily unmolested - gem. After the show, will it be fully restored? "No. There is no restoration in store for this Bugatti. It will stay original, be maintained and driven as it is. As it was meant to be."



Few people yet know that the car will be at Pebble Beach this month. It's likely that this truly original jewel will make quite a splash.

The two photos above are vintage photos taken in the 1950s.

Christie's next Sale of Exceptional Motor Cars will be at the Monterey Jet Center, USA on August 16th.

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