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Car connoisseurs learn from Revs Institute experts

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A car class gathers around a 1927 Delage 1.5-liter Grand Prix car.
PHOTO BY MARK ELIAS

Attracting visitors to Naples on Florida's Gulf Coast is rarely difficult in March. But when the subject is collector cars and the venue is the Revs Institute for Automotive Research, it becomes easier. The event gives connoisseurs, curators and specialists a chance to catch up on the latest techniques and trends in acquiring, preserving and protecting collector automobiles.

The Revs Institute is staged by the Collier Collection and CH Motorcars, near Naples Municipal Airport. The faculty includes experts in curating collections, vehicle restoration, automotive history and regulatory issues. Designed to focus on the "academic study of the automobile as a technical, industrial and aesthetic achievement as well as an agent for social change," the institute was the brainchild of retired business executive, artist and philanthropist Miles Collier. With more than 100 significant vehicles at their disposal, faculty members use displays, halls and restoration facilities as their classrooms.

The 2010 event began with gallery discussions of "intriguing automobiles." That led to a discussion of the intrinsic value of an East German Trabant versus a French Citroën 2CV, or an original Mini versus a Volkswagen Beetle.

Fred Simeone of the Simeone Foundation of Philadelphia discussed whether the auto connoisseur was a hobbyist or a historian. The ideal goal would be the care and feeding of a historic automobile as a document of the past. He said that "a car must have provenance," it must be

a car of significance, and as much as possible of the original vehicle must remain for it to retain value and importance. "If the car's provenance is unknown, you have to be concerned," Someone said.

Presenters stressed the importance of original photos of the car when it was new and photos during the restoration process to document every step of the work.

"We go to great lengths to try to find views of the car as it was originally built," said Paul Russell, principal at Paul Russell and Co. of Essex, Mass. "We continue to photograph as we do the restoration, but we constantly refer to the historic photos and see something new that we didn't notice the first time around. Photos are invaluable to us. They are essential."

Regulatory issues continue to be a concern for collectors as well. McKeel Hagerty and Carmel Roberts of Hagerty Insurance Agency pointed out how environmental concerns and anti-CO2 lobbying efforts could relegate a historic roadgoing automobile to the status of museum piece. As traditional fuels are regulated out of existence, the internal-combustion engine could be legislated off the roads the same way horses are restricted—unless lobbying efforts are ramped up to counteract the movement.

Hagerty announced the founding of the Historic Vehicle Association, with the purpose of allowing "yesterday's vehicles on tomorrow's roads."

Through the four days of the Revs Institute's sixth biennial Symposium on Connoisseurship and the Collectible Car, participants saw films and photographs of West Coast car racing from the Edgar Motorsports Archives, attended a session on the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center's expert appraisal techniques, learned about collectible cars as financial assets and took part in talks on the "Influence of Celebrity on Historic Motor Cars."

Founder Collier said, "The more I fooled around with cars, the more I was interested in their connections to our culture, our world and our history." He said he tends to get carried away with things.

Future projects include an academic study center with a research university. Talks are under way with Northwestern, Stanford and MIT.

Visit www.revsinstitute.org for more information.

By Mark Elias



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