

‘History, Luxury, Sport: Automobiles In Newport’ At The Audrain Automobile Museum

By CLIFFORD ATIYEH

NEWPORT, R.I. — Hidden near the idyllic coastline and stately Victorian mansions of this Rhode Island city is a lost racetrack. Just north of the same roads where traffic grinds to a halt each summer, young

men sped in circles as Newport’s high society cheered them on, the air filled with ungodly noise, smoke and dust. They battled each other in expensive cars, on dirt, sand and the streets. In 1900, to be idle and rich meant a chance to compete in what were

among the nation’s first automobile circuit races. Newport is at the heart of the birth of American motorsport.

Some of those early race cars are now on display in Newport’s Audrain Automobile Museum. The latest exhibit, “History, Luxury, Sport: Automobiles in Newport” highlights the rarest, most expensive vehicles from the early Twentieth Century through 1980, all of which have historic and modern ties to the city.

“The story of Newport and Rhode Island in automotive history, especially that of motorsports, is largely unknown,” said Donald Osborne, CEO of the Audrain Group, and who helps oversee the museum. “This exhibition shines a remarkable light on that story, the people and the

amazing technology of the age.”

The white 1901 Panhard is the exhibit’s highlight. What appears today as a rudimentary open-top carriage was a million-dollar supercar brimming with engineering prowess. Starting in 1900, it raced four times at the Newport Automobile Races, a rabberousing series that 22-year-old Willie K. Vanderbilt hosted at a dirt horse track in Middletown, R.I., on the streets of Cranston, R.I., and Newport’s Second Beach. Competitors poured into Newport. By 1903, their cars surged in power and traveled so dangerously fast that Vanderbilt was practically run out of town (the last straw was his attempt to shut down Ocean Drive, which quite offended the residents).

“They were racing on the street, getting into trouble,

much like kids today,” said David de Muzio, the museum’s executive director.

But Vanderbilt continued to race abroad, and with a car identical to the very 1902 Mercedes Simplex in the museum, he hit nearly 70 miles per hour in a street race to Paris. During that same year in France, he set a land speed record in a Mors Type Z. A surviving example of that car, with its huge engine, pioneering hydraulic shock absorbers and no front brakes, sits in the exhibit.

“This was a billionaire’s game of the era,” de Muzio said. “You’re paying \$20,000 for a car, in 1901, and 100 percent of the import tax.”

At home, Vanderbilt moved the crowds from Newport to Long Island and christened the Vanderbilt Cup. Several of those race cars, including a 1907 Renault and a 1911 Fiat, are gleaming in all their original glory at the Audrain. More cars across New England are part of the collection. A Winton Bullet, the car which famously lost to Henry Ford in 1901, comes from the Larz Anderson Auto Museum outside Boston.

“The amount of innovation in the first decade of the Twentieth Century has never been reproduced since,” de Muzio said. “In the gallery, it’s fun to see those cars in contrast to the newer vehicles.”

Those cars represent winners from the Audrain Newport Concours d’Elegance, an annual show hosted by the museum each October. Take the 1947 Willys CJ2A, the first civilian jeep sold after World War II, owned by a young collector who placed second in the show’s “30 Under 30” category. Rarer still are the one-off 1953 Abarth 1100SS Ghia Coupe and a blue 1961 Pontiac Ventura “Bubble-top” coupe, a high-performance “family car” which predated the famous Pontiac GTO.

“History, luxury and sport also so specifically matches with what has made and makes Newport the city it is,” Osborne said. “The Audrain Newport Concours d’Elegance has reflected the best of those in celebrating the art and importance of the automobile in our society.”

The newest car in the Audrain exhibit is a red, wedge-shaped BMW M1, the brand’s first mid-engine car intended for the race track whose development included work by Lamborghini which has a devoted following. Many of these cars, some loaned by Audrain supporters across New England and leading collectors and institutions from across the country, put Newport on the map for today’s automotive historians and enthusiasts. And thanks to Vanderbilt’s boisterous racing, the lobster and sailing capital that is Newport is also forever a car town.

The exhibit runs through December 8. The Audrain Automobile Museum is at 222 Bellevue Avenue. For information, www.audrainautomuseum.org or 401-856-4420.



1902 Mercedes Simplex 40hp. Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.



1902 Mors Type Z (left). Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.



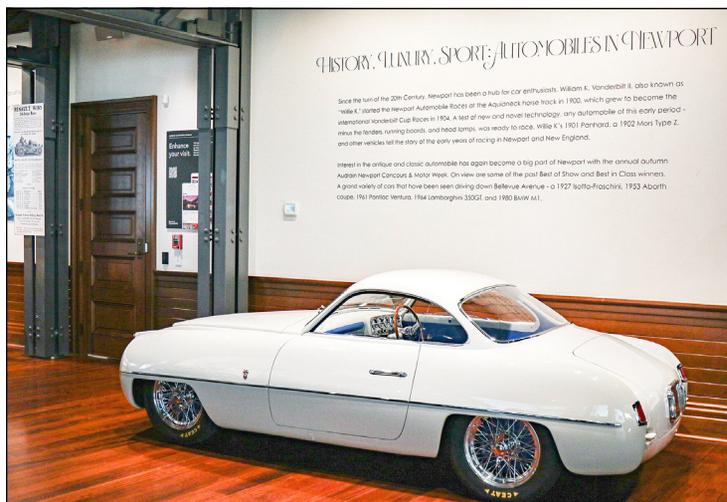
1901 Winton Bullet (left), 1901 Panhard et Levassor Type B1 (right). Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.



Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.



1927 Isotta-Fraschini Tipo 8A S Fleetwood Roadster, built for movie star Rudolph Valentino. Best of Show and Most Elegant Award winner of the 2019 Audrain Newport Concours d’Elegance. Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.



1953 Abarth 1100SS Ghia Coupe. Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.



1980 BMW M1 Coupe (center). Credit: Audrain Automobile Museum.