

PETER STEVENS – DESIGN AS CONFECTION

This is one of a series of comments on the 8th biennial symposium “Connoisseurship and the Collectible Car” held at the Revs Institute for Automotive Research in Naples, Florida in March 2015. [\[Link\]](#)

Today I was lucky to share a conversation with car designer Peter Stevens [\[Link\]](#) as we looked at some of the vehicles in the collection of the Revs Institute in Naples Florida.

He is well known as the designer who worked on the McLaren F1 road car which marked a paradigmatic shift in high performance car design. It was produced between 1993 and 1997 and remains influential and acclaimed – it’s a new classic.

Peter has specialised in the design of innovative and high-performance vehicles, including the MG X-Power SV, MG TF, Jaguar XJR-15, Prodrive Subaru World Rally Championship-winning car, Lotus Esprit MkII, Lotus Excel and Elan SE as well as BMW’s 1999 Le Mans winner. His focus is on creating visually pleasing, light, safe, fuel efficient vehicles, articulating the design process around aerodynamics and the development of innovative processes and materials.

A professor at the Royal College of Art, Peter is wonderfully articulate about design work. Our conversation led us to confront the very soul, the character we see in some automobiles.

Car designers have been consistently seen as stylists – and we took up this notion as we headed for a trio of red racing cars in the foyer of the Revs Institute. Peter particularly likes the 1964 Simca 2 Mile Corsa as designed, or more accurately modified, by Carlo Abarth. Here is a modest small everyday car, a Simca, that has risen above its station, in a kind of automotive social mobility, to become a serious contender. And with supreme flair. Great lines it does have, and so much more – this is not just a hot rod, but a remarkable **confection** of the humble mundane and a spirit of design defiance – that so much more can be done with what you have, given the right mind-set.

Peter took us into his fascination with aerodynamics in a comment on a nearby Porsche (based on some math but not wind-tunnell work) and I asked him why he had spent so much of his career on race cars. Answer – because you have to produce them quickly and that means you learn fast – through the iterative cycle of design, build, race, modify. This is so appealing for the designer who wants to learn and, precisely, **confect** – bring together the different elements of an automobile – because you can actually act on feedback to change things.



Peter with the McLaren F1



With Tom Gale, Murray Smith, Miles Collier, Peter Mangiafico.



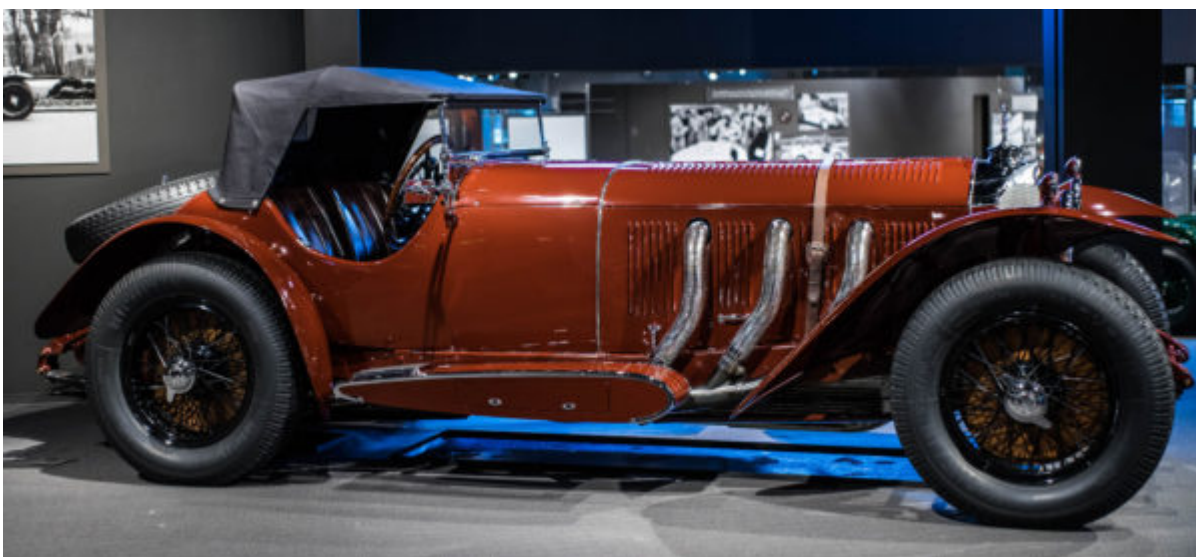
Talking about a 1964 Abarth Simca – upwardly mobile

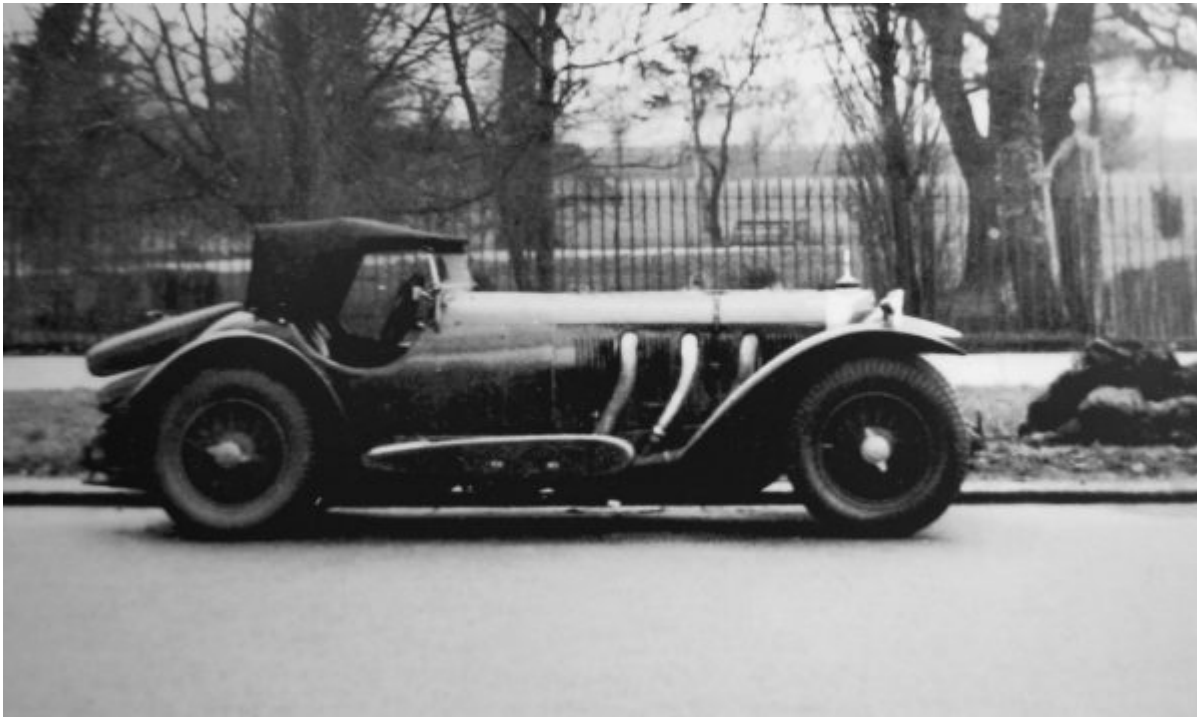
It was here that Peter reckoned the designer acted best as one who pulls together the different components of a project, compounding, con-fecting, as I put it. So that the whole is more than the sum of the parts.



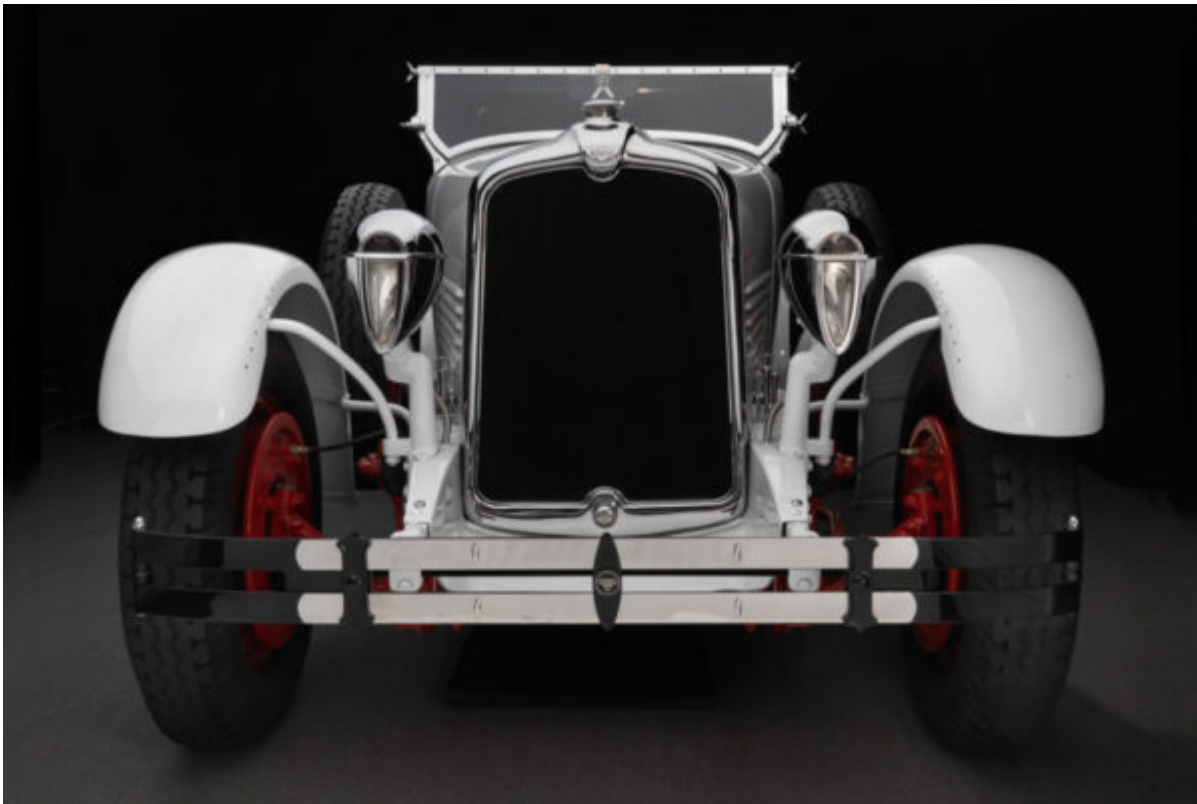
Delahaye 1937 Type 135 MS Special Roadster – begging questions of the designer as stylist

Has line and form in the Delahaye overtaken the compound sum of the parts?



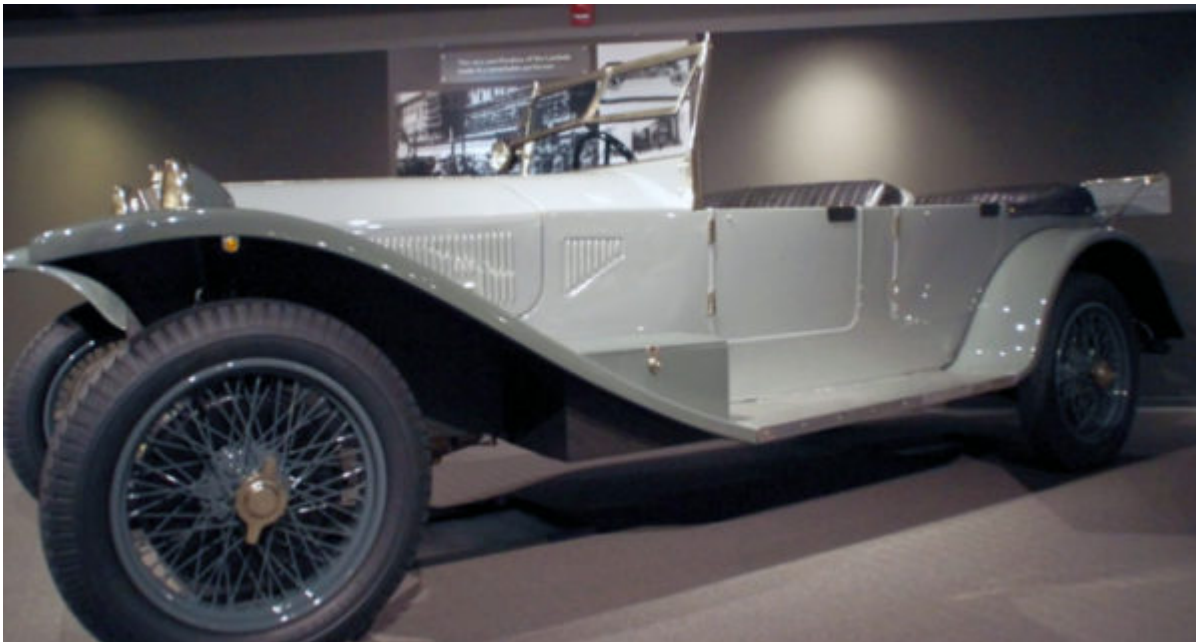


Mercedes Benz 1929 Sport Model SSK – just how much does this car care about its driver?



Stutz 1928 Black Hawk Boattail Speedster – look into those eyes

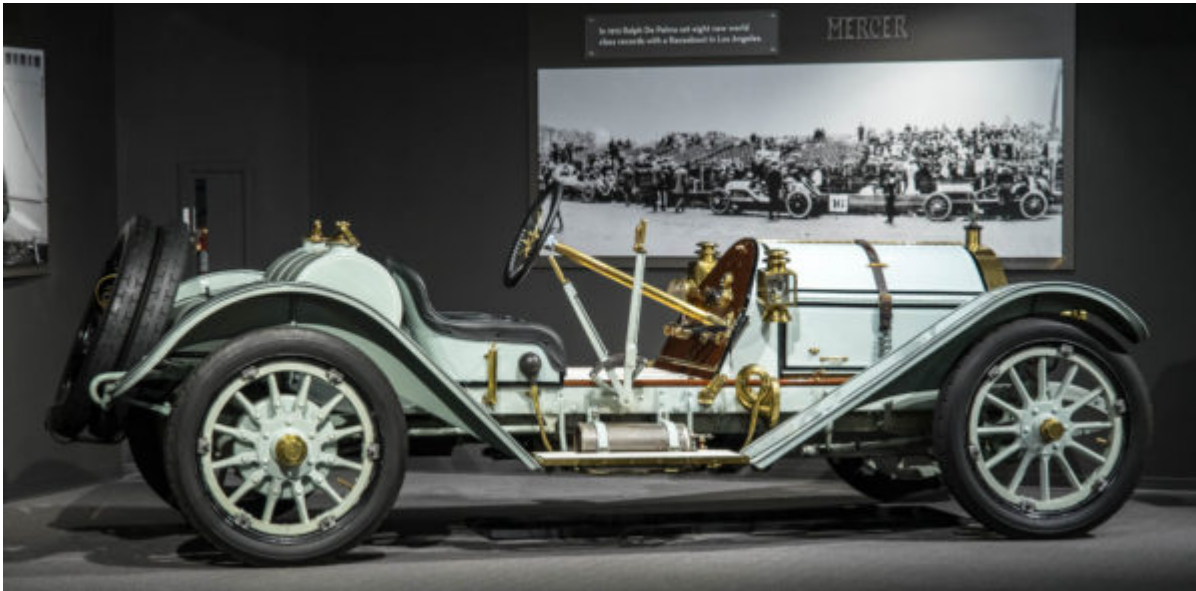
Character. I asked Peter about these remarkably aggressive looking cars. “A lot of Miles’s cars look like rakes!”, he suggested – dissolute libertines. In contrast the Delahaye looks like “a spiv’s car”. Spiv – a type of petty criminal who deals in illicit, typically black market, goods – with “spiffy” smart looks, pencil mustache, slick brylcreemed hair, wide-brimmed hat, light-coloured suit and a bright patterned tie. It’s not just that the car might belong to such a person, but that it actually is a kind of rake or spiv. How does this work? It’s kind of like physiognomy – the way outward looks reveal inner character and history. And more. Here Peter’s fine-tuned appreciation of the essential DNA of a car came out. Yes – designers should admit that there’s a face to every car – look at the eyes on that Stutz. Then take the Mercedes-Benz SSK. The chopped top and relegation of the driver’s seat and passenger’s compartment right to the back, the prominent exhaust piping and sheer size of the engine compartment declare the complete priority of the engine, its agency over that of the driver. The car doesn’t really care about passenger and driver.



Contrast the 1927 Lancia Lambda Tourer. A remarkable engineering accomplishment – dampened independent front suspension on a stiff unitary body design, a precursor to today’s monocoque bodies, plus an innovative four cylinder engine. But to Peter it looks “parked”, however successful it was as a racer. The line is too perpendicular. Peter took us into the character of curves – bezier, french, mathematical, hand drawn. And character is what we were touching upon – how the whole emerges from the sum of the details. For Peter, this is the work of the

designer.





Merger 1912 Model 35-C Raceabout

Peter said “I don’t get” the Mercer. His eye homed in on the parts – the way the brass pedals embodied the intersection of drawing, pattern making, casting, finishing, and assembly. The remarkable spring on the engine cover – a triumph of mechanics, material, function, elegance. Again an amalgam, a confection of hand, mind, material, skill and craft – a whole that conveys a commitment to the

artifact, and conveys a distinctive statement that bridges the artifact, designer, maker, and user. Here there's so much that typically remains tacit, unspoken, or unnoticed – but not to the designer.