

Paper Mache for 3-21-25 by David Read

Our community has a very active and vibrant car culture. Celebratory auto shows abound, some as standalone events, some as part of other special occasions. While I am not what I would call a “car guy” never having done so much as changed the oil in a vehicle, I have owned a few fun, special automobiles in my life. My car journey started with a 1964 Corvair with the shifter on the dashboard. I know, Ralph Nader’s favorite car to denigrate due to safety issues, but what did I know. \$400 cash and I’m out the door with wheels! Some years later after my Ford Galaxie and two VW camper vans, I bought a 1976 El Dorado Convertible, midnight blue with natural leather interior and a not-even-remotely fuel efficient 500 cubic inch engine. What a fun car. Any then, feeling even more self-indulgent, I bought my favorite car of all time, a 1972 Citroen Maserati SM with the hydro-pneumatic, self-leveling suspension system. I found the futuristic styling irresistible.

I got to thinking about cars this past week having learned about McPherson College in Kansas. It is the leading school for the next generation of classic car restorers. Students can earn a B.S. degree in automotive restoration. McPherson attracts students from all over the globe to its campus just north of Wichita. McPherson students earned second place for their gorgeous restoration of a 1953 Mercedes 300S Cabriolet at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance in 2023. If you don’t know, that’s like the Academy Awards for car owners. So, this is all well and good, but is it art?

Historic auto restoration is a meticulous and highly skilled craft that combines engineering, artistry, and historical preservation. Restoring classic cars requires patience, technical expertise, and an appreciation for automotive history. This process is more than just mechanical repair—it is an art form that respects the past while bringing iconic vehicles back to life. The craftsmanship involved in auto restoration is a key aspect that elevates it to an art form. Metalwork, woodworking, upholstery, and painting must be executed with precision to match the car’s original aesthetic. Restorers often use traditional hand tools and techniques to shape body panels, stitch leather interiors, or recreate intricate dashboard details. The goal is to combine old and new techniques to ensure that the vehicle remains as close to its original state as possible.

Painting and finishing are among the most visually striking aspects of auto restoration. Classic cars often featured unique color schemes requiring specialized techniques to replicate. Unlike modern automotive paint jobs, which rely on automated processes, restoring a historic car’s finish often involves multiple layers of hand-sprayed paint and extensive polishing. The goal is not only to make the vehicle look pristine but also to preserve its character, ensuring it reflects the era in which it was originally built.

Beyond the technical and artistic aspects, historic auto restoration is an act of cultural preservation. Classic cars are tangible pieces of history, reflecting the design trends, engineering advancements, and societal influences of their time. Restoring these vehicles allows future generations to experience and appreciate the craftsmanship of the past. Whether displayed in museums, driven on scenic roads, or showcased at prestigious concours events, restored automobiles serve as rolling works of art, embodying the passion and dedication of those who revive them. In essence, historic auto restoration is more than a mechanical process—it is a tribute to the ingenuity and artistry of past automotive designers and craftsmen. By preserving and reviving these masterpieces, restorers ensure that the rich legacy of classic automobiles continues to inspire and captivate enthusiasts for years to come.