Garaj Mahal: The Smithsonian Institution's Automobile Collection

By Jan Tegler | Photos By Michael Shaffer | October 11, 2013 | 18

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The Smithsonian has an auto collection?

That's the response -- my own and that of most people -- that led to this Garaj Mahal. Yes, the Smithsonian does have an automobile collection. Part of the National Museum of American History's (NMAH) broader transportation collection, it's comparatively small and relatively unknown. To understand why, and to get a rare in-person look at the collection, we visited the Smithsonian's Paul E. Garber storage facility in Silver Hill, Maryland.

Named for Paul Garber, the dynamic first director of the National Air and Space Museum (NASM), the facility was built in the early 1950s to house the Smithsonian's growing collection of aircraft. In the 1920s, Garber recognized the historical importance of aviation and became its champion within the Smithsonian's academic cloisters, single-handedly acquiring approximately half of the collection and advocating for a stand-alone museum for aviation. Thanks to his efforts, President Harry S. Truman created the Air and Space Museum in 1946.

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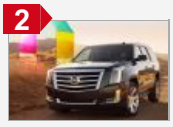
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Unfortunately, automobiles never had a champion at the Smithsonian. The museum's first automobile (an 1894 Balzer) was acquired in 1899. Despite more than a century of history since then, the collection numbers just 73 cars. A smattering of trucks, buses, motorcycles, and other machines are among the transportation collection's 217 vehicles.

There are just five postwar cars among the vehicles displayed in the NMAH in downtown Washington, D.C., in the "America on the Move" exhibit. The bulk of the postwar collection (13 road cars, nine race cars) sits under archival covers in the same buildings that once housed the majority of the NASM's aircraft collection.

Though preserved in climate-controlled conditions, the rest of the mostly nonfunctioning vehicles are haphazardly distributed among several buildings, crammed together and unavailable for public viewing. It's a somewhat forlorn assemblage. Why are automobiles so poorly represented at the institution known as the "nation's attic?"

Roger White, the NMAH's associate curator road transportation, says the reasons are many, including funding, the way the NMAH's buildings evolved, inaction by some of his predecessors, and the "first cut" mentality that guides collecting for the transportation collection in alignment with the Smithsonian's broader mission as America's public museum.

"We don't think the way other museums do," he explains. "Every vehicle here has to do triple duty, representing some important turning point in design, manufacturing, or social history, and say something about the person who owned it. It has to speak very clearly about something that is a teaching tool. Every vehicle here is potential for future projects."

Critically, the neglect also seems to stem from academic bias against the automobile. Noted collector and founder of the Revs Institute for Automotive Research, Miles Collier, argues that "the automobile was the greatest change agent of the twentieth century" but maintains that "the 'academy' pays no attention to the automobile."

White acknowledges that automobiles have never had great support at the Smithsonian.

"Most curators think of American history as something you can hold in your hands. There is a bias against bigger items, not just vehicles but heavy machinery, locomotives, and such."

Looking ahead, White says the collection will grow only slightly. Most immediately, he wants to add an example or two of the alternatively powered vehicles (hybrids especially) that now feature in American life. The current NMAH exhibit, in place since 2003, will remain for the

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foreseeable future. The vehicles included may change at some point, but there are no plans to make those stored at the Garber Facility accessible to the public.

"The collective decision was made to put the rest of the collection online," he concludes. "Let the world see it on the Internet."

1948 Tucker Sedan

Number 39 of the 51 Tucker Sedans built, this 11,721-mile example passed through multiple owners before being transferred to the NMAH by the Drug Enforcement Administration, which had it seized in a 1992 narcotics investigation. Repainted and reupholstered, the futuristic rear-engine four-door carries a 334-cubic-inch aluminum flat-six derived from a Franklin 0-335 helicopter engine. The 166-hp unit drove the Tucker's rear wheels via an electrically selected vacuum-actuated manual transmission. Four-wheel-independent suspension gave the 4200-pound sedan competent handling. Safety innovations included a windshield designed to pop out in a crash, a padded dashboard, a center headlight that turns with the front wheels, and a padded "crash chamber" ahead of the passenger seat that the passenger could duck into in the event of a collision.

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1953 Glasspar G2

Donated to the Smithsonian in 1996 by a private collector, this G2 was produced by California-based Glasspar, one of a small number of companies that made fiberglass sports car bodies in the early 1950s. Company founder William Tritt was building fiberglass-reinforced plastic (FRP) boat hulls in 1947. The G2 was born in 1949 when Tritt offered to design a European-flavored fiberglass sports car body for a hot rod a friend was building around a Willys Jeep chassis with a V-8. The marriage of the Glasspar body and customer-provided chassis and driveline became the formula for Glasspar sales. More than 300 G2 bodies (and one factory race car) were made. Tritt significantly refined FRP techniques and was consulted by GM prior to its production of the fiberglass Corvette in 1953.

1964 Chrysler Turbine Car

The NMAH's Turbine car is number 45 of the 50 production units (five prototypes were also built) made between 1962 and 1964 by Chrysler to test consumer reaction to turbine automobiles. Styled by Ghia and powered by Chrysler's proprietary 130-hp turbine jet engine, the coupe could run on almost any type of fuel -- diesel, unleaded gasoline, kerosene, JP-4 jet fuel, vegetable oil -- even tequila.

The Turbines were test-driven by 203 people between 1963 and 1966, including four men in the Baltimore-Washington area who drove this car. Like GM's later EV1, they were reclaimed and mostly destroyed. Only nine remain. Chrysler donated this example to the museum in 1967. Fuel economy was comparable to that of contemporary cars on the highway but suffered around town. That and the Turbine's high emissions killed production.

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1965 Ford Mustang

Manufactured in October 1964, just over five months after the smash debut of the Mustang at the New York World's Fair, this blue hardtop came to the NMAH from a member of family, in a manner of speaking. Ms. Eleanor McMillan, a conservator at the Smithsonian, used the car to commute to work and for pleasure trips until 1990. Though she worked for another arm of the Smithsonian, McMillan knew many people associated with the Museum of American History and donated the car shortly after she stopped using it. Equipped with a 200-cubic-inch six cylinder, McMillan's car put 120 hp to the ground via four-speed manual transmission.

1977 Chevrolet Vega Hatchback

A Vega? We're not sure why either, but it was the second car donated to the NMAH by Guenther and Siewchin Yong Sommer, who also gave the museum their 1967 Pontiac Grand Prix Convertible. Initially heralded, the Vega's reputation quickly deteriorated, and 1977 marked the last year of production. In the wake of more than 300 changes for 1976, including a redesign of the car's 2.3-liter inline-four (84-hp), the '77 Vega was good as it ever had been, but not good enough. Noted for engineering, reliability, safety, and corrosion problems, the subcompact tarnished Chevrolet's image, representing many of the problems American manufacturers faced in the 1970s. Perhaps that's reason enough for its inclusion here.

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1997 EV1

The EV1 represents a controversial chapter in modern automobile history. Launched in 1996 as the successor to GM's 1990 Impact concept car, the lease-only, Saturn-retailed coupe was the first modern attempt at bringing a viable electric car to market. Powered by a 137-hp three-phase AC induction motor with a lead-acid battery pack initially (later nickel-metal-hydride), the Smithsonian's Generation-I example combined an aluminum space frame, aluminum suspension components, and plastic body panels with electric power brakes/steering and modern HVAC/audio features. GM built 1117 EV1s between 1996 and 1999. Having determined the EV1 wasn't commercially viable, GM pulled the plug on the program in 2003, repossessing and crushing all vehicles despite opposition from owners. One of approximately 40 remaining, the NMAH's EV1 is said to be the only one fully intact.

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1967 STP Turbocar

The Ken Wallis-designed, Andy Granatelli-backed STP-Paxton Turbocar caused a sensation at Indy in 1967 and nearly won the race with Parnelli Jones at the wheel. Propelled by a United Aircraft of Canada ST6B-62 gas turbine, the 1450-pound Turbocar produced 540 hp, good enough to qualify sixth for the 500 at 166.075 mph. Offered initially by Wallis to Dan Gurney and Carroll Shelby, who passed, the Turbocar project found a home with the ebullient Granatelli, who convinced Jones to take a chance. Reportedly, Granatelli introduced the side-by-side driver/turbine configuration and Ferguson four-wheel drive to the concept. The smooth jet engine's main advantage was tremendous torque coming off corners. Jones led the majority of the race, but fell out with just eight miles to go when a transmission bearing failed. A.J. Foyt took the lead and won.

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1984 200th-Win #43 STP Pontiac Grand Prix

Ex-transportation collection curator William Withuhn brought several racing cars into the NMAH collection in the 1980s, including one of the most famous NASCAR racers of all time: Richard Petty's 200th-win 1984 Pontiac Grand Prix stock car. Petty drove the 700-hp-plus Pontiac to victory at the Coke Zero 400 at Daytona on July 4, 1984, besting Cale Yarborough by little more than a foot as the caution flag flew on lap 157 of the 160-lap race. It was the seven-time champion's final victory, won in front of President Ronald Reagan -- the first sitting president to attend a NASCAR race. Car and team owner Mike Curb donated the Pontiac to the NMAH in late 1984.

1979 Budweiser Rocket

NMAH curator Roger White forgot to mention that the controversial Budweiser Rocket was part of the collection stored at the Garber Facility. We spotted its vertical stabilizer along a wall, peeking out above other vehicles. The Budweiser Rocket claimed to be the first car to break the sound barrier on land, achieving 739 mph based on data derived from radar tracking and an in-car accelerometer at Edwards AFB, where driver Stan Barrett made the run on December 17, 1979. Launched as Project S.O.S. (Speed of Sound) by Hollywood stuntman and director Hal Needham, the Rocket was designed by LSR and drag racing car

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builder Bill Fredrick. The three-wheeler utilized a bi-propellant powerplant, combining a hydrogen peroxide motor with an AIM-9 sidewinder air-to-air missile. Neither the FIA nor FIM were present to record and certify the run, so it has never been officially recognized. Thrust SSC is officially recognized as the first car to break the sound barrier.

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bostonbred111 9 days ago

Have you tried looking in Cuba (i know its almost impossible to get in but depends upon if you have a decent car you'd offer,) for free..

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Rusty69 11 days ago

I would like to note that most of these vehicles were on display before the remodel of the NMAH in 2003. The old display was basically just like a big indoor parking lot with lots of cars, trucks, and motorcycles (and the Bud rocket car). The new display tries to tell a story and give significance (as indicated in the article), but the layout restricts the number of vehicles. I liked the old layout better.

Like Reply

Nibbie49 11 days ago

Dam phone mercury sable AIV test vehicle, all aluminum 3.2L sho powered

Like Reply

Nibbie49 11 days ago

I'm suprised they don't have a sho powerd 94 mercury sable Aug test vehicle in there. My dad had a 66 root beer brown mustang just like that when I was a kid. 3 speed manual inline 6.

Like Reply

lasvegascolonel 12 days ago

When my wife and I bought our new Mustang in 1966 (for $2495) the color wasn't blue but a turquoise metallic color. We've had 3 since but none as much fun as the original. Glad to see a Mustang is in the collection, especially considering the true junk I've seen stored in government warehouses.

Like Reply

block 13 days ago

WOW, the Mustang is EXACTLY like the one my mother had for 30 years - same color, hubcaps (of course) ;etc.

Like Reply

btc909 13 days ago

"That's right, GM didn't sentence all the EV1s to death. It donated several to museums and universities. One of the recipients was the Missouri University of Science and Technology that has been using the rare EV as a veritable Frankenstein's monster. GM had delivered the EV1 in a disabled state but it didn't take long for the University to get it rolling again. "I had the original motor taken out and replaced with a DC motor to get it running," said Dr. Cheng Hsiao Wu in a *Jalopnik* **report**."

Like Reply

Dano_GTI 13 days ago

Who else just googled "Glasspar G2 for sale" after reading this? What a beauty.

Like Reply

LockedOn 13 days ago

Might be a typo on the Mustang with a 4 Speed. The only 6 Cylinder manuals I've ever seen were 3 Speeds

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skyguy 13 days ago

That 6 cylinder '65 Mustang with a 4 speed manual must be rare. Surely most of the 6 cylinder cars were automatics or 3 speed manuals.

Like Reply

ramairmustang 13 days ago

EV1 wasn't commercially viable, GM pulled the plug on the program in 2003, repossessing and crushing all vehicles despite opposition from owners. One of approximately 40 remaining, the NMAH's EV1 is said to be the only one fully intact.

That to me is hard to believe. I work in Cincinnati and I know of 3 around here that I see on the way to work and home from work about everyday on I-71 and I-75.

Like Reply

albert pooholes 12 days ago

@ramairmustang there is no way you have seen any of these on the road. GM took the motors out of any of the surviving ev1's. That is why the one in the museum is the only working one in existence.

1 Like Reply

titanium.tim Oct 11, 2013

Can't tell you how annoyed and amazed that they have such a small but amazing and monumental collection that is not displayed!

The only EV1 in the world that was not stripped of its drive motor (GM put a long nose and tail on one and broke 181 mph!)

A flawless Tucker (that is the first time I have heard of the passenger 'crash chamber' I wonder if that represents the very first 'safety cell' in a vehicle).

The very first vehicle to (allegedly) break the sound barrier on the ground!

Two turbine cars.

They do have a good collection of extremely pivotal vehicles in the world of Automotivedom

Like Reply

Plan B Oct 11, 2013

The Tucker was truly ahead of its time.

1 Like Reply

titanium.tim 10 days ago

@Plan B Still wish that modern design would provide us with an air cooled car, the symplicity can never be understated.

Like Reply

titanium.tim Oct 11, 2013

Love the article and I am happy to know that historical vehicles in strange places are reported on.

Like Reply

mustangfan1 Oct 11, 2013

nice 1965 LIGHT BLUE MUSTANG maybe 1 of the 1st mustangs ;) ;)

Like Reply

autobug2 Oct 11, 2013

@mustangfan1 Not when it was built in October, `64. The first ones were built in late February-early March that year.

Like Reply

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