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# DEPARTURES


THE CULTURE ISSUE





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# I N H I G H



Vintage cars  
displayed at Grand  
Basel last year.

# G E A R

Vintage cars have joined the art establishment, with four-wheeled masterpieces being sold to the same collectors at the same big-ticket fairs as blue-chip paintings. *by Brett Berk*



A 1958 Abarth Fiat Jolly 750cc (top) and a 1966 Iso Grifo Series II Targa from Stuart Parr's collection, in East Hampton, New York.

A 1995 BMW 850 CSI featuring a design by the painter David Hockney, part of BMW's long-running Art Car program.



## ANYONE HOPING TO PLAY A LATE-AFTERNOON ROUND AT THE BRIDGE,

the ultraexclusive water-view golf club in Bridgehampton, New York, on a golden September Saturday last year, would have been disappointed. But for collectors of cars and art—an increasingly overlapping set—there was no better place to be. Champagne in hand, moneyed motorheads and art-world insiders mingled among displays of rare and covetable cars, such as a four-leaf-clover-shaped arrangement of vintage Ferraris, a row of classic Porsche 911s, and a 1950s Jeep in a sand trap. At the 18th hole, they encountered an array of repurposed shipping containers designed by artist Lars Fisk, decked out as outposts of major contemporary art galleries and filled with blue-chip pieces by the likes of Alex Katz and Wolfgang Tillmans. Among the most impressive works on view was an installation by the artist Tom Sachs, an ersatz lunar base with a geodesic dome and a fully stocked bar, for sale at \$525,000.

Founded in 2016, the annual invitation-only September Art Fair at the Bridge brings together a 150-vehicle classic-car concours and an art fair that features a dozen top-tier galleries including David Zwirner and Vito Schnabel.

“The Bridge celebrates art and cars, and it’s not just based on money,” says Stuart Parr, a designer, film producer, and renowned collector of art and vehicles who has shown numerous cars and motorcycles at the show each year since its first. “They’ll put out a \$12 million Ferrari next to a convertible VW Bug from 1957, and you’ll have just as many people around the Bug.” Plus, at the Bridge, Parr notes, there are no prizes, unlike at other high-end concours. “It’s really about passion,” he says. “It’s not about winning. People really get to enjoy, and there’s no tension.”

That passion, together with the price tags involved, is what connects collectors of both art and cars. “There’s a certain amount of synergy between the two realms,” says Bob Rubin,

the event’s cofounder and owner of the Bridge, which is sited on the grounds of a famous mid-20th-century car racing circuit. “The discovery of cars as art-like objects is easier than bringing an interest in art to the car world. But it’s starting to happen.”

The worlds of collectible cars and fine art are converging. This reflects long-term trends in other categories of collectibles such as furniture, jewelry, and architecture: Over time, key examples have been elevated to the level of artwork and revered, displayed, and priced and marketed accordingly. As long as there have been cars, people have collected them. What’s changed recently is the type of cars people are looking for: those with a story to tell.

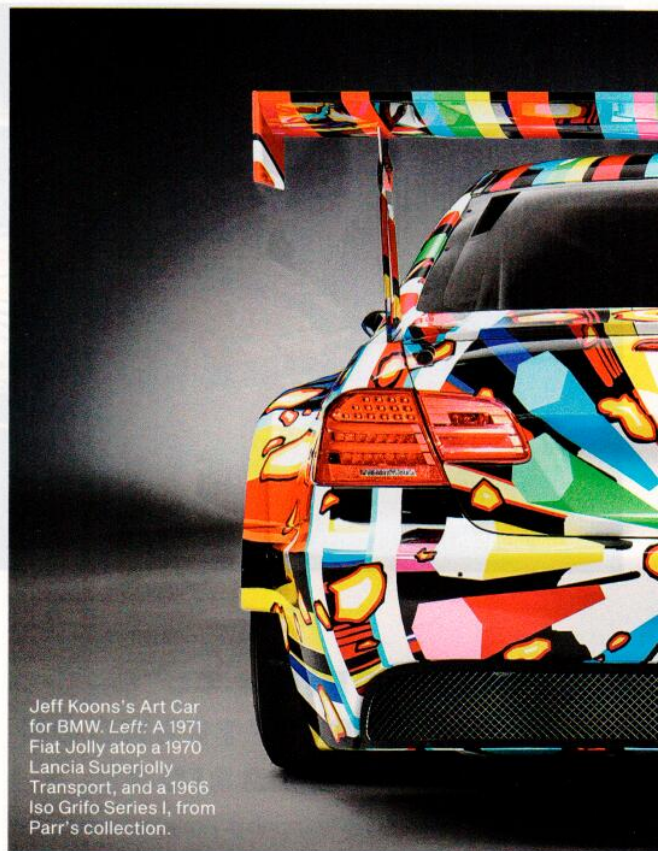
The vintage car market, like the contemporary art market, remains superheated. This is especially true in the upper echelons, where premium vehicles regularly trade in the seven-figure range, and a subset of exceptional vehicles trade in the eight-figure range.

But the points of connection run deeper than escalated prices. “The car market has matured immensely in the past ten to fifteen years,” says David Kinney, publisher of the *Hagerty Price Guide*. “As such, we’re now routinely using most of the language of the art market.”

This includes the use of terms like *patina* to describe a car’s ordinary wear, the expansion of services for evaluating a vehicle’s authenticity and stated provenance, and a correlative uptick in attempts at forgeries.

Most intriguingly, the most desirable collectible automobiles are now those that are, like the most valuable fine furniture and artworks, unmolested. “Originality wasn’t a big deal as little as ten to fifteen years ago. Everybody would just restore a car, and it would be worth as much money as an original, and often more,” says Kinney. “Now that rubric has changed, and the original cars, the ones that are untouched, that have the original paint and interior, are now always at the top of our market.” This is as true for eight-figure cars as it is for those at the market’s base.

This appreciation of originality reflects increased interest in the story told by a car’s natural wear and tear, what historians



Jeff Koons's Art Car for BMW. Left: A 1971 Fiat Jolly atop a 1970 Lancia Superjolly Transport, and a 1966 Iso Grifo Series I, from Parr's collection.

call its “entropic narrative.” It also privileges the link between a notable vehicle and a notable owner or driver or racing win—this is the steering wheel that Steve McQueen or Ayrton Senna held when crossing the finish line. In this sense the vintage car market has come to resemble the vintage timepiece market, where watches worn by iconic people command a higher price (take Paul Newman’s Rolex Daytona, which set an auction record of \$17.8 million in 2017), and signs of wear, such as a sun-bleached dial on a sports watch, are considered desirable proofs of authenticity.

“The joke is that anyone with a checkbook can restore a car,” says Kinney. “But no one can make it original twice.”

Parr certainly appreciates this focus on originality and preservation. He has shown cars at the Bridge that fit this description, including an Iso Grifo, an Alfa Romeo, and a Mercedes-Benz. “Two years ago, I showed a Lancia Superjolly,” Parr says. “It had virtually no mileage on it, a canopy, all fitted inside really beautifully with big brass boat rope as doors. I have a photo of Pope Paul VI touring the factory in it standing next to [Fiat and Lancia head Gianni] Agnelli.”

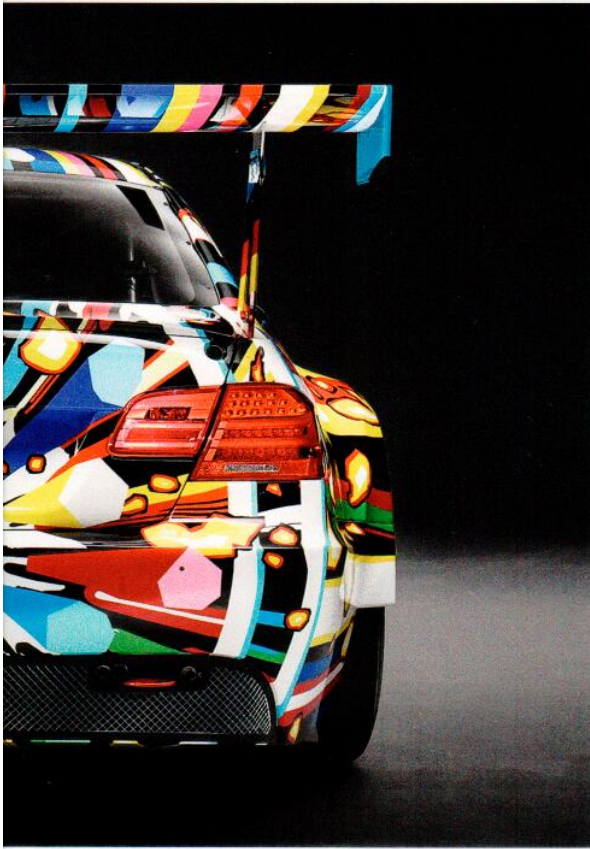
These days, cars have begun to regularly infiltrate fine-art museums. Ken Gross, a veteran automotive journalist, author, concours judge, and former museum director, has been a driving force in getting the car its due. “The automobile is probably the most significant invention of the twentieth century,” Gross says. He has curated a dozen exhibits at American art museums—including Atlanta’s High Museum of Art and Houston’s Museum

of Fine Arts—assembling displays of fantastical concept models, potent race cars, vehicular exemplars of Streamline Moderne or Art Deco styling, and more.

“People look at these exhibitions as kinetic art, mechanical sculpture,” Gross says. “They’re also seeing cars on platforms, spotlight, so they’re looking at them in a way that they just don’t see cars on the street. And many people suddenly have a new appreciation for cars when they see this. They recognize that this really is twentieth-century industrial art, and they’re pleased to see it in a museum.” These exhibitions have brought in record crowds, including people who might not ordinarily visit an art museum. “Part of the success of shows like this is making people realize that art does have something to do with all of us,” says Susan Edwards, CEO and executive director of the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, which has hosted two of Gross’s shows.

Cars have also long been a rich subject matter, and medium, for American artists. The candy-colored car-part sculptures of John Chamberlain, the eroticized muscle cars of Richard Prince, the dystopian DeLorean shells of Daniel Arsham, the futuristic life pods of Andrea Zittel, the photo-realist street scenes of Richard Estes, and the VW Beetle rooftop crucifixion of Chris Burden all played on our emotional connection with the automobile.

“For artists, the car was a symbol of the modern, and of American leadership in modernity,” says Barbara Haskell, a veteran curator at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art. “It



ances at established art fairs like Design Miami or Masterpiece in London. Last year, MCH Group, the team behind Art Basel, the prestigious Swiss art fair that's now expanded to three locations, launched an automotive equivalent: Grand Basel. The events are based on a similar model: A carefully curated list of dealers pay for the privilege of displaying their highly desirable wares in perfectly lit booths. They are in turn provided access to a select group of wealthy collectors (and ticket-buying lookie-loos).

"In testing the concept, we discovered that about 70 percent of people that are related to Art Basel have an interest in collecting cars," says Mark Backé, global director of Grand Basel. Moreover, as the markets for cars and art have begun to converge, so have their definitions. "I read a very interesting article about a hundred top collectors in the car area," Backé says. "When asked why they collect cars, the second most popular answer now is that they considered these types of cars to be art."

Grand Basel's initial outing in Basel, Switzerland, was a

**"WHEN YOU HAVE CARS REACHING PRICES THAT EXCEED THE TOP END OF THE ART MARKET, AND AUCTION HOUSES HAVE TAKEN ON EXOTIC CARS," SAYS ARTIST RICHARD PHILLIPS, "THEY'VE KIND OF TAKEN IT OUT OF THE HANDS OF CAR CULTURE."**

became almost synonymous with that sense of modern life being so sped up and interconnected and technologically advanced." Some carmakers, meanwhile, have sought to embrace the art world's fascination with automobiles, none more so than BMW with its long-running Art Car program, in which the German carmaker commissions major artists like Jeff Koons and David Hockney to reskin race cars.

All this attention to and appreciation of the automobile as a fine-art object also has as its foundation another very American root: money. "I think it's pretty straightforward," says artist Richard Phillips, who has created automotive installations with a 1972 Dodge Charger, a 1992 Porsche 911, and a 2011 Lotus Evora. "The market demands this. When you have cars reaching prices that exceed the top end of the art market, and auction houses have taken on exotic cars, as Sotheby's and others have, and stage unbelievable sales, they've kind of taken it out of the hands of car culture." He continues, "It's sort of like being in the presence of the *Mona Lisa*. When you're next to a high-value object, you're not driving it, but it makes you feel a certain way."

Classic cars for sale have also begun to make featured appear-

success. The cars on display included a Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing Coupe, an Aston Martin DB5 Volante, and a Lamborghini Miura, and Backé reported approximately 30 sales of top-tier vintage vehicles in the \$500,000 to \$3.5 million range. Future shows are already being scheduled, and the next one is expected to take place in Frankfurt this fall.

The car may hold its privileged position in the world of fine art for some time. But there is a question of how long it will remain relevant in our increasingly technological age. "The empowerment of the individual, the sense of freedom, I don't think will be in the future linked with the automobile the way it was in the twentieth century," Haskell says.

In other words, what happens when the electric-powered, shared, autonomously driven vehicle starts to dramatically transform our perceptions of the gasoline-powered, individually owned, human-driven automobile?

"As those cars cease to be something that people use in everyday life, they will become more nostalgic or deemed more exotic, something removed from our normal consumption," says Haskell. "After that, they can really be appreciated as sculpture." ▢