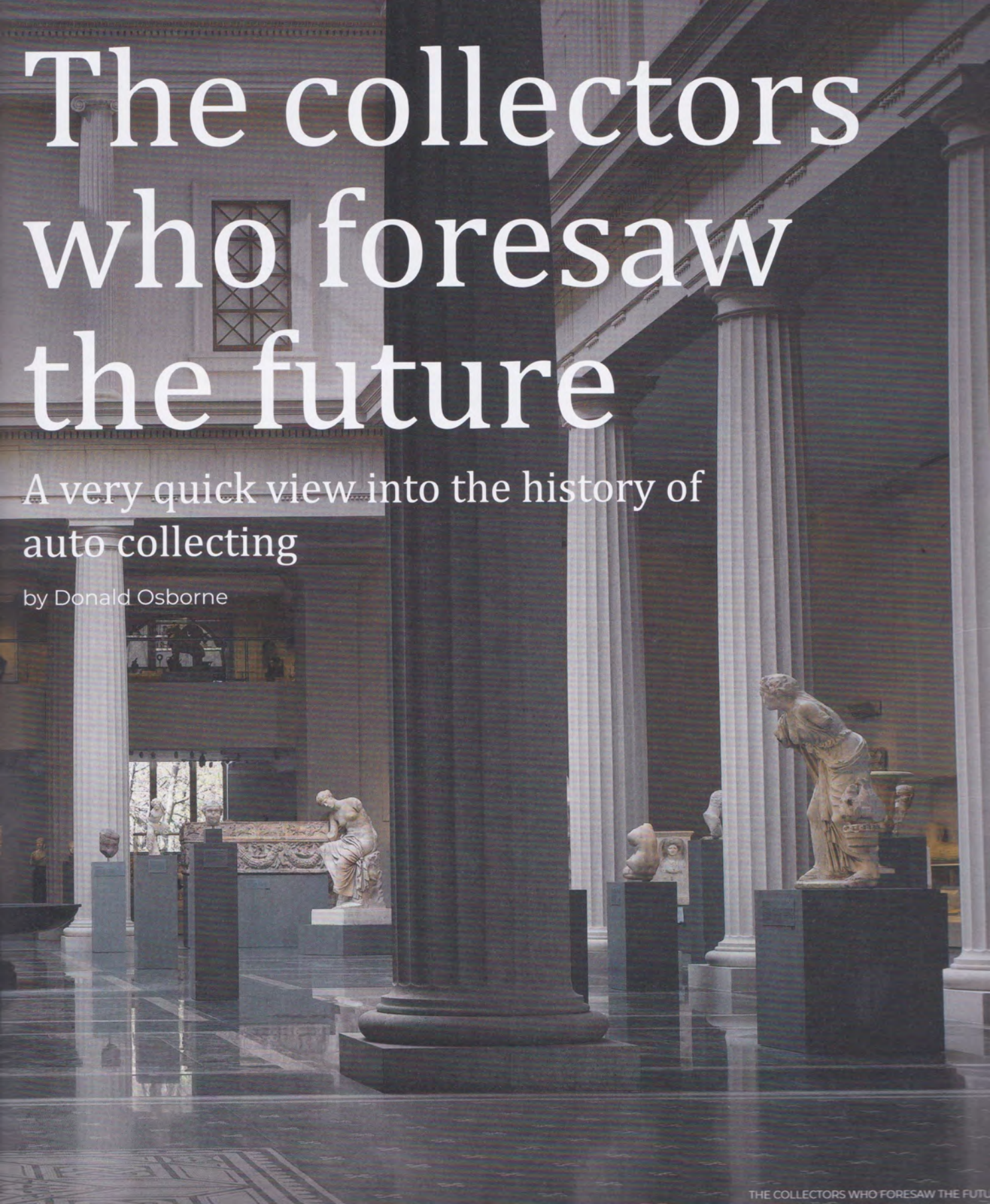


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The collectors who foresaw the future

A very quick view into the history of
auto collecting

by Donald Osborne



Why care about the roots of auto collecting?

Consider us all very fortunate at this point in time. Since you are holding this publication in your hands, you are clearly someone, like myself, who has an enthusiasm – no, a passion – for motor vehicles. Please understand that this article can, and will, only scratch the surface of this topic. How did automotive collecting begin, by whom was it started and how has it evolved?

We are fortunate because not very many years ago a handful of astoundingly prescient people decided that something most saw as a useful tool at best was deserving of preservation, and indeed, veneration. The best of these pioneers also had a discerning eye, and the passage of time has shown that while they may not have had today's criteria in mind, they did choose amazingly well. So how can the roots of automobile collecting show us anything about why and how we collect today? It can sometimes be tempting to see long-term trends or meaningful patterns in looking at the past 20 years in the collector-car market. And, by "collector car," I mean all types of motor vehicles.

Human nature seeks answers and understanding through analysis – the more rapidly, the better, at times. A look at the proliferation of financial news is a good example: across the world, hundreds, if not thousands, of "experts" provide on-the-spot explanations as to why millions of people and institutions have made billions of transactions in equities, bonds and commodities. That the answers might be so readily available to these chosen few begs the question, "If they knew, why didn't they make the deals earlier and retire as billionaires before midday?" But, that's not really my point. What I seek to explore here is something more basic – the nature of collecting and how the fundamental aspects of the activity in the collector-car arena defy many attempts to clearly analyze it.

A very young endeavor

Key to the challenge is the fact that car collecting as we know and understand it is quite young. Accepting that the first "motor car"

was the 1886 Benz Patent Motorwagen, it was not until after the end of World War II, 60 years later, that a more widely recognized habit of looking to assemble meaningful numbers of obsolete working vehicles began. Compare this with the lengthy history of collecting fine art which dates back to the Roman Empire when leading citizens proved their erudition and cemented their social standing by collecting items of antique Greek art. Noted Rutgers University history professor James Delbourgo, PhD, writing a review in *The Atlantic* of Erin Thompson's book, *Possession*, states: "Collectors have long been pegged as creatures of passion if not perversion..."

Delbourgo speaks of both the Roman love for Greek art and of the next major wave of collecting frenzy: the 18th-century British, and later 19th- and 20th-century Americans, on their "Grand Tour," in which they were compelled to acquire great swathes of classical paintings, sculpture and antique furniture to improve the artistic quality of their lives. It took a very particular type of passion to reach the conclusion that a tool was worthy of rescue and indeed of veneration. Of course, collectors of art have always been known to seek out objects created by past masters as well as to acquire and live with those created by their contemporaries. The gathering of contemporary vehicles for reasons other than their intended utility, however, will not be an important part of this story – but does play a part.

The dawn of collecting pioneers

The first "collections" of motor vehicles most often arose in the stables, garages and warehouses of the wealthy families who were the first customers for automobile manufacturers. From the invention and first marketing of the motor vehicle, it was an expensive and exotic plaything. As such, the owners of the early automobile consider selling one when a newer, more powerful, more comfortable and more advanced model was created. With no need for cash to purchase another, the unused car most often found itself parked in storage, under a sheet to protect it from dust. Thus, up until World War I and sometimes beyond, it was not terribly unusual to find that



George Waterman, Jr., and Kirk Gibson, Sr., sitting in his Daimler car.

a family had retained all the cars they had purchased. This was a boon for one particular pair of gentlemen who are largely recognized as among the first, if not the first to actively seek out obsolete vehicles for the purpose of preservation, study and display. They were George Waterman, Jr., and Kirk Gibson, Sr. In the 1920s, these friends had begun to seek out examples of old vehicles they felt deserved to be saved from the oblivion to which they had been relegated as no longer useful. For them, the products of the dawn of motoring immediately before and after the turn of the 20th century, were worthy of preservation. As few others shared their thoughts – their method of hunting down their prey was remarkable in both its simplicity and effectiveness. They printed a postcard, which they left in rural and suburban locations mostly in the New England region of the United States which seemed to be a likely place to be hiding unused motor vehicles. Their success rate was astonishing. Together the partners, co-founders of the Veteran Motor Car Club of America, found and saved remarkable cars.

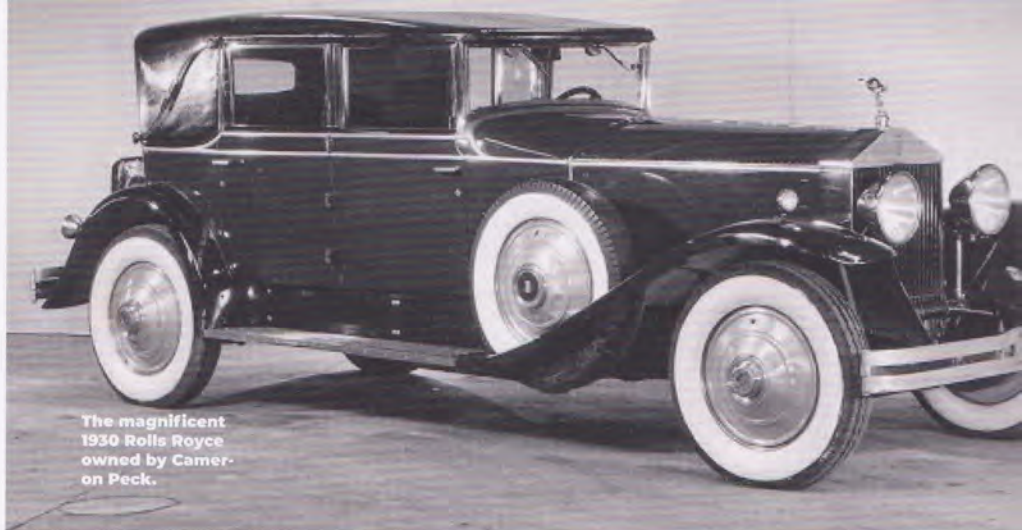
Among their treasures caught was the 1866 Dudgeon Steam Wagon, one of the earliest self-propelled vehicles built in the United States. Another was a 1907 Renault Racing Roadster, one of ten ordered by William K. Vanderbilt and one of the few survivors. It was purchased in 1928 by Gibson and remained in his family for 89 years. Evidence that Waterman especially had a discerning eye can be seen in his ownership as well of an 1896

Duryea, a 1908 Benz, a 191 Fiat Tipo S-74, a 1904 Napier and a 1908 Isotta-Fraschini. Gibson and Waterman had great success in their searches and at one point in the 1930s, according to an interview given in 2014 by Kirk Gibson III, had over 100 cars packed into an empty auto showroom in Boston, Massachusetts.

Collecting enters a new phase

While it wasn't until the late 1940s when auto collecting came into its own, there was a surprising amount of activity in the decades before World War II. In the USA, one name stands out above several others. D. Cameron Peck was born in 1912 in Chicago, Illinois. Peck was a voracious collector who, through the years until the time of his death in 1990, is said to have owned more than 1,500 cars from some of the earliest to contemporary examples. He began collecting in the 1930s, starting with a 1908 International Truck that had been abandoned behind a gasoline station. By 1947, Peck had a collection of well over 100 cars displayed in a former new car showroom in Illinois. The attached service area became a restoration shop. By the time he had his first big collection sell-off, prompted by health issues, in 1952, his staff estimated that more than 600 cars had passed through his hands from 1936 until then.

Among the buyers at that historic auction sale were a number of other now very well known early collectors. They included noted American



The magnificent 1930 Rolls Royce owned by Cameron Peck.

operatic tenor James Melton, Henry Austin Clark, Jr., and legendary sportsman Briggs Cunningham. All three would amass collections that still, to this day, inspire enthusiasts for both their breadth and quality. It is interesting to note that Henry Austin Clark, Jr., was a wealthy heir who spent his time indulging in his twin passions of cars and music, specifically jazz. His first antique car was a Ford Model T that he bought when he was 11 years old. Like his fellow American collector James Melton, Clark opened a museum to allow the public to become more familiar with antique cars – once his collection had grown too large to be housed at his own home. When his Long Island Automotive Museum opened in Southampton, New York, outside of New York City in 1948, it contained approximately 50 vehicles, from the late 19th century through

the 1930s. In addition to cars, it also included trucks, buses and vintage fire vehicles. As Clark also enjoyed using the vehicles on tours, they were all kept in running condition.

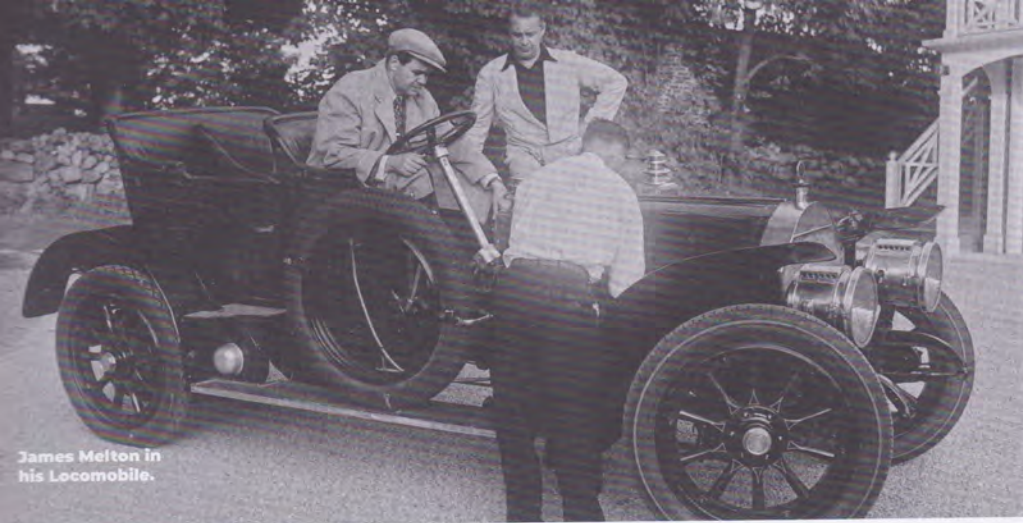
Unlike Waterman and Gibson in the 1920s, who could count on finding antiques that were more or less complete, many of the cars Clark bought had to be rescued from salvage yards. It was fairly easy for Clark to find mechanics who could work on the cars as many were not yet that old.

However, most repairs and maintenance were done by habit in the manner in which a vehicle might have been serviced when new – not with an eye for “pure” originality when an “improvement” might be perceived as better in order to make a car easier to use or more reliable. The same year as the Long Island museum was opened, James Melton was also launching a 20,000 sq. ft. museum in nearby Norwalk, Connecticut, to showcase his collection of antique and modern cars to the public. The collection was an eclectic one, ranging from a 1910 Locomobile to one of the infamous Docker Daimlers – the 1949 Green Goddess. Once again, some very important cars were to be found within the crowd of vehicles, including the 1911 Mercedes driven by Ralph DePalma in that year's Vanderbilt Cup race.

Only a few years later, in 1953, Melton decided to move his collection to larger and more glamorous quarters in Hypoluxo, Florida, near



An old advertisement of the Long Island Automotive Museum.



James Melton in his Locomobile.

Palm Beach. Called "Melton's Autorama" it opened with a flourish – many of the museum's cars were driven down from Connecticut to Florida, creating a moving show on the route. The displays were designed to show the cars in period settings and the museum became a major tourist attraction for a time. But, with no plans made for its support, the museum was forced to close in 1961 after Melton died.

Henry Austin Clark Jr.'s museum lasted rather longer, but the costs and falling attendance had forced the sale of several hundred cars from the collection. It finally closed in 1980. It was clear that a different level of both strategic planning and financing would be necessary to sustain such enterprises.

An international affair

Of course, activity to secure the future of the past was not just a phenomenon occurring in the United States. In 1934, Pieter Louwman, the importer of Dodge automobiles for The Netherlands, bought a 1914 Dodge for display in his new car showroom. It was the start of what would become the impressive and beautifully curated Louwman Museum collection – but that could hardly have been imagined at the time.

Pieter Louwman's motivation was driven by a desire to save the interesting older cars that his customers brought in as trades for new cars. Few would have thought that their "used" vehicles would have much interest

to anyone other than the scrap man. But Louwman had a different view. Sharing his collection with the public was always an important part of why he collected, but it was usually either a few old models related to the marque he sold, or as the collection grew larger through acquisitions it became open to visitors by arrangement. In Italy, the home to the birth of collecting, it's rather more difficult to find traces of activity in the 1920s and '30s. It is likely because the nation had lower per capita automobile ownership than the USA or Britain and because there was less pressure to scrap cars that were past their useful life. However, one of the major collections in Italy traces its roots back to the 1940s. Mario Righini is one



Mario Righini next to his Alfa Romeo 8C once raced by Tazio Nuvolari and the Alfa Romeo 6C Villa d'Este.

of the last of the old-time collectors. His father began to build a collection from among the more interesting and sometimes important cars that were brought to their family demolition yard near Modena by the Italian government for scrapping after their registrations were cancelled. With a keen eye for beauty and historical importance, the Righinis tucked the best of the cars into buildings in their 15th-century castle to preserve for the future.

After a period, Mario began to seek out other cars of the types they were being brought and were able to acquire some of the most important Italian cars built – examples of all the nation's marques. Many cars, now desirable as collectors' items, were purchased new in the 1970s and '80s by Righini. In the fashion of the pioneers, the collection is open



The 1914 Dodge Model 30 Touring from the Louwman Collection.

by reservation only and visitors experience the vehicles in a presentation that owes more to a storage aesthetic than to a display one. But this in no way implies that the collection is not maintained and valued and gives it a particular historic charm. In France of course the Schlumpf brothers must be included in any list of pioneering collectors.

They began their acquisitions much later than the others here, starting in the late 1950s. Fritz and Hans Schlumpf were Swiss nationals who owned textile mills in Alsace, France. Inspired by the activities of Bugatti in the region, they began their collection around 1960 with the purchase of ten Bugattis, along with a handful of other cars. Entranced by the Bugattis, they then performed a variation on the Waterman & Gibson shopping card and sent a letter to every owner listed in the 1962 Bugatti Registry, offering to buy every car they owned. As a result of the letters it is said they were able to buy 50 additional cars.

Still on the hunt, they managed to do a deal in 1964 with an American businessman in the Midwest, who had a collection of 30 Bugattis, to buy them all. John Shakespeare was very much a collector in the old manner. Somewhat of a hoarder and a tinkerer, many of his cars were parked fender to fender in warehouse buildings, many partially disassembled for repairs. The Schlumpfs never finished restoring all the cars they had bought from Shakespeare by the time they escaped Alsace and returned to Switzerland to avoid prose-

cution for misappropriation of business funds connected to the liquidation and closing of some mills while they were buying cars for their collection. For the brothers, it was about the acquisition and display of the vehicles, not sharing or using them as the primary goal.

A not-so-missing link

Perhaps the bridge between the collectors of the 1920s through the '50s and those of the early 21st century might be Bill Harrah, a casino magnate from Reno, Nevada. William F. Harrah, universally known as "Bill," is arguably the first example of the exercise of modern standards of collecting, while still rooted in the methodology of the pioneers. Harrah set out in 1969 to build the largest collection possible;



some have said he wanted to own one of every car made. Whether that was true or not, he did end up with an immense group of cars – somewhere between 1,400 and 1,800 at the time of his death at 68 years old in 1978. Once



again, his collection had – in common with the pioneers – a wide range of vehicles, including a 1892 Pillion steam car, Frank Sinatra's 1961 Ghia L6.4, a 1901 De Dion-Bouton, a Tucker 48, the 1938 Phantom Corsair and the Bugatti Type 41 Royale Coupé de Ville Binder. However, unlike them, he was the first to combine an in-house maintenance and restoration staff, tasked with research and study, to confirm that the cars were being maintained in a manner to preserve originality or restored to correct standards. Of course, the level of both of these have progressed tremendously in the decades since the Harrah Collection was disbanded at auction in the 1980s.

Nevertheless, the Harrah Collection set a pattern that is now required in collecting around the world. The combination of those standards and the keen and discerning eye of the pioneer collectors are what add market value to the association of a vehicle with a particular collection. Simply amassing a certain number of cars in a group of garages, barns, warehouses or even a showroom or museum under a single name does not guarantee a lift in the long-term market value of a vehicle. However, even today, cars that have the provenance of having been in the collections mentioned in this story still have an added appeal – having caught the eye of a connoisseur when no one else seemed to notice it existed.

NOTE: The author, Donald Osborne, is working on his second book, the subject of which is the history of the rise of automobile collecting – the personalities and the prizes. □

