Being careful not to apply pressure directly on the aluminum body, trained staff roll the Phantom Corsair through the museum to its display space.

The Car of Tomorrow

FROM THE 'ROLLING SCULPTURE' EXHIBITION AT THE VERO BEACH MUSEUM OF ART: THE 1938 PHANTOM CORSAIR, COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL AUTOMOBILE MUSEUM

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In 1937, when the Phantom Corsair first appeared, the world had never seen anything like it. Sleek and dramatically proportioned, the car looked like something sent back from the future. Eighty-six years later, it still does.

From now through the end of April, the Phantom Corsair can be seen at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, one of 22 rare Art Deco vehicles in an exhibition titled "Rolling Sculpture."

The car was the brainchild of Rust Heinz, grandson of the founder of the H.J. Heinz Company (Rust was his mother's maiden name). Not keen on spending a life overseeing pickle and ketchup production, Heinz enrolled at Yale to study naval architecture. On the side, he began designing and racing speedboats, but he yearned to build automobiles. Heinz left Yale one year short of graduation in 1934, moved in with his favorite aunt in Pasadena,

The one-of-a-kind Phantom Corsair is such a popular exhibit at the National Automobile Museum in Reno, Nevada that a red banner was placed atop the museum's website in January to alert visitors that the car is away for several months.

California, and opened an industrial design studio.

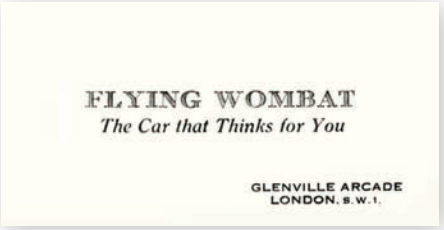
Although his parents disapproved of his decision to quit school, he was soon working on a project for the family business: a teardrop-shaped van named the Comet. It had a bulbous front, a pointy back, and a lit-up neon Heinz "57" on each side. It's uncertain how many were built, perhaps just one or two, but none have survived.

Rust Heinz's Comet, a rolling advertisement

In 1936, Heinz began making sketches of his dream car: the Phantom Corsair. When his parents balked at financing the venture, his aunt agreed to fund it. In today's dollars, it ended up costing more than $500,000.

As luck would have it, the famed coachbuilders Bohman & Schwartz were located in Pasadena. The team worked with Heinz to refine his sketches, build scale models, and then direct construction of the prototype. Heinz's own 1936 Cord 810 provided the front subframe, engine, gearbox, and gauges. The Lycoming 4.7-liter V-8 was upped from 125 to 190 horsepower, producing an "estimated" top speed of 115 mph.

"All this can be yours for $12,500" proclaimed one ad, four times the cost of a Cord 812.



A business card from the film *The Young in Heart*

The result was a car that elicited immediate and visceral reactions; it was startling, extravagant, imposing. It was also fairly impractical for purposes other than turning heads or committing supervillain crimes.

"It's the true dream car – the stuff of dreams, not the stuff of practicality," says Mike Lamm, a noted automobile journalist who rode in the car in 1973. Alas, he recalls several functional issues that hadn't been fully resolved.

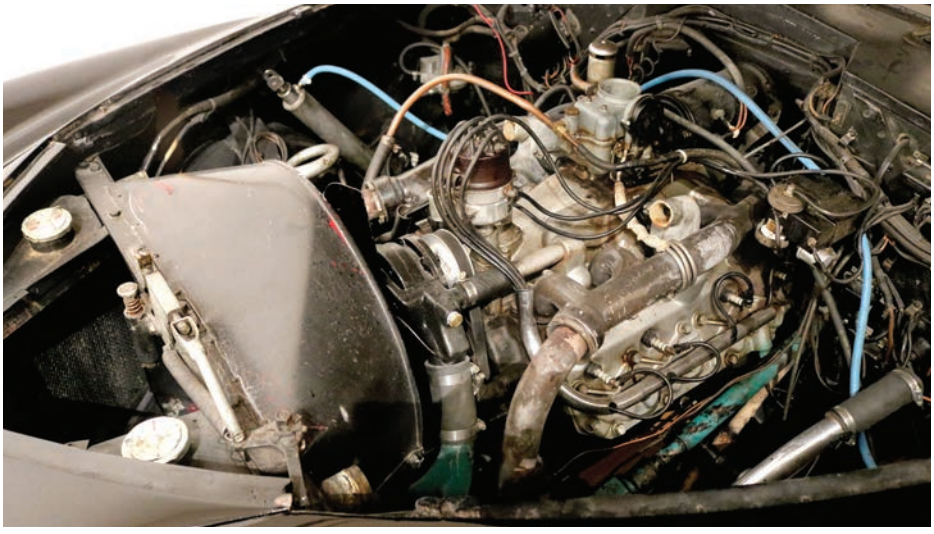
"The car was hell to see out of," he says. The rear windows were tiny, side visibility was limited, and the split windshield was height-challenged. Compounding the problem, the car had no mirrors, which weren't required at the time.

Lamm adds, "It felt like what it was, a very heavy car. Steering was heavy, the controls were heavy. It was not a pleasant car to drive."

The Phantom Corsair was loaded with innovative features. Cork and rubber were used inside to protect passengers and elsewhere to reduce vibration. Doors and synchronized, hinged roof panels swung open with the push of a button. A dashboard button raised or lowered the hood by activating electro-hydraulic rams.

Chrome was used sparingly, most prominently in the triple-blade, shock-absorbing bumpers. The car sat low, with a body that extended out and over the wheels. That extra width allowed for four front-seat passengers, one to the left of the driver. The dark, cramped back seat area included two "luxury compartments," each housing a metal Thermos and tumblers.

To promote the groundbreaking vehicle, a slick brochure was produced and a full-page ad was taken out in Esquire (opposite one for Heinz tomato



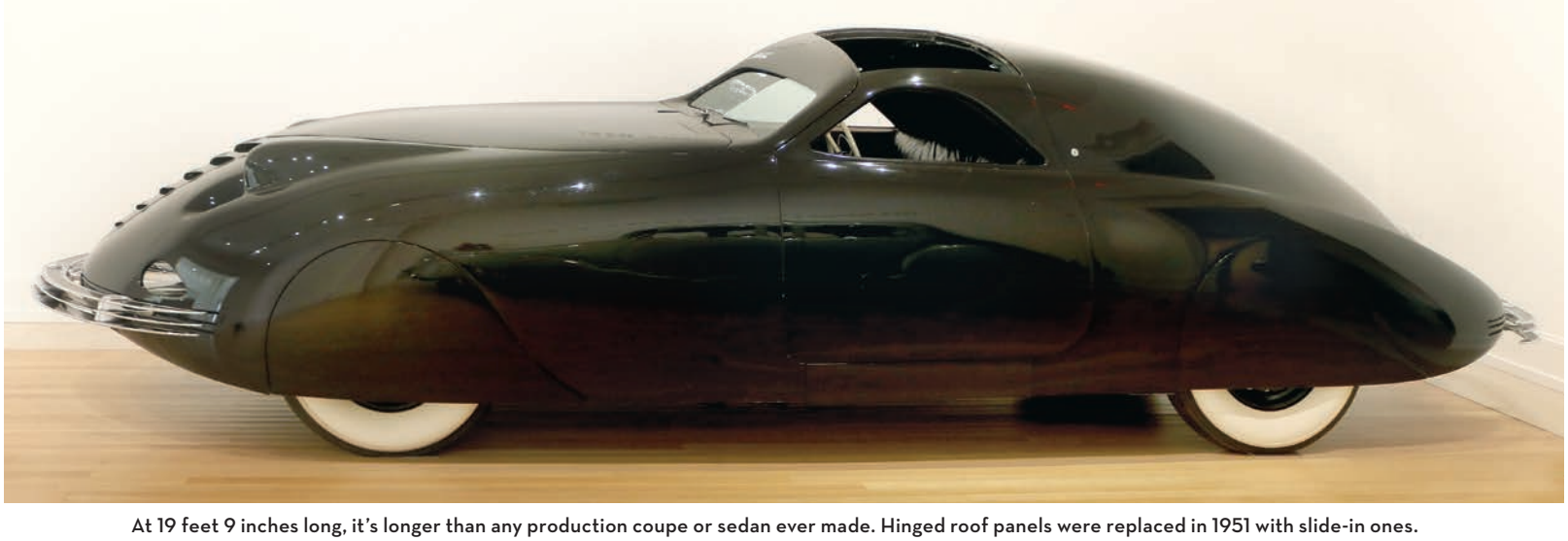
The 4.7-liter V-8 has never been restored. With limited airflow into the engine, overheating was a problem, Two radiators helped compensate somewhat.

An array of 13 gauges includes a complicated dial in the center that displays pulling power, tractive and wind resistance, brake power efficiency, and more.

juice). Media coverage, including a segment in a Popular Science movie short, followed. The car even landed a prominent role in the 1938 movie *The Young in Heart*. Renamed the Flying Wombat, the car can be seen dashing through the countryside honking a horn that plays a snippet from Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries."

Tragically, the last time Rust Heinz stood next to the car was at the 1939 World's Fair, where it was part of the Electric Utilities exhibit. He died, as a car passenger, in a crash soon after. With the driving force behind the Phantom Corsair gone, and not one order placed, the car would forever remain a one-off masterpiece. ❀

The car has been likened to a killer whale, a submarine, and from the front, a half-submerged hippo.



At 19 feet 9 inches long, it's longer than any production coupe or sedan ever made. Hinged roof panels were replaced in 1951 with slide-in ones.