

# CLASSIC DRIVER



## Fleming vs. Onassis: Whose Bentley R-Type Continental was best?

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*At this year's Pebble Beach sales, rivals RM and Gooding will each offer a 1953 Bentley R-Type Continental with notable celebrity provenance. The former's entry was initially owned by shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis, while the latter's was ordered new by 007 author Ian Fleming...*

A few weeks ago, we looked at the [1965 Bentley S3 Continental that gained fame as Rolling Stone Keith Richards' drug express to Marrakech](#), soon to be sold by Bonhams. Refusing to be outdone, RM and Gooding have both consigned their own Continentals with important historical celebrity provenance - albeit the earlier, R-Type flag-carriers of the sobriquet. With only 208 built, these cross-country expresses were the exclusive preserve of the world's elite; among the luminaries to order them new were Aristotle Onassis and Ian Fleming.

### **Wealth reservation society**



Unsurprisingly, both men demonstrated good taste when ordering the cars: each was specified with a manual gearbox (only 34 such cars were built in LHD), along with the desirable 'seats and spats' options that added lightweight bucket seats and rear wheel covers. While Onassis kept his for six years before moving it on, the car Fleming ordered was never intended to be owned by the Bond author. Instead, he commissioned the car (which also boasted fitted luggage and a racehorse mascot) on behalf of his friend Ivar Felix Bryce, a wartime SIS agent and inspirational figure for Fleming's character Felix Leiter. Let's not forget, although the films have created synonymy between Bond and Aston Martin, 007's steed in the books was a Bentley – and the R-Type Continental couldn't have been more fitting for a secret-serviceman of the real world.

## Forks in the road of fate





Despite their similarities when new, the Continentals in question experienced rather contrasting fates. The Onassis car passed through several other wealthy owners' hands (including the co-chairman of the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance), before being restored and repainted in its original colour combination of Tudor Grey over Maroon. Meanwhile, the Fleming/Bryce car – originally finished in a deeper shade referred to in the books as 'Battleship Grey' – was repainted white, and then laid up in a Hollywood garage for more than 30 years, to be discovered only recently. As such, Gooding has described the unrestored car as 'one of the most important Bentley discoveries', attaching a \$1.4m - \$1.8m estimate as a result. RM, meanwhile, is yet to publicise its guide price for its car (its estimate is available on request only), but you'd expect the symbolic first owner to spark the interest of collectors to a similar degree.

*Photos: Edward Quinn, © [edwardquinn.com](http://edwardquinn.com) (period image) / RM Sotheby's / Brian Henniker and the car's owner for Gooding & Co.*

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