Emotive Motoring

Showcased in the hallowed halls of the Louvre are 17 outstanding automobiles from a deeply enviable garage — L'Art de l'Automobile: Masterpieces of the Ralph Lauren Collection stands as testament to one man's impeccable taste in transportation, and celebrates the voluptuous artistry of the world's finest carmakers.

by **wei koh**

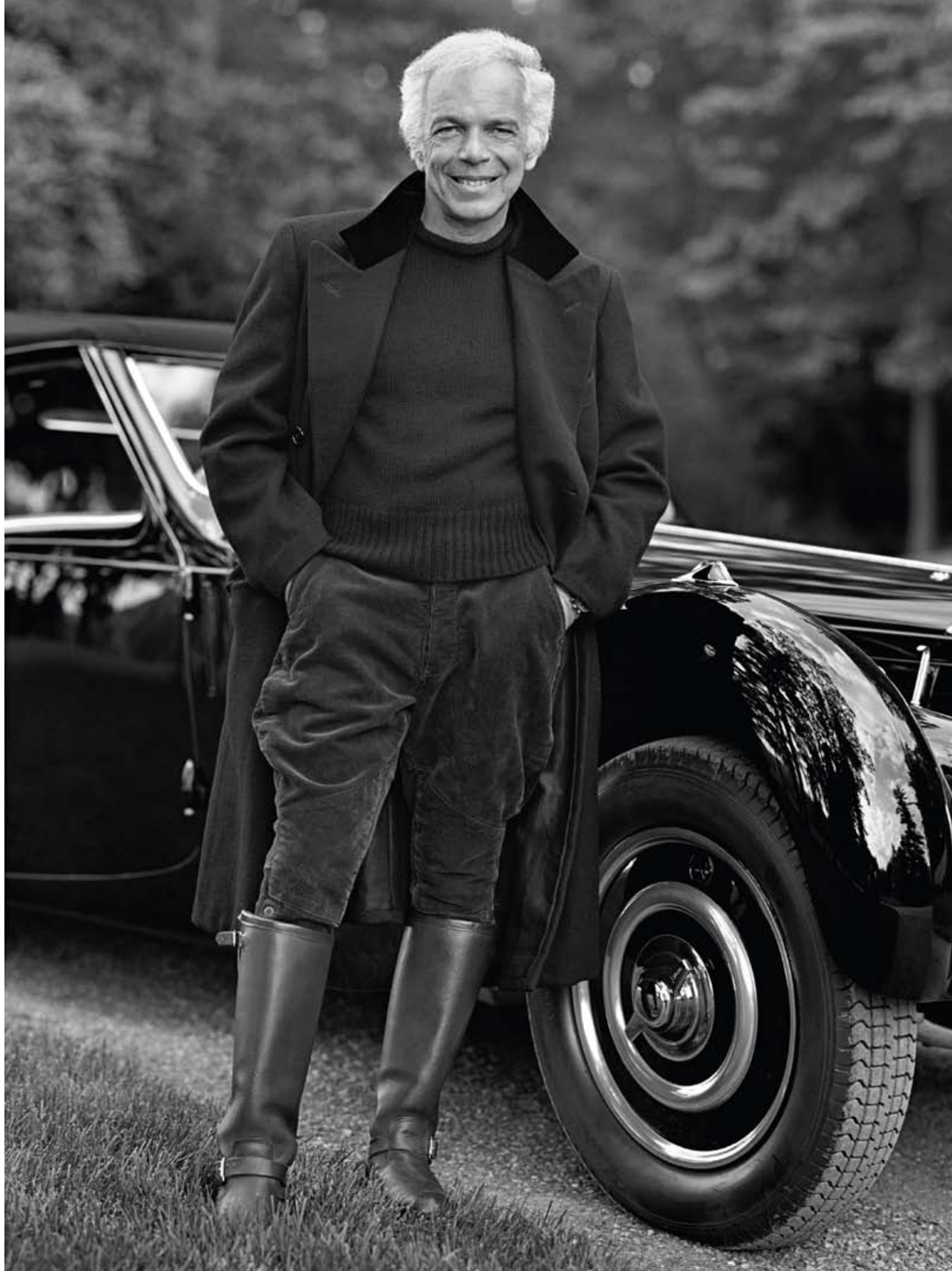
Ralph Lauren

doesn't like being called a car collector. For him, the 60-odd cars that comprise the world's greatest assembly of performance machines are not objects to be placed inside hermetically sealed chambers or gone over ad nauseam with Q-tips and chrome polish. He does not limit their use to the summer solstice or other cosmic alignments of the stars. What he does is drive them. He invites everyone in his family to use them. Because for Lauren, the cars are meant to be driven; they are meant to go round bends and pushed flat-out on straights. Only through being used do they ascend beyond machines into the nobility of purposeful things.

He says, "I've always liked purposeful things, things that are designed not to be decorative." And it's this insistence on using his cars, on driving them on a daily basis — occasionally bestowing a visiting tourist to the sleepy upstate hamlet of Bedford where he keeps this metal armada with an 'oh my God' moment nonpareil: as Lauren rolls up at the light in a Ferrari 250 GTO or his Bugatti 57SC, the unsuspecting tourist is hit with a sort of cosmic double-tap that has him first blown away by the car itself, before he registers who the driver is. By then, Lauren will have smiled or waved, because he's that kind of cool guy, before pinning the throttle and roaring off into the glorious yonder.

The nobility of use is the thread connecting his love for artisan-built automobiles and the luxury universe that he's created. For Lauren, there are only two types of objects: those that gain in beauty with usage and those that diminish by interaction with the human touch. It is for that reason that his luxury empire is not built on the shimmering ephemera of trend, but on the substance of timeless elegance and the patina of quality which makes every Ralph Lauren product — from the zen purity of the polo player tie, to a hand-canvassed barathea tuxedo, to a chair built from 54 hand-placed layers of carbon fiber — an object that gains beauty the more it's used.

As the father of American luxury, it's somehow fitting that Lauren is a car guy. In this way, he's connected on some level to



Opposite: A lifelong automobile aficionado, Ralph Lauren has amassed an impressive 60-odd car collection that includes marques such as Alfa Romeo, Bentley, Bugatti, Ferrari, Jaguar and Porsche.

Previous spread: One of the stars of Ralph Lauren's prized collection is the 1938 Bugatti Atlantic which he had painted black from the original blue.

every great American gearhead fitting fuelie heads to his L78 396 Chevy to appease the elusive gods of rear-wheel horsepower. Somehow the automobile, though born in Europe, is most at home upon the vast interconnected bloodstream of America's highways. It was, after all, California, that golden land of eternal optimism, that was the direct inspiration for some of Europe's most famous cars, including the Porsche 356 Speedster — made at the behest of US Porsche distributor Max Hoffman for Southern California's amateur race scene.

The car, in America's hero mythology, is as inseparable from the character and as integral a part of the hero's identity as Silver was to the Lone Ranger's. It is impossible to think of Steve McQueen without conjuring up his green Mustang GT in *Bullitt*, or thinking of James Dean outside of his ill-fated 'Little Bastard' Porsche 550 Spyder.

To some extent, it may be their innate heroism that Lauren's drawn to; he, more than any man alive, has mastered the iconography of heroism in his clothes, in his images and in his shops. Indeed many of Lauren's racecars with impressive race pedigree, which have fueled extraordinary courage in the face of innumerable odds, are testament to man's heroism. At the same time, for Lauren, his cars are not trophies or symbols, but pure organic extensions of who he is, and as a man who so perfectly inhabits so many universes, it's only natural that his collection, to borrow from Whitman, "contains multitudes".

In many ways, Lauren's cars represent the completion of the evocative universes he's demonstrated such genius at visualising. He explains, "Automobiles are an expression of the individual who buys or drives them. We represent ourselves with cars just as we represent ourselves with the clothes we wear." As such, Lauren is perfectly attuned to the contextual importance of the right car. He explains, "If you envision an elegant stone country home, you think of a dark green Jaguar. If you live on the beach, you might want a Jeep."

Lauren's legend as the winner of multiple Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance 'Best of Show' awards is the result of his innate ability to look at an object, distil its pure essence and then align it with his vision to make it absolutely perfect. This is a fine balancing act, a question of details. For example, the Bugatti Atlantic, which he is most often associated with, came to him with a blue exterior. It may have seemed a risky choice to paint the car black, but that somehow allowed it to take on an identity that is more breathtaking and a purer expression of Jean Bugatti's vision of aviation-infused automotive sculpture.

Ralph's cars have informed his designs. His all-black 'Darth Vader' Porsche 930 Turbo inspired a collection of ultra-stealth luxury performance wear that literally pioneered the market for this category of garments. The dashboard on his '38 Atlantic is quoted in his most recent Sporting timepiece that has received accolades from the watch cognoscenti.

Despite the incalculable value of what is commonly acknowledged to be the greatest collection of automotive art in the world, it is also not lost on Lauren that perhaps the greatest value of a car is in the memories it helps us make with others. Lauren recalls his very first 'exotic' car, a 1961 Morgan that he bought in his early 20s; he remembers selling the car when he got married because he needed to buy an apartment. He recalls the three-hour bus ride that he took back after selling it to a friend in Massachusetts, feeling that touch of remorse, "I think

Top: Ralph Lauren's 1929 Bentley Blower, distinctively embellished with the British flag, is immortalised as 007's first car in Ian Fleming's novels.

Opposite: The restoration of this 1930 Mercedez-Benz SSK 'Comte Trossi' took two years, but the hard work was vindicated when it won 'Best of Show' at both the 1993 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance as well as the 2007 Concorso D'Eleganza Villa d'Este.

Right: Ralph Lauren's Sporting Automotive timepiece features a wood dial — elm burl, to be exact, which is the same wood found on the dash of his Bugatti Atlantic.

Opposite: A trio of red-hot cars from the collection — (clockwise from top left) the dash of the 1954 Ferrari 375 Plus, the 1958 Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa, and the 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B Mille Miglia Spider.

I gave up that Morgan too early." But then he was vindicated because that car helped provide a home to the family that would end up being his proudest achievement.

He explains, "I bought a 1971 Mercedes 3.5 convertible. It was the last hand-built car they made." He recalls sitting in the car with his son who was at the time 32 years old — the same age he was when he bought it. He states, "That car has history, memories, it is more beautiful today than it ever was." With that compact economy, he perfectly sums up the communicative value of automobiles.

Like his brand, Lauren's cars are stridently optimistic, espousing freedom and heroism. They make frequent appearances in Lauren's advertisements and visual displays. So impressive are they that they have been the subject of books, television documentaries, and now, two museum retrospectives: the first at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the second occurring this year from 28 April to 28 August at the Louvre's Musée des Arts Décoratifs. Reopened in 2006 after a decade-long renovation, this museum's objective is to enable people to interpret objects and their ability to both express and affect human culture. To Rodolphe Rapetti, the curator of 'L'Art de l'Automobile: Masterpieces of the Ralph Lauren Collection', Lauren's cars are perfect examples of cultural objects.

He explains, "This is not the first-ever exhibition of cars at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. In 1970, we did a show called Bolides Design, featuring competition cars as expressions of art and technique and selected by a jury including artists Jean Tinguely and Victor Vasarely. But what really appealed to me about this new show is to see the design narrative of the automobile through the eyes of the world's greatest fashion designer, Ralph Lauren."

Rapetti and Lauren's journey was a long and involved one. He explains, "The selection process took one year. The architect of the museum was involved from the beginning and we knew that the maximum we could have was 18 cars. So the first thing we decided was that if we were to include as candidates all the cars from the 1920s to present-day cars which are still enriching the collection, it would be too wide of a time period to communicate a focused evolution of design and technology. So, we decided we would look at the period from the '30s to the '60s as these are some of the most exciting and halcyon years of car design to us. This way, we could create a chronological presentation with a strong narrative, which would be more ideal for our museum. The museum is divided between the central hall and the space in the wings. So, I decided to showcase only competition cars in the main space and GT cars in the smaller area.

"We discussed the selection very intensely with Mr. Lauren and we made all the selections together. What I realised was that Mr. Lauren is himself a fantastic curator, you see this also in his designs where he has selected a specific detail from the past that is so charming and beautifully timeless that it looks perfect on a modern garment."

Lauren and Rapetti worked hard to create the dramatic first impression of the exhibition. He explains, "It was Mr. Lauren's idea to have the Bugatti as the first car that you see, as you come up the stairs into the main hall, as something of a flagship — a single expression of automotive art at its finest. We decided to place the car on a high-polished black surface, so there is this dramatic sense of reflection and context for it."

When asked about his personal favourite car of the exhibition, Rapetti laughs and replies, "The Bugatti Atlantic is a perfect example of automotive art telling the story of the prevailing culture. There is this wonderful tension between the front and the back of

That night, it was an American that was the star that shined brightest in the City of Light.

This page: 'L'Art de l'Automobile: Masterpieces of the Ralph Lauren Collection' is hosted at the Louvre's Musée des Arts Décoratifs.

Opposite: Rodolphe Rapetti and Ralph Lauren worked hard to ensure that L'Art de l'Automobile had a strong narrative and communicated a focused evolution of design and technology. Notable guests at the gala dinner held to celebrate the launch of the exhibition included Madame Hélène David-Weill (top right), the president of Les Arts Décoratifs, Michelle Yeoh, Jean Todt, Jackie Stewart, Jean Reno, Zhang Ziyi, as well as Ralph Lauren's family (centre).

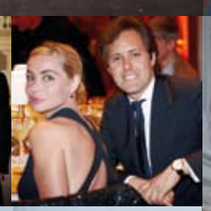
the car. The front is very much like a car from the 1920s, but the back is much more aerodynamic, informed by the streamlined approach that was dominating the 1930s. It is the story of emerging modernity. This was the last work of Jean Bugatti, the son of Ettore, as he passed away shortly afterwards. One interesting element that demonstrates the importance of design is the raised central spine of the car which has absolutely no utility. It comes from the fact that the first prototype was in a special metal that was an aluminium alloy, and the two halves of the coach had to be joined this way. But when Jean Bugatti progressed to the actual car, he liked this element so much that it remained — as you can see, it gives the car a special sense of beauty. Another example is that the car has six exhaust pipes, which are not based on the engine profile because this is an eight-cylinder engine. So this was purely an aesthetic choice."

As he continues his soliloquy on Lauren's cars, Rapetti's eyes light up. "Another car that is very interesting is the Bentley Blower, a car that Ettore Bugatti liked to call 'the world's fastest lorry'. Walter Owen Bentley hated these cars as his engines were not made to be supercharged — they were unreliable. When the famous Bentley Boys lead by Tim Birkin were preparing these cars for Le Mans, they had to do it at a separate facility because Bentley wouldn't let them use his factory."

As he speaks, we are transported to that pioneer era of gentlemen racers working with technology so new that they plotted courses into the great unknown. Rapetti points out the contrasting aesthetics between the Bugatti Atlantic and the Bentley Blower, "What is interesting is the sheer brutality of the [Blower]. The supercharger is so inelegantly placed, not as part of the car but bolted to the front, almost as an afterthought. But the car's monstrosity, its bulk, all makes it beautiful. What is great is that Mr. Lauren sees the beauty in such contrasting machines."

As he weaves in his delighted way from one car to another, it's clear that Rapetti has been totally enchanted by Lauren's automobile collection, which he refers to as the "the most perfectly considered in the world". So, too, are the guests that arrive for the exhibition's gala dinner, which include Jean Todt, Jackie Stewart, Zhang Ziyi, Michelle Yeoh, Jean Reno, Anne Parillaud, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Lee Radziwill, and many more luminaries of culture and auto sport.

In her speech congratulating Lauren on the exhibition, Madame Hélène David-Weill, the president of Les Arts Décoratifs, thanked him for what he's given to Paris as a gift of culture. Lauren, in turn, thanked her and referred to Paris as his new second home. Amid the hushed room within the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, overlooking the central courtyard of the Louvre, the pyramid designed by I. M. Pei, and the building itself created in the 12th century by Philip II, more than 500 years before America declared its independence, it is clear that Ralph Lauren, his cars and his brand, as an extension of who he is, have not only become a part of Paris' cultural landscape, but they are integral to the story of human culture itself.

That night, it was an American, whose unique ability with aesthetics was beautifully embodied by the perfectly considered sculptures in steel on display, that was the star that shined brightest in the City of Light.

EVENT PHOTOS: PIERRE-OLIVIER DESCHAMPS, CARTER BERG AND JULIEN HEKMIAN