

"Why don't you paint a car?"

When the starting pistol went off at 4 p.m. on 14th June 1975 to launch the 24-hour Le Mans Race, the history of this legendary circuit in north-west France gained a new facet. The engine of BMW 3.0 CSL was revving up on the grid, straining to face up to the competition at last. It wasn't the 430 bhp that made the racing coupé with number 93 an attraction, for there was no shortage of power and capacity to provide excitement in this context. The attraction was the paintwork of the BMW.

Gaudy colours made this car stand out from the crowd of sponsorship liveries. What the onlookers saw was a work of art rather than an advertising medium promoting economic interests. The CSL was actually a synthesis of art and racing car. The admiring onlookers were witnessing the beginning of a collection of vehicles that was unique in the world: BMW Art Cars.

By Manfred Grunert

The idea of combining art and racing came from French auctioneer and racing driver Hervé Poulain. In 1973, he had already addressed the subject in his book *L'Art et l'Automobile*. He complained about the lack of bridges between the two areas of human endeavour and regretted the lack of interaction between them.

From today's perspective, his conclusion sounds almost like a challenge to make waves. At the start of 1975, he embarked on the project. He viewed it as an association between art and industry as a counterweight to the increasing reduction in status of the automobile myth during the era of the oil crisis and industrial pessimism. He set out the theoretical tenets of the project in his essay entitled "*Les mobiles de Calder et les miennes*".

The transition from theory to implementation seems rather unspectacular by comparison: "Why don't you paint a car?", he asked his friend Alexander Calder, one of the world's most eminent sculptors. They were eating lunch together, and he took the opportunity to outline his idea. Calder was famous as an artist who had no inhibitions, and he agreed enthusiastically, asking him to look around for a suitable car. Poulain hadn't anticipated this reaction. At that stage he had neither thought about a specific make nor a specific marque.

He had lots of contacts in the touring-car scene and took his idea to French racing driver Jean Todt, "one of the most progressive men in the world of motor sport," as Poulain described him. Todt assured him that he could only think of one person on the racing scene who would understand the artistic aspect and comprehend the public interest in such a project: BMW racing director Jochen Neerpasch. Todt knew Neerpasch from 1973, when the Frenchman took overall victory in the Austrian Alpine Rally alongside Achim Warmbold in a BMW 2002Ti.

Poulain followed the advice of his compatriot and called up the BMW motor sport director. He remembered the response from Munich as follows: "Our cars are in the United States. We don't want to take part in any race in Europe this year, but ... that's a good idea!" Todt had been right and

Poulain had moved his project forward significantly. Even when he expressed the wish to drive in the Le Mans 24-hour race, Neerpasch agreed. This couldn't be taken for granted by any means, because a race in the American IMSA Series was scheduled for the same weekend. Only one of the planned two vehicles would be able to line up on the grid because a crew of mechanics would have to be provided in France. The presence of the make at the American racing series was extremely important at that time, because this was the route to attracting attention in the world's biggest automobile market. Ultimately, success at this event would generate orders for cars.

Neerpasch needed some backup in order to justify an – albeit temporary – absence from the American racing scene. He received this support in the form of Horst Avenarius, at that time Head of Press and Public Relations. Avenarius quickly grasped the value of the project for the company. He wasn't thinking in terms of advertising, because he was very aware that "where it [industry] links up with artists, it embarks on an adventure. It can be confronted with an abyss or be invited to listen to the most beautiful songs" – this is how Avenarius phrased it in the afterword of the catalogue for the exhibition. "The automobile in art" held in 1986.

His interpretation of patronage was directed towards engaging with art in a way that would open up a new horizon of experience and thereby impart new depth to one's own – industrial – processes.

After the necessary cover had been procured, the choice of vehicle wasn't difficult. BMW had created a sensation at Le Mans two years previously with a stunning victory by the BMW 3.0 CSL, going on to win the European Touring Car Championship. Hans-Joachim Stuck held the lap record for touring cars at the Nürburgring (08:09) with the racing coupé and the vehicle had proved popular in the IMSA Series with its power and handling. But the race had to be run in the USA

Union of art and technology in the halls of Motorsport GmbH. Cover page for the press folder for the Le Man 24-hour race in 1975.



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before Calder could be presented with this "racing canvas". And the time to Le Mans was getting shorter and shorter.

Poulain used an old trick to give Calder an impression of what the vehicle looked like: he gave his friend a toy car. Luckily, Calder had a wealth of experience in projecting his art from small models to large works of art. He had used this technique again and again

to produce his giant sculptures. However, this project appeared to be rather unusual. A sculptor normally creates forms, and here he was being commissioned to change the colour of an established form with fixed technical parameters.

But this was nothing new to Calder either. Two years previously, he had painted an airliner for Braniff South

American Airlines. And his passion for the interplay between static and dynamic images had been obvious at a much earlier stage. In 1932, he had already changed and stylized 15 engines, in part by applying colour.

Started very small

The critics reacted with overwhelming enthusiasm to "L'art automobile", and



French artist Marcel Duchamp described the sculptures as "mobiles".

The term used by Duchamp and the spirit of this early work epitomized the constants in Calder's oeuvre even at that time: the exploitation of engineering, the movement and the vibrant colours. Today, Calder's "mobiles" rank among the most innovative sculptures of the 20th century.



Poulain visited Calder several times while he was working in Touraine. The two friends agreed that after the toy car, a dummy should be painted on a scale of 1:5.

The sculptor was always asking the racing driver what he felt like when he was racing. Calder compared Poulain's description of this situation with bull races, where the animals are attracted by the colour while simultaneously fearing death.

Soon Calder started painting. He distributed the colours yellow, red, and blue over large areas of the model. "It appeared as though these colours represented the tail of a comet in three colours," was how Poulain described the model. Calder was "like a prehistoric priest directing wall paintings, who knows that the colours carry you away and move inexorably forward."

Start in Le Mans: no worries

Calder used the velocity of a three-colour combination to generate a dynamic quality in their juxtaposition – a single-minded acceleration without end. The artist was much more laconic in describing his creation. When a cameraman brought along by Poulain asked Calder why he was only using these three colours, he replied with a smile, "That's all I can do!"

When it was finished, the dummy was taken to Munich. There it was used as a template for painting the original racing car. By this time, BMW Motorsport GmbH had decided on a driver team. Hervé Poulain as the initiator of the project was to line up on the grid at Le Mans with fellow Frenchman Jean Guichet and American Sam Posey.

Posey drove for BMW with Hans-Joachim Stuck and Brian Redman in the IMSA Series. He had plenty of experience and success with the lightweight coupé, winning the 12-hour race at Sebring shortly before. But Posey was no more only a racing driver than Poulain was just an auctioneer.

Calder and Hervé Poulain with the toy car used as a model for painting the original.



Calder's signature on the rear fin of the BMW: "Colours that move forward inexorably".

Posey had studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. He had painted pictures and designed furniture. This and his passion for literature and film made him an ideal crew member for the CSL cockpit. Everything was now in place for the start at Le Mans.

In fact, the racing track wasn't the first stage on which the Art Car could be admired. The premiere was celebrated on 30th May 1975 in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs of the Louvre in Paris – and it was probably the first racing car in

Poulain and Calder were an ideal team for this project.

the world to celebrate its debut in a museum. Curator François Mathey highlighted the significance of the car for contemporary art and its relationship with economic interests in his opening speech: "Art mocks industry. Industry ignores art. All attempts to prove the opposite are no more than alibis for salving our consciences.

But that's no bad thing. Calder has succeeded in drawing our attention to the fact that there's a problem and he has demonstrated that it's not about window-dressing or advertising. He knows that there's nothing more serious than playing, and a racing car is the