

CLASSIC DRIVER

1926 Bugatti Type 37

- Lot sold
USD 650 000 - 850 000
Year of manufacture 1926
- **Lot number** 21
- **Drive** RHD
- **Condition** Used
- **Location** 
- **Exterior colour** Other
- **Car type** Other

Description

The Type 37 Grand Prix, one of the most successful Bugatti models, was based on the famous Type 35, but was intended for voiturette racing with its 1.5-litre engine. Like the Type 35, the Type 37 provided excellent overall performance, but it offered an increased level of versatility for road events and rallies. As opposed to the Type 35's eight-cylinder unit, the Type 37 was fitted with a four-cylinder engine that was even tougher and more tractable. Unlike the other Bugatti Grand Prix cars, the Type 37 used plain, not roller, bearings and a one-piece crankshaft. The Type 37's engine featured a compact cylinder block, single overhead cam, and three-valve cylinder heads, relying on simplicity and lightweight design for its performance. The cars were easily capable of 90 mph.

Type 37s quickly became known as race-winning machines and were entered in all the great road races of the era including Le Mans, the Mille Miglia, and the Targa Florio. Given its mechanical robustness, the Type 37 was the rare car that one could drive hard all day long and then safely drive home.

The fascinating history of this example, chassis 37227, is chronicled in a report on file by renowned Bugatti historian Pierre-Yves Laugier. Mr. Laugier also uncovered outstanding period photographs of the Type 37 from new through the 1950s. On the first of December 1926, chassis 37227 was invoiced for the amount of 46,400 French francs to Mr. René Bacon in the city of Luxey in southwest France. The Bugatti was delivered by a Mr. Deprat who drove it from Molsheim to Luxey. Mr. Bacon was a WWI hero who owned large forests in the region and made his money by manufacturing turpentine from pine trees.

René Bacon raced the Type 37 at least once, in Pau, according to a contemporary newspaper account. The daily newspaper L'Auto, dated the 5th of February 1927, describes a flying start on the previous day during that meeting in Pau, and Bacon finished third. He next let Louis Rigal, a well-known driver of the time, race the Type 37 in the first Bugatti Grand Prix at Le Mans on the 24th of June 1928, in the 1500cc class, but Rigal retired after the first lap.

The Bugatti was then sold on the 18th of June 1929 to the famous driver Count Stanislaw Czaykowski, a well-known Bugatti privateer driver who was born in The Hague in 1899. He settled in southwest France around 1926 and registered the Bugatti to his new house in the village of Autevielle. This Type 37 was the very first Bugatti owned by the Count, who bought twelve Bugattis in five years, until his death at Monza on the 10th of September 1933. In his machines, he won the Casablanca Grand Prix and had success in other famous races of the period. Notably, he broke the one-hour race record at a speed of 213.842 km/h at Avus in 1933.

On the 9th of December 1930, the Type 37 was sold to Count Czaykowski's friend and mechanic Ernest Friderich in Nice. Friderich, an engineer and racer for Bugatti from its earliest days, had been in charge of the maintenance of Count Czaykowski's cars since 1929. The Bugatti remained in France and passed among a handful of other owners, including Jean Vuiria, a noted automobile and motorcycle racer, and, from 1946 to 1950, Mr. Claudius Alazard. The Bugatti was discovered in 1958 by famed Bugatti hunter Antoine Raffaelli, who was a young 24-year-old enthusiast at the time.

In 1960, the Bugatti was sold by Leonard Potter and the Halfway Garages in the UK and purchased, for \$2,100, by its fascinating long-term owner, Peter Larkin of New York City; it has remained in his family ever since. Mr. Larkin was an influential four-time Tony Award-winning set designer, and a 1962 New Yorker article entitled "The Bugatti Upstairs" chronicles an early moment in Mr. Larkin's ownership. The article states, "He used to keep the vehicle, which was built in 1926 or 1927, parked in the street. Last fall he had to send some parts to New Jersey for repairs, so he had to find a winter-storage place. He decided to put the car on his terrace." The article reports that Mr. Larkin and a friend took the Bugatti apart, carried it piece by piece upstairs, and reassembled it on the terrace of his 18th Street apartment in New York, which was located above Pete's Tavern, a legendary drinking establishment dating back to the mid-1800s. The car was eventually taken back down and reassembled.

In addition to his important work on Broadway, Mr. Larkin, along with lighting designer Jules Fisher, designed The Mothership in the 1970s for the seminal music collective Parliament-Funkadelic. This was a fire-spitting flying saucer that would descend from the rafters at packed arena shows, and it has since become one of the most iconic stage

props of all time. A replica of it now resides in the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

Mr. Larkin was an active member of the American Bugatti Club, showing and driving the Type 37 at various events in the US throughout the years and taking part in the International Bugatti Rally on the East Coast in 1995. Starting in 1998, Bugatti specialist Vintage Auto Restorations in Bethel, Connecticut, headed by longtime Bugatti expert Don Lefferts, began freshening the Type 37. This extensive work mostly focused on mechanical components, retaining the Bugatti's wonderful patina, but included metalwork, such as the replacement of the dash and firewall for increased structural integrity, a repair to a crack in the frame, and some cosmetic work as well. The engine's lower sump was repaired; engine parts were replaced or restored; and the engine was rebuilt, tuned, and dyno tested; photos of it on the dynamometer are on file. Additional photographs of the freshening, as well as 50 pages of detailed invoices chronicling this work remain on file and are available for review.

Mr. Larkin was enthusiastic in his ownership of the Bugatti, stating in 2016 that he still drove it every Sunday, weather permitting. He drove the Type 37 until he was about 90 years old, although, according to his step-son Wesley Strick, "Peter knew that not everyone shared his love of automotive excitement. For years, he kept a photo album of dazed-looking acquaintances whom he'd just driven around Bridgehampton's backroads at top speed. Then he'd screech to a stop in our driveway and my mom would snap their photos as they stumbled from his car -- the album was titled "Frightened Bugatti Guests." It should also be noted that Mr. Larkin was a direct descendant of Deacon Larkin who, in 1775, lent his horse to Paul Revere for that famous "British Are Coming" night ride.

At the VSCCA Hunnewell Hill Climb in Wellesley, Massachusetts, in May 2015, noted Bugatti expert and American Bugatti Club registrar Sandy Leith had the opportunity to examine the Type 37, including its lower crankcase engine number (137), frame number (391), gearbox number (265), and differential number (262), and has opined that these components appear to be correct and original to the car. Additionally, in the 2018 American Bugatti Register, the Type 37 is described as "Basically original but with a late pressure crank and an unusual dip in the center of the front axle, similar to 37221." Mr. Laugier, in the course of his review of the Type 37 for his report, similarly opined that, based on his research, he believes the engine number is correct for this car, and that the frame number, gearbox, and differential are all also correct as they are within the series of Type 37 numbers.

In 2020, Mr. Larkin's family sent the Type 37 to Bugatti specialist and Pebble Beach award-winning restorer Scott Sargent of Sargent Metal Works in Bradford, Vermont. The fluids were checked and changed, a new muffler and tail pipe were installed, the brakes were re-shimmed, an overflow tank for the radiator was added, and the belly pans were pulled off and cleaned. Mr. Sargent noted that much of the Type 37's body appears original, a rarity among 1930s Grand Prix cars. According to Mr. Laugier's report, the tail section of the aluminum body may have been modified at some point. Mr. Sargent also reported that the car ran and drove well, with a strong engine and good oil pressure, and noted that the Type 37 has previously had some upgrades for drivability, including an electric starter and a modern-style clutch.

The Type 37 is accompanied at auction by a wonderful assortment of automobilia and Bugatti memorabilia amassed by Mr. Larkin over the years. This includes his driving gloves, goggles and hat, small-scale Bugatti models, along with posters, books on the marque, Bugattics and Pur Sang magazines, and a personal invitation from Romano Artoli to the launch of the Bugatti EB110 in 1991.

Now offered for sale for the first time in over 60 years, 37227 is well-respected within the Bugatti community. It has been cared for by a fascinating series of owners and is accompanied by wonderful period photographs and a history report by one of the foremost experts on the marque. Additionally, it has been mechanically maintained by Bugatti specialists, with a voluminous file of documentation chronicling the work. It has a captivating look, with its patinated older blue paint, and is a stunning and historic example of one of the most successful and sought-after designs conceived under the watchful eye of Le Patron, Ettore Bugatti.

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