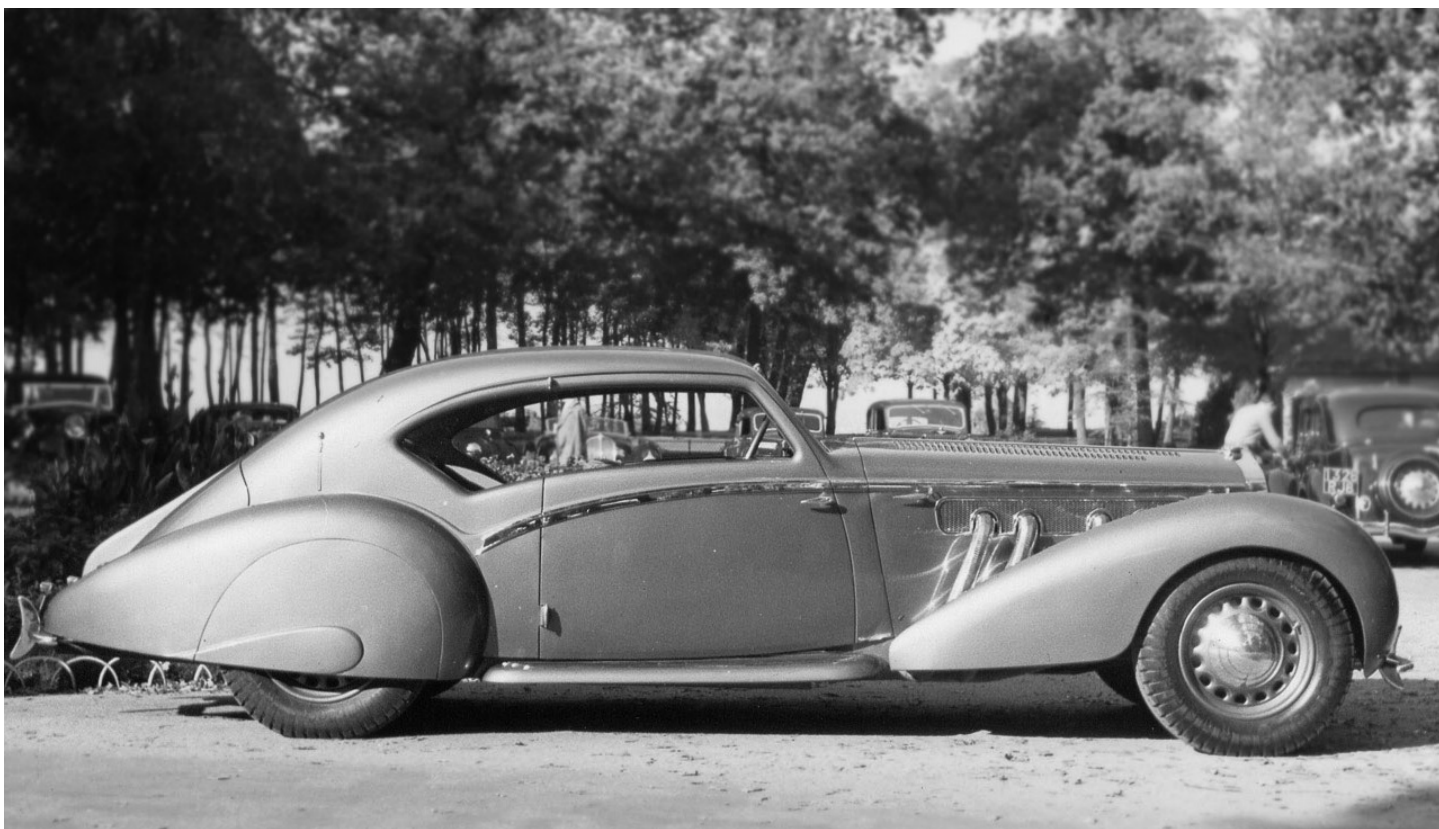


Millicent's Delage

The first in a multi-part series about Millicent Rogers and her Delage Aérosport by the expert who restored it

by David Cooper | Mar 20, 2019 | Auto Biographies, Restoration

PHOTO: DANIEL CABART. USED WITH PERMISSION.



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Millicent Rogers, 1946. Credit: Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, NM

I n

October
1937,
under
the



glistening iron and glass canopy of the Grand Palais in Paris, a woman who would go on to wage a personal battle against the Nazis in World War II crossed paths with the Delage Aérosport, one of the truly great prewar French cars, at the *31e Salon de l'Automobile*. The encounter would set off a series of events resonating through the next seven decades that would result in not only a much deeper understanding of this landmark car, but also of

the woman who was so instrumental in its design evolution.

The annual Paris salons of the Thirties were the premier European venue for the automobile, drawing worldwide visitors. Paris was the global center of fine cuisine, couture, perfume, lingerie, jewelry, and fine automobiles. The fierce competition at the salon inspired manufacturers and coachbuilders to showcase their best models, fully loaded with the most striking finish and presentation. Because of this, it was no surprise that Millicent Rogers, an ex-pat Standard Oil heiress living in Europe, was walking the show that day.

Rogers' grandfather, H.H. Rogers, had been one of John D. Rockefeller's partners in Standard Oil. Though his name is probably unfamiliar, in a recent ranking of the 100 wealthiest Americans of all time, Rogers stood at No. 22, ahead of J.P. Morgan, Bill Gates, and Howard Hughes. Millicent grew up in a rarefied world of great men, tremendous wealth, world travel, and priceless treasures. Known for her sense of style, Millicent, though now dead for over 65 years, is still considered one of the 10 best-dressed women of all time and was often photographed for Harper's Bazaar and Vogue.

Millicent's third husband, Ronald Balcom, was a serious car enthusiast. That October, Balcom had convinced her to travel to the Paris salon specifically to see the unveiling of the latest Delage Aérospout, a car he felt was just right for them. In that he demonstrated sophisticated taste.

The special "Paris Show Cars" displayed at the Paris Salon are still considered the most significant of the prewar coachbuilt cars. Of

those luminaries that included premier cars from Bugatti, Delahaye, and Talbot-Lago, the Delage D8-120 Aérospport Coupe was considered a star of the salon that fall.

In the center of the Grand Palais, at the Delage stand, company founder Louis Delage personally unveiled the new Aérospport to the president of France, Albert Lebrun. The scene was majestic, the gleaming new model sitting upon marble pillars above a Persian carpet. For a person with a taste for the finest things in life, an apt description of Millicent Rogers, it was a propitious time.



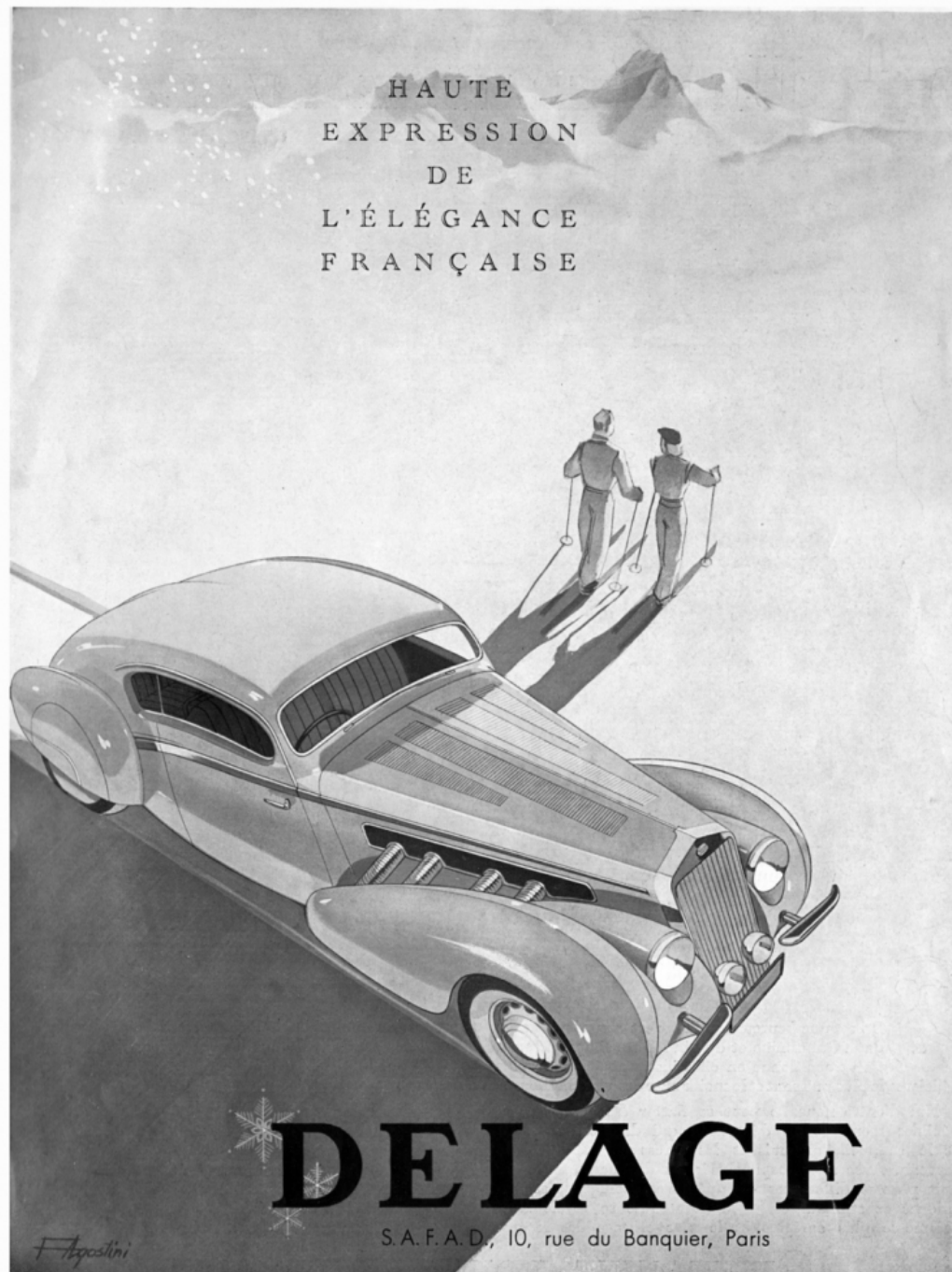
Louis Delage showing the Aérospport to the President of France, Albert Lebrun.
Credit: Daniel Cabart. Used with permission.

The year 1937 was a seminal one for design. Some extraordinary cars were introduced that year by the four great French luxury car manufacturers. It was also a year of geopolitical volatility and continuing economic hardship as the Great Depression ground on.

Yet automobiles, building on decades of development, had reached a crescendo of elegance, design, and performance.

Although all of the luxury manufacturers were struggling in the late 1930s, a discerning class of wealthy clients was still commissioning a small number of cars that expressed their boundless faith in the future while ignoring the daily uncertainties. In prewar Europe, cognoscenti looking for the most cutting-edge design and performance were drawn principally to one country, France.

Delage Advertisement, L'illustration Magazine, 1938



By successfully combining elegant streamlined design, inventive state-of-the-art engineering, and superb detailed craftsmanship, the French dominated the European market for elite automobiles. Paraded, along with the latest high couture – the best of which also

came from Paris — at Concours d'Elegance and at the Paris salon, they were seen by the masses, copied by other manufacturers, and continue to influence car designs today.

These magnificent machines were also capable of carrying two or four passengers in luxurious comfort at speeds over 100 mph. French coachbuilders like Letourneur & Marchand, Figoni & Falaschi, Pourtout, and Saoutchik developed innovative manufacturing machinery and proprietary techniques to build these extraordinary handmade, limited-production vehicles. The result was a group of cars that are still among the most desirable, prestigious, and valuable of all time.

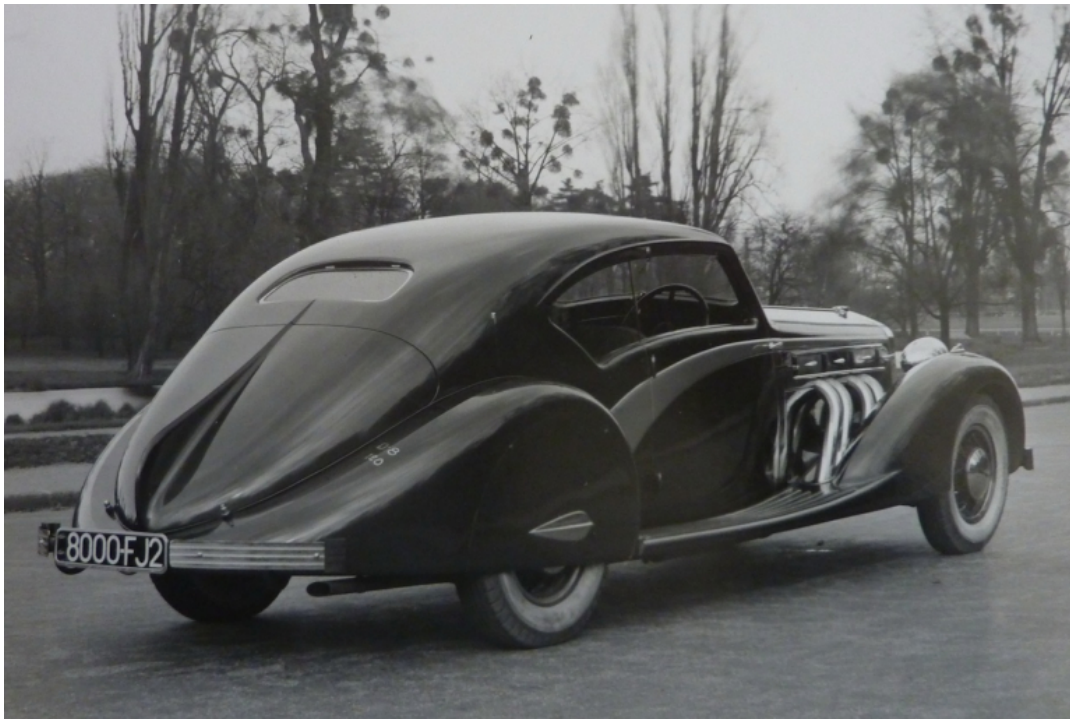
Aerodynamic styling really took off in the luxury market in France after 1935, with the introduction of Bugatti's Aerolithe Coupe at that October's Paris salon. While the Americans had been the first to introduce aerodynamic styling in production cars with the groundbreaking but polarizing Chrysler Airflow, the Bugatti proved that a car could be both aerodynamic and beautiful. The Aerolithe, evolving into the Atlantic model the next year (widely considered to be one of the most valuable and beautiful cars of all time), inspired all the other French designers to create their own aerodynamic designs.

These new designs were never tested in a wind tunnel and in fact were not as aerodynamic as they appeared. Nevertheless, they were "streamlined," to use the term of the period, and looked impossibly sleek and racy compared with the upright and staid designs ubiquitous in early 1930s vehicles regardless of price. The cars'

looks promised unprecedented performance and excitement, and French manufacturers delivered on that pledge by wrapping the elegant, streamlined bodies around slightly detuned grand prix race-car chassis.

Inspired by the Bugatti Aerolithe, coachbuilders Figoni & Falaschi introduced their masterpiece, the 1937 Talbot-Lago Teardrop Coupe. With complex curves that undulate over the engine and passenger compartments and taper at the end of an impossibly long tail, the car is among the most iconic designs ever.

However, while both the Talbot-Lago and the Bugatti were elegant two-seat coupes, their uncompromising design led to overly cramped cabins and limited views through the windows. French manufacturer Delage, together with coachbuilders Letourneur & Marchand, saw an opportunity and successfully married exquisite streamlined design with comfort and practicality in their exquisite four-passenger D8-120 Aérospout.



Delage Aérosport Coupe prototype. Credit: Daniel Cabart. Used with permission.

Indeed, cognoscenti considered Delage — the most elegant and well-constructed car of its era — to be France’s finest car. A Delage could be driven with ease, in contrast to the detuned race cars of Bugatti and Delahaye that were too highly strung to be enjoyed daily, or the cars with Figoni & Falaschi bodies whose extravagant shapes provided limited practicality.

So there were very good reasons that Balcom wanted his wealthy spouse to consider adding a D8-120 Aérosport to their garage. Returning to their home in St. Anton in the Arlberg, the ski center of Austria, they discussed the purchase of the Aérosport over the Christmas holidays.

While Millicent Rogers loved the car, she would not buy it unless some design changes were made. In addition, she wanted changes

to the exterior and interior colors and finishes. As one of the most expensive cars of the century, the Aérosport was a serious acquisition – and it was her checkbook. In January 1938, Rogers and her husband returned to Paris to purchase the Delage and immediately had the car sent to Letourneur & Marchand for further modifications.

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Arturo, Millicent's son –
who was just 10 at the time
– recalled their visit to
Letourneur & Marchand's
atelier outside Paris.

Millicent's son Arturo at Turtle Walk in
Taos, NM Credit: Cooper Technica
Archives

Rogers, in fluent French, explained to the designers, Marcel Letourneur and Carlo Delaisse, the changes she sought, including reshaping the curve of the rear fenders to echo the sweep of the front fenders. Arturo, who was carefully trained never to touch the exterior lacquer paint on a car, was shocked

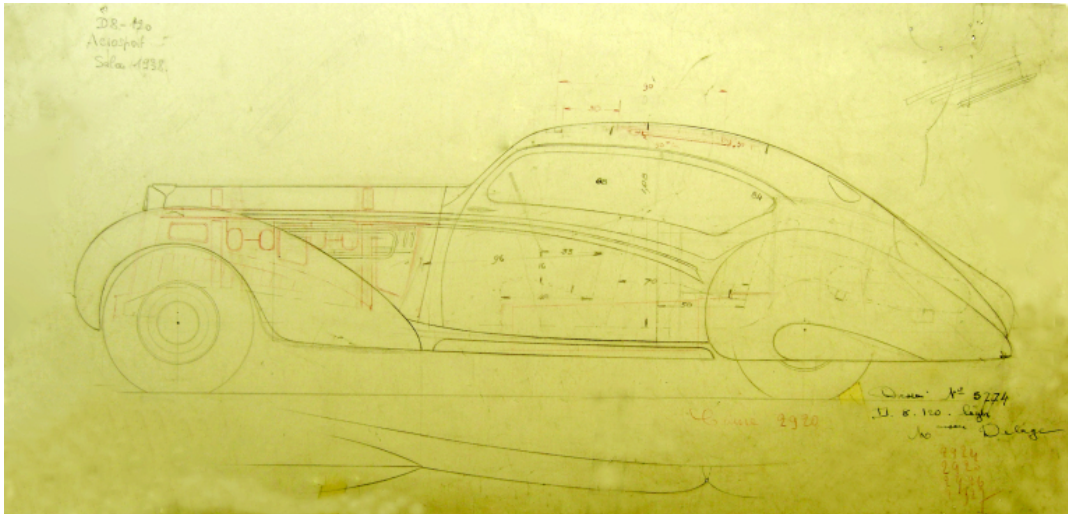


when his mother took out her red lipstick and marked the rear fender to show the line she preferred. Millicent's lipstick line led to a longer and sleeker rear fender that worked in harmony with the front fender and resolved an awkwardness at the rear end. Arturo was even more surprised when Letourneur and Delaisse admitted they had not been satisfied with the rear shape of the show car. The designers liked Rogers' suggestions and were impressed with her fine eye, so much so that they incorporated her design suggestions on the next three Aérosports.

Letourneur & Marchand delivered Millicent's Delage in summer 1938 as she requested. It was the only Aérosport finished in metallic paint, a fine graphite-gray lacquer, and reupholstered for her in hand-dyed red veal skin (softer than calfskin.) The interior wood trim was finished in exotic burlled thuya wood from North Africa and dark walnut.

Conversations with Arturo and other family remembers enabled the

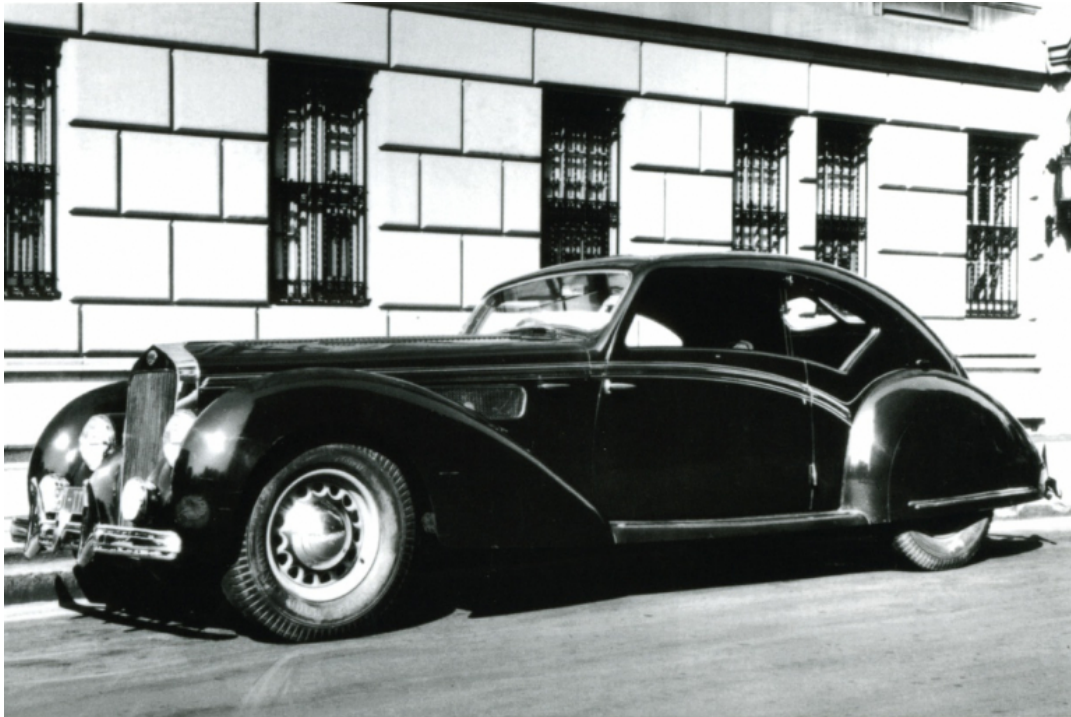
subsequent history of the Aéroport to be pieced together. Lulu Vanderbilt, who married Ronald Balcom after his divorce from Millicent, recalled that “Ronnie” had wanted the Delage when he and Rogers divorced in 1941, but Millicent said it was her car and she kept it. Vanderbilt revealed that Balcom lamented and grumbled over his lost Aéroport for the rest of his life.



L&M original body drawing for 51623. Credit: Daniel Cabart. Used with permission

Before World War II, Rogers imported the Delage to the United States for use at Claremont Manor, her estate in Virginia. Claremont Manor was a working farm, which entitled her to a C ration card, allowing her enough gasoline to use the car regularly when traveling from Virginia to New York and Long Island. Ration cards had been issued for all cars in the United States during the war, granting permission to purchase a certain amount of fuel per week depending on need. Rogers’ friend, interior designer Billy Baldwin, remembered riding in the back “so stuffed with throws and furs I could barely squeeze in.” Another family friend, Tony Cumming, described seeing the Delage one night during the war, parked in front of Rogers’ apartment on

58th Street in New York. A lifelong car enthusiast and racer, Cumming had never seen anything like it and spent hours studying every detail on the Aérosport.



Delage Aérosport in New York City for the New York World's Fair, 1939. Credit: Millicent Rogers Museum, Taos, NM

After the war, Millicent's son Arturo used the Delage as his daily driver in 1948 and 1949 when he was living at Claremont Manor. Arturo was driving the Delage when it developed engine problems in mid-1949. Millicent could not find anyone qualified or willing to repair it in Virginia, so she shipped the car to Max Hoffman in New York.

After the war, Max Hoffman, an automobile importer, was largely responsible for introducing many important European cars to the United States, including Mercedes-Benz, Delahaye, Jaguar, Alfa Romeo, Porsche, Volkswagen, and others. Hoffman subcontracted

the engine repairs to Zumbach Motors in Manhattan, one of the few shops that worked on rare French engines. Because Rogers had just moved to New Mexico, she agreed to sell the Delage to Hoffman. After the car was repaired in the early 1950s, Hoffman sold it to a Frenchman, who returned the Delage to France.



Front view of 1938 Aérosport narrowed to fit the Surbaisse chassis. Credit: Daniel Cabart. Used with permission.

However, the engine problems persisted, and the Delage languished for many years, until it was discovered and sold to an American collector, who commissioned restoration work in the U.K. When that restoration ran into questions and difficulties, Cooper Technica, my firm that specializes in the complete restoration of prewar and early postwar European sports and touring cars, purchased the Delage for a client. We then embarked on the research described above into the car's history and provenance, as well as the details of the original

construction and materials. Cooper Technica has been entrusted to restore Millicent's Delage accurately to the way it was when it was first delivered to Millicent in Paris in 1938. That restoration, and the research behind it, will be documented in subsequent articles. Stay tuned.

Millicent's Delage is adapted from a forthcoming book by David Cooper.



David Cooper

David Cooper, the founder of auto restoration firm Cooper Technica Inc., is an historian, lecturer, writer, and consultant to museums, collectors and investors. He oversees all aspects of restoration and assembly at his shops in Bristol, WI, and Lyon, France.

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