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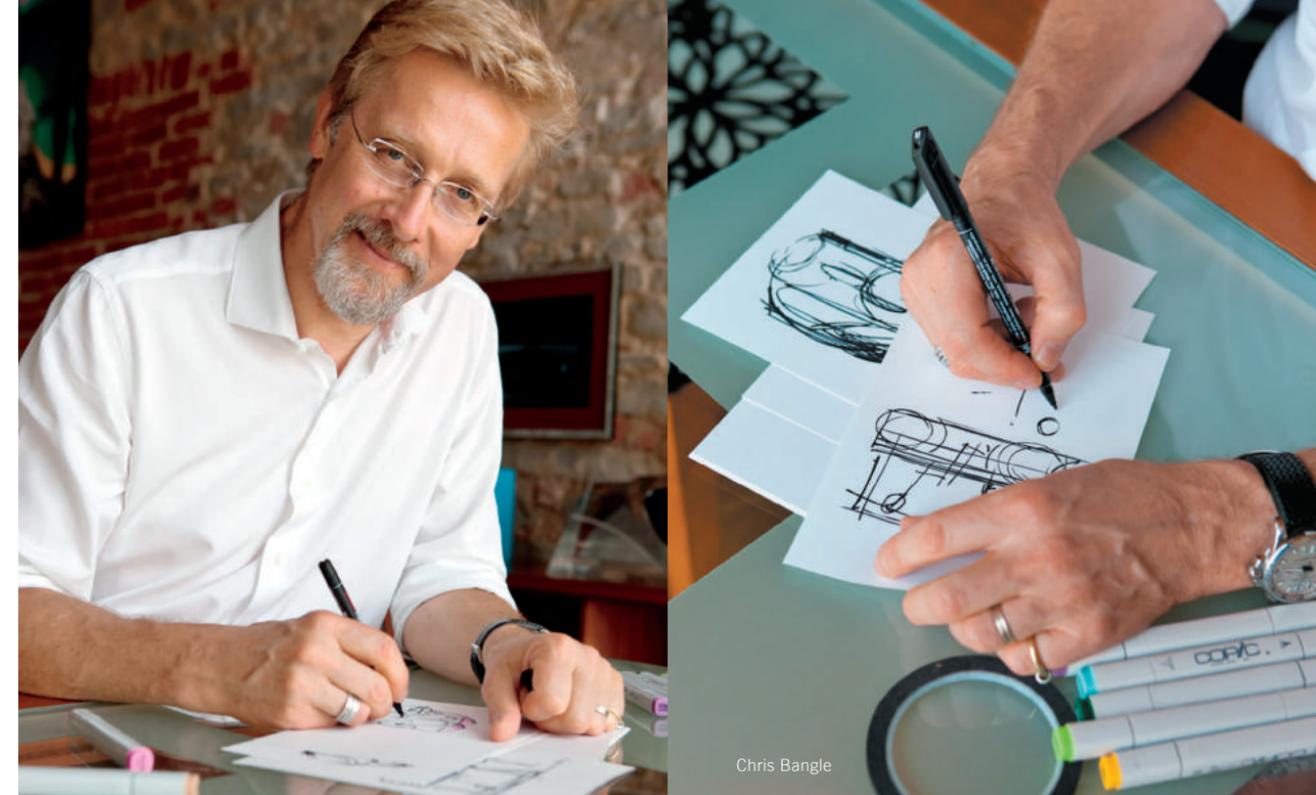
# Automotive Art

Crossing the intersection between form and function where cars become art

By John Bray

Everyday objects are rarely considered art and, for the most part, there's good reason for that. Function over form dominates everyday, utilitarian goods. But one piece of everyday art—the automobile—is rarely looked at as such. For those who design cars, this can be a problem because designing a car is often about far more than design. Or perhaps it's simply that the line between design and art is too gray to form a real divide.

Ferrari Concept: Zhinan Liu & Kevin Miron



“There are very few other occupations that require this much personal identification and investment of your soul,” says Chris Bangle of his view toward the work as a car design director. If anyone would know, it's Bangle. He was the American chief of design at BMW from 1997 to 2009 (he is now the owner and founder of Chris Bangle Associates, a design management firm). He's had his hands on more cars than most people will ever drive in their lifetime and has killed exponentially more concepts.

For car designers, canceling a concept can be as gut-wrenching as whitewashing a mural because art is art regardless of its final form or function. “Literally every car out there on the road was at one point sculpted by men and women,” says Bangle, emphasizing the designers' attachment to the finished product. Touched by hand—often many, each belonging to a person with a unique vision—and sculpted from clay in much the same way that Michelangelo worked his magic, every car is as much a result of the artist process as it is a result of the marriage between modern industry and practicality.

So although every car may be designed, it comes from an artistic place. For Bangle it's the process—

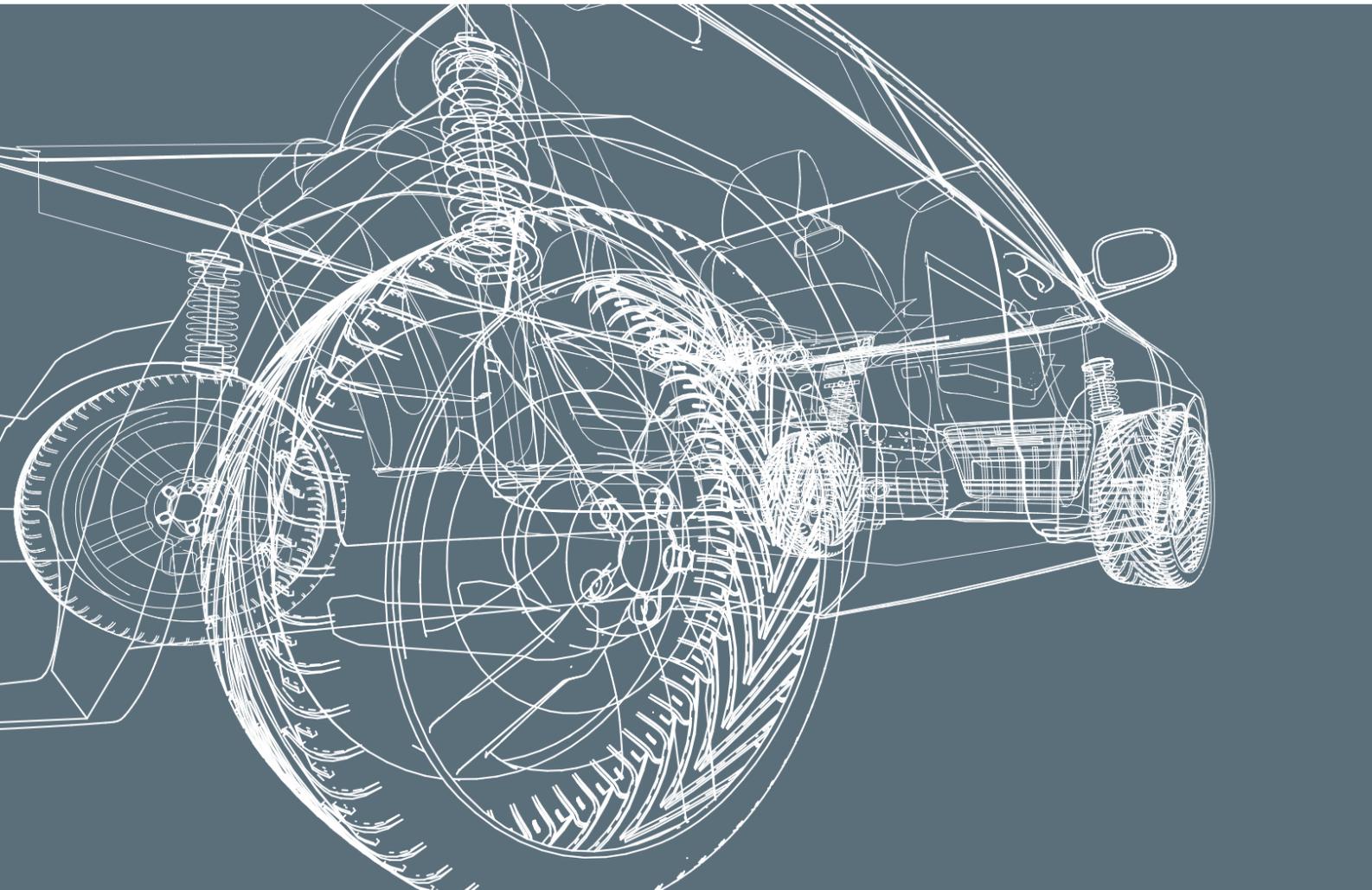
or, more specifically, how the process ends—that distinguishes art from design. “The real difference in my eyes [between art and design] is who decides when to begin and when to end,” says Bangle. “An artist decides when to start and when to stop.” As experts in their field, the designers themselves often decide when the process stops. That, following Bangle's logic, is what makes for art.

Alexander Klatt, MFA chair of transportation design at the College for Creative Studies, has a slightly different take on the art-design divide. Having served as the vice president of global design for Fisker following a long tenure in leadership with BMW and BMW DesignworksUSA, Klatt has seen car design from every angle, inside and out. “The [design] process in the industry is always an artistic exercise,” says Klatt. “Whatever the designer is inspired by” is expressed in the design. “It is like fine art,” he says.

For Klatt, however, the decision to stop does not necessarily draw a hard line between art and design. The artistic value of a car is determined by how much art is allowed to remain: “The percentage of art [in a final car design] really depends on the loops of decision making. That's why some concepts look so artful [but]



2008 Bugatti Veyron. Photo: Barrett-Jackson



they change dramatically” before going to production. These decisions may be dictated by mass production feasibility, market needs and myriad other factors, but regardless, Klatt says, “you lose a lot of the expression from the designer” with every change.

Additionally, every change can have sweeping impact because cars are uniquely multifaceted. Every car looks different in motion than it does when parked, and experiencing a car from the inside looking out is a different perspective entirely. These facets also change the design process. “It’s a more holistic experience,” Klatt says. “You can design the car from the inside to the outside and also the outside to the inside.”

So what’s the underlying reason that some cars are more “artful” than others and concept cars more artful still? Both Klatt and Bangle point to overall company culture when it comes to design decisions. “The premium brands’ strategic leadership teams focus more on [differentiating],” says Klatt, adding that they do this “to go more artistic, to push the envelope further.”

It’s because of this approach that premium brands are able to produce beautiful cars year after year while remaining relevant and appealing to loyalists and new customers alike; however, Bangle notes that car designers face a challenge from within the ranks.

“We as car designers have probably undervalued the challenge to us to make cars relevant to people,” he says. “Increasingly they are not. And this is really dangerous.” With a lack of relevance, the door to change is open. Just as painting, sculpture, architecture and nearly every other art form have seen time and again, this might mean that car design is facing a major shift. With today’s technology, that could mean the next wave is automated, algorithmic design, meaning more generic, less artistic cars created for need rather than for beauty. On the other hand, a change this drastic may also serve to highlight the artistic value of cars—likely the premium brands—that are still designed by hand.



Regardless, it's difficult to argue that cars are not works of art. From sketching to sculpting to building heritage into every design, the process is highly artistic and, if permitted to do so, the end result can stand as a timeless creation. After all, cars are not auctioned for their scrap value; they're auctioned for their iconic designs and their place in automotive history.

"People appreciate the cars as art," says Craig Jackson, car collector and owner of Barrett-Jackson, The World's Greatest Collector Car Auctions®, before emphasizing his point by referring to these cars as "rolling sculptures." Barrett-Jackson annually puts on four of the most popular and prestigious car auctions in the world, and Jackson himself embodies everything these quarterly auctions represent. With more than 30 cars from various decades cycling through his garage and beyond, Jackson appreciates both the business and the art of car collecting.



1949 Delahaye Type 175 Saoutchik Coupe De Ville. Photo: Barrett-Jackson



But beyond a car's iconic status or its place in automotive history is how it resonates with the collector. Perhaps more than anything else, that alone makes cars works of art. "Some of the cars I collect are muscle," says Jackson of a car class that may not typically be considered for anything beyond its power, "but I try to display them as works of art." Of course his fondness for muscle—a fondness, says Jackson, that includes many of the modern retro throwbacks from the past decade or so—doesn't mean that his 1948 Delahaye is out of place alongside his new Dodge Challenger or his 2008 Bugatti Veyron. That's how art collections work: You have a style you enjoy, but nothing is set in stone. Certain cars hit you right away and others, he says, "grow on you." Clearly this all means there's more than function at play. In fact, it's tempting to say that a car's function is simply a product of its form, but it's probably best to let designers and collectors make that argument on their own. [LR](#)



1947 Talbot-Lago T-26 Grand Sport. Photo: Barrett-Jackson