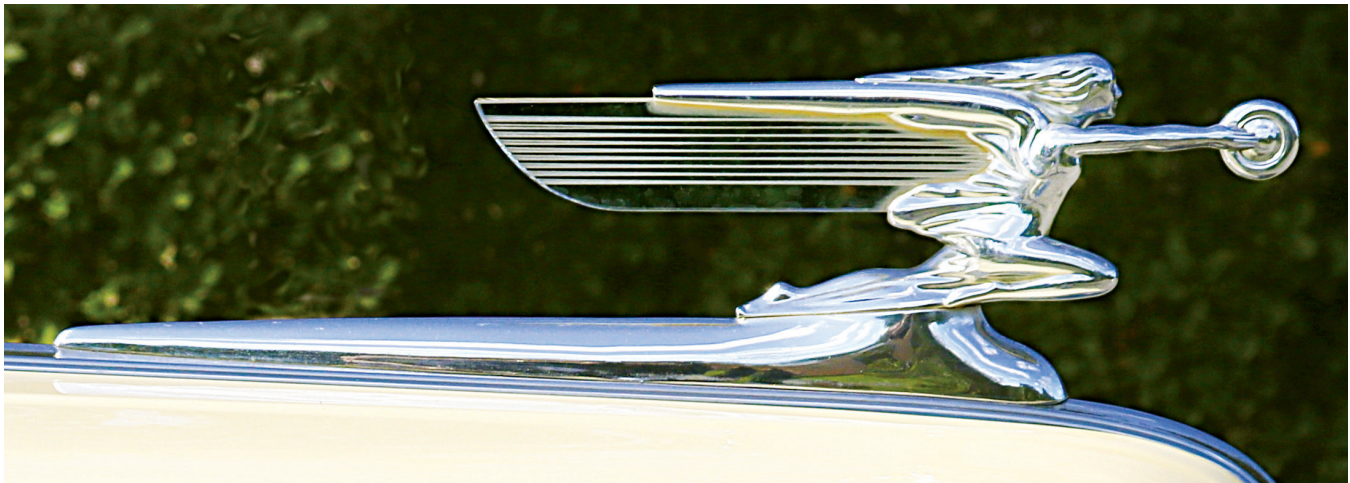




WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PATRICK MERRELL

# Front and Center

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOOD ORNAMENTS, FEATURING ELEGANT EXAMPLES FROM AROUND TOWN



“Goddess of Speed,” nicknamed the “Donut Chaser” for the car wheel she’s holding, on a 1941 Packard One-Twenty Deluxe – Motor City Classic Cars

The world’s first-known hood ornament belonged to King Tutankhamun: a life-sized, gilded-wood falcon mounted on the front of his ceremonial chariot. Atop the bird’s head was a large golden disk featuring a winged scarab, the sun, two crown-wearing cobras, five ankhs and a bowl-shaped basket.

It would be another 3,200 years before carmakers in the United States and Europe began copying that idea from Tut’s two-horsepower vehicle. The results were equally beautiful and symbolic, if not quite as elaborate.

In the early days, cars had exposed radiators, and the caps on them were strictly utilitarian, not much more glamorous than a pickle jar lid. That changed in 1912, when the Boyce MotoMeter Company patented a cap with a thermometer sticking out of it, allowing drivers to gauge the temperature of the water vapor inside. It was a nice-looking design, consisting of a glass-and-metal disk supported by a small pedestal. Soon adornments were being added, such as logos, emblems and “toppers” – small metal sculptures that identified the automaker.

Hood ornament design really took off in the 1920s, with Boyce MotoMeter crafting custom designs for hundreds of manufacturers in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Australia. Many other companies on both sides of the Atlantic joined the fray, fashioning distinctive sculptures for both automakers and as aftermarket items.

AE Lejeune, a bronze foundry in England, was particularly successful in Europe. It commissioned prominent sculptors to make two of the hood ornaments on these pages, the “Leaping Greyhound” for the French car company



Clockwise from upper left: 1929 Delage "Leaping Greyhound" on a 1932 Lincoln KB – Motor City Classic Cars; "Flying Eagle" on a 1934 Chevrolet Master Coupe and a light-up "Chief of the Sixes" on a 1954 Pontiac Chieftain – Sam Gagliano; "Waterfall" on a 1947 Mercury Eight – Delray Motorcars





"Winged Eagle" hood ornament on a 1933 Chevrolet Master Pickup – Gavin Ruotolo

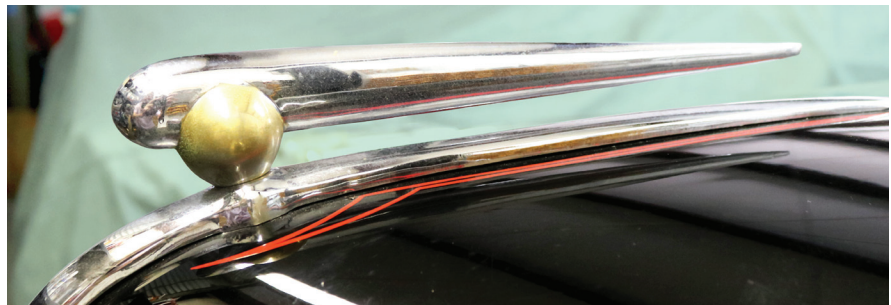
Delage and "Spirit of Ecstasy" for Rolls-Royce. Another notable commission was Bentley's "Flying B," a capital letter "B" with a pair of large wings.

Lejeune also made a wide variety of novelty hood ornaments – frogs, dogs, pigs, birds, golfers, polo players, nymphs, airplanes, painted red devils, and a snail with a jockey riding on its shell. By the late '20s, it was touting itself as the largest "car mascot" maker in the world, with 300 different designs.

Every carmaker soon had a distinctive hood ornament. A few memorable ones were Pierce-Arrow's "Archer," Bugatti's "Dancing Elephant," Jaguar's "Leaper" and Hispano-Suiza's graceful "Flying Stork." One of the oddest figures was "Midge," a "distinctive and very attractive" chrome-plated mosquito, available in two sizes from dealers as an accessory for MG's 1935 P-type.



Jets and rockets were a popular theme for hood ornaments in the 1950s: 1956 Chevy Nomad and 1954 Oldsmobile Super 88 – Motor City Classic Cars



Clockwise from upper left: 1937 Packard Super Eight radiator cap – Motor City Classic Cars; 1937 Ford Coupe hood-release handle that doubles as a hood ornament – Rosner Motorsports; 1941 Lincoln Continental Coupe – Sam Gagliano; 1950 Ford Custom Deluxe – Motor City Classic Cars



“Spirit of Ecstasy” on a 1986 Rolls-Royce Corniche II Convertible – Rosner Motorsports

Birds and mammals were common subject matter, as were women and Art Deco designs. Other modes of transportation were popular themes as well. In the '30s, Plymouth chose sailing ships for its designs, and many carmakers used trains in the '40s and then rockets and airplanes in the '50s.

After 1960, hood ornaments became increasingly rare. Styles had changed, but so too had safety concerns. Although there were few known cases of pedestrians being skewered, various regulations were imposed over the years to prevent just such an occurrence. Some carmakers adapted by offering flexible, spring-loaded mounts, so the projecting piece would collapse when struck.

In the case of Rolls-Royce, the company wasn't ready to retire its Spirit of Ecstasy. Instead, the hood ornament was engineered to retract into the hood during a collision – and also when the doors were locked, to prevent theft. ✿



The Mercedes-Benz “Three-Pointed Star” isn't fancy, but it's one of the few hood ornaments still being offered today. – Delray Motorcars