

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Timeless Classics: Cunningham C3 by Vignale](#)

Lead

Briggs Swift Cunningham II was an exceptional man: an American sportsman and entrepreneur who raced (with huge success) both on land and at sea, creating his own marque of sportscar in the process...

At sea, he skippered the 12-metre yacht Columbia to victory in the 1958 America's Cup; while on land, he had his sights set firmly on Le Mans. His dream was to achieve the first Le Mans 24 Hours victory by an all-American crew in an all-American car.

Funded by personal fortune



In the 1950s, it was relatively rare for Americans to focus with such determination on European endurance racing, especially someone with such enormous wealth (he was heir to the Swift meatpacking fortune). Briggs Cunningham's efforts – which led to the creation of cars under the Cunningham marque – were entirely funded by his own personal fortune.

The Cunningham C3, meanwhile, was built for sale to the public – a series of 25 road cars to satisfy the homologation requirements for his 1953 Le Mans sports-racing car.

The road-going C3 had a similar chassis to that of the racers, but with a wider track and longer wheelbase. It was powered by a Hemi V8 engine and built in Cunningham's own factory at West Palm Beach, Florida. However, unlike the racers, C3 road cars were shipped to Vignale in Turin for coachwork, then back to the USA to be sold. The price was fairly staggering, starting from around \$9,000 each, a vast amount at the time, but the price was justified by the performance: 0-60 mph in around 7 seconds and a top speed that wasn't far off 150mph.

An American in an Italian suit



The car that appears in our photographs was the first C3 to be given Vignale coachwork, chassis number 5206, referred to by the Cunningham factory as 'the prototype'. It had many one-off features, such as a special Cunningham script on the nose, no chrome rubbing strip beneath the doors, a chrome windshield surround, plus plenty of performance modifications. It also borrowed many Ford interior components, such as its radio, heater, and handbrake. [This 1953 car](#) is being offered for sale by [RM Sotheby's as part of The Andrews Collection, on 2 May in Texas](#). Although the car carries an estimate of \$900,000 – \$1,200,000, it is offered without reserve.



Incidentally, Briggs Cunningham never did quite manage to win Le Mans outright, although he finished third overall in both 1953 and 1954, and continued to race ever-modified versions of his own design (along with Jaguars, Listers, Maseratis, and Corvettes) right through until 1963. In the end, it wasn't until 1967 that the dream of an all-American winner came true. That was the Shelby American Ford Mk IV of Dan Gurney and A J Foyt – and it's worth pointing out that the victory required a significant slice of Henry Ford II's corporate wealth.

Photos: RM Sotheby's

Gallery













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