

Collectible AUTOMOBILE

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"Where Are They Now?": One-offs We'd Love to Find



1933 Duesenberg Model J Convertible Coupe

- Show and Tell: A Look at Bob Lutz's Cars
- Photo Features: 1933 Duesie, 1956 Chevy





A "Car Guy's" Cars: Visiting the Collection of Bob Lutz

by Gary Witzenburg

So what if General Motors's top personality and resident "car guy," Bob Lutz, has silvery hair? So do lots of people nearly half his age, and with half of his vitality.

This ex-Marine fighter pilot still flies high—particularly in his own helicopter (for transportation) and an ex-Libyan air force fighter jet (for fun). Among his other hobbies are riding motorcycles, collecting cars, and serving as chairman of General Motors North America and vice chairman of the corporation's Global Product Development organization.

Of course, the last is hardly a hobby. Like other top GM execs, he attends endless high-level meetings, motivates his troops in the auto industry's trenches, deftly fields media questions, and makes critically important decisions on future products. For all this, he's compensated very well, but he just has so much fun doing it that it might as well be a hobby.

Fresh out of the Marine Corps, Lutz began his automotive career at GM Europe in 1963, then moved on to ever-higher positions at BMW, Ford, and Chrysler before "retiring" as vice chairman of Chrysler in 1998. He then toiled as chairman of battery maker Exide, Incorporated, until GM president and CEO Rick Wagoner invited him on board his revitalized leadership team. Soon

Be it by vocation or avocation, Bob Lutz has spent a lifetime around interesting and exciting cars. Now the dynamic advocate for winning vehicles at General Motors has surrounded himself with some of his historical favorites. He lets us have a look at his collection.

after returning to his original employer in the industry in September 2001, Lutz was promoted to his current responsibilities—and celebrated his 70th birthday.

We visited the sprawling Lutz farm not far from Ann Arbor, Michigan, on a sunny Saturday last autumn to examine his eclectic collection of 14 collectible automobiles. They're not the Duesenbergs, V-16 Cadillacs, and other irreplaceable rich-guy treasures you might

expect, but a selection of interesting old cars that mean something special to him.

We were greeted warmly by Bob; his beautiful wife, Denise (who flies her own helicopter); and a small pack of friendly, energetic dogs. Ducks and swans circled gracefully on a large pond across the drive. One of the two family helicopters sat ready (for a grocery run?) in the background.

Lutz unwrapped a trademark cigar as he showed us a twin of the first car to impress him as a child. It is a stunning yellow 1934 LaSalle convertible, a milestone example of the luxury brand that once filled the price gap between Buick and Cadillac.

"This is the first car I remember as a little kid," he recalled with a grin. "I remember leaning out the top floor window, and I'd see at least four people on the front seat and at least three more in the rumble seat, everybody with bottles in their hands and behaving irresponsibly. It was a '34 that looked exactly like this one. That's why I had it redone in those colors."

Beyond those memories, Lutz loves this car because of its flamboyant styling, a trademark of designer Harley Earl, who created the look of the first LaSalle in 1927, then stayed on at GM to create its Art and Colour Section, now the Design

Center that styles GM vehicles. "When you look at what others were doing in 1934, it was pretty special," Lutz enthused. "Look at the 'pants crease' in the fenders, the ornaments at the front of the fenders, the grille, the biplane bumpers, those 'half-cups' on the side. On the interior, the theme is consistently carried through in the welts on the door trim, horizontal and vertical, and they come to different points. It's just outstanding!"

Next, he showed off his rare 1934 Riley MPH Sports Competition Roadster, a spindly sports car like something out of an old British movie. "I always wanted one," he said. "I had seen this one for years in a garage in Bern [Switzerland, where Lutz grew up]. It belonged to the Riley importer, who raced it before the war. Then he died, his widow wouldn't sell it, and I forgot about it. Then, when I was in the Marine Corps, I saw an ad for it, at 13,000 Swiss francs, which was \$4000 at the time.

"The proportion on this car is incredible. It looks a lot like the early Thirties Alfa Zagato—the door cutline, the rear fender, the fin in back. But it's better than the Zagato because it has this extreme long hood and the very short, rounded, tucked-under deck. It looks like it's accelerating so fast that the whole body has

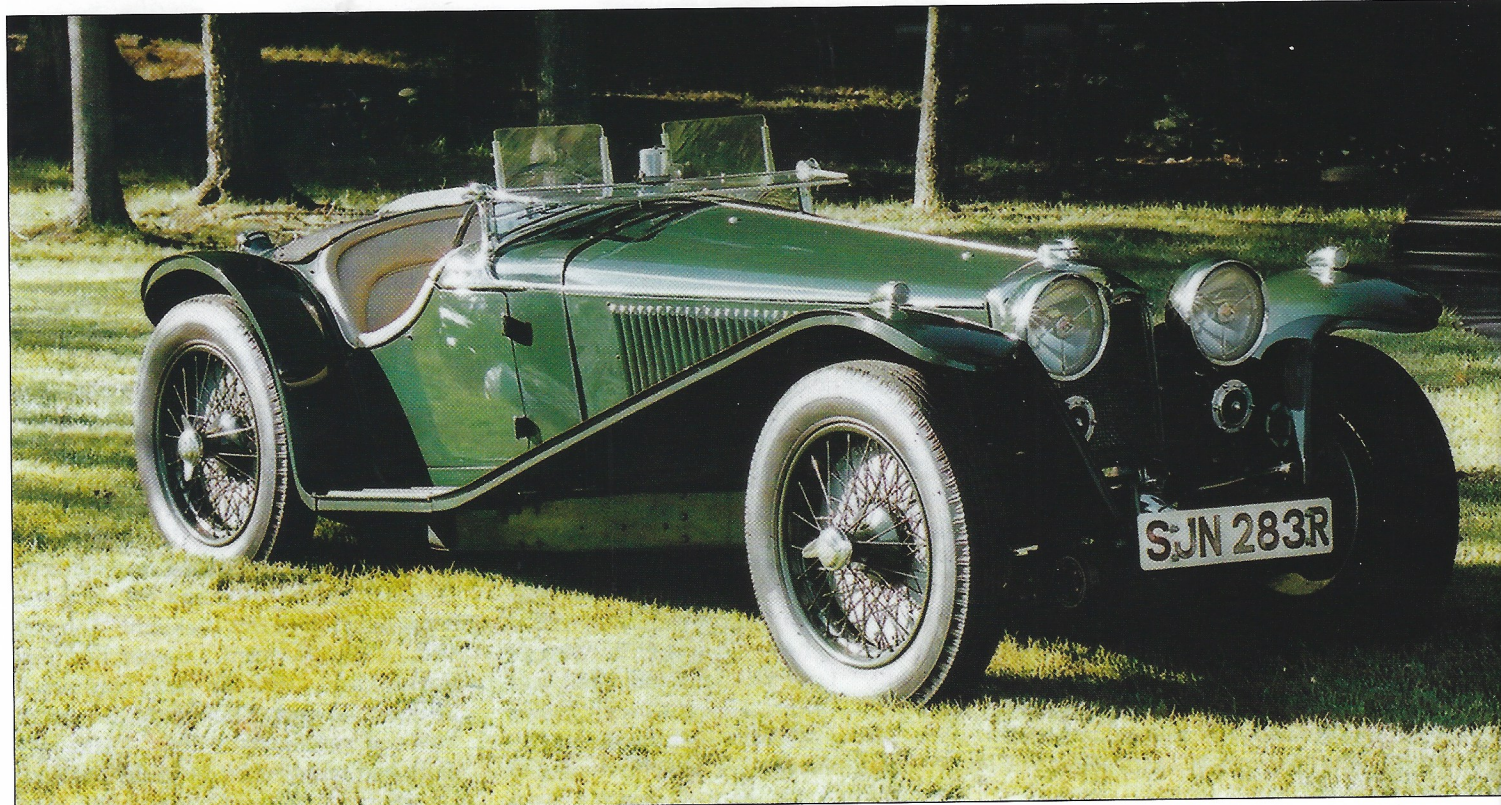


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slid aft on the chassis, which gives it a tremendous feeling of thrust. It has a beautiful instrument panel, and such a beautiful engine for 1934."

This model was designed for Le Mans, Lutz says, but by the time it got there,

1. Bob Lutz enjoys a good cigar and a great car. 2. Lutz's 1934 LaSalle convertible has been repainted to match one from a fond childhood memory. 3. He admires the rare and racy '34 Riley MPH Competition Roadster for its styling and Wilson preselector gearbox.



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everyone else was running more modern technology. We commented on its unusual shifter.

"That's the Wilson preselector. It's a semiautomatic gearbox. You preselect the gear, and the clutch is only a switch for triggering the shift. I'll demonstrate." He leaned into the cockpit, started the engine, and selected a gear. We were expecting the Riley to rattle off and scatter the dogs on its way into the pond.

"It's not going anywhere," Lutz assured us, "until I tap the clutch. The clutch triggers the selection of the gear, but it still won't move until I add throttle. It's a centrifugal device that gradually engages the clutch. If you look inside the box, it has everything a modern automatic transmission has, with epicyclic gear trains and bands. What they couldn't figure out was the torque converter and vacuum devices for the shifts.

"These transmissions were popular for racing because they were robust, and the driver could preselect the gear he wanted before going into a corner. Then, as the car is going sideways, and he's flailing the wheel around—which they had to do in those days—he doesn't have to worry about taking one hand off and finding a gear. He can just tap the clutch, and there it is.

"There are about another 10 of these in the world. Total production was 21, including the prototype."

Then he led us to an odd, yet familiar, black sedan crouching in the drive, looking like Inspector Clouseau's Parisian police car. He explained that this French Citroën 15-6 was another '34-vintage design, though this particular example was built in 1952.

"It was the world's first inline six front-drive car, and the world's first unit-body car, at a time when everyone else was still using frames. Look at the Fifties Hudson-style 'Step-down' design and where the beltline is compared to a '34 car designed in the U.S." [He gestured toward the LaSalle.] "Look at the rear leg room. And no overhangs: They got the wheels absolutely out to the corners of the car, which gives it this wonderful, low-slung appearance. It's an absolutely modern proportion.

"It's got full torsion-bar suspension on all four wheels, with the longitudinal bars going to the A-arms in front, exactly like Chrysler did in the Sixties. In the back, it's got transverse torsion bars with trailing link suspension, *à la* postwar VW and Porsche."



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Lutz contrasted his three 1934-design cars: "The Citroën was way, way leading-edge technology, and typically French. The Riley was totally British, but really nicely executed. The LaSalle was antiquated technology but a gorgeous body."

Next came a car his father had actually owned, a 1952 Aston Martin DB2 coupe. The elder Lutz, general director of a bank in Zurich, Switzerland, bought it new "because Aston Martin had done well at Le Mans, so he could sort of be 'king of the hill,'" Lutz *fils* explained. "But he'd get blown off by colleagues with Jaguar XK-120s, which were half the price with way more horsepower. Still, he wanted to be loyal to Aston, because it was a make

that he liked very much, and it wasn't ostentatious. Being a Swiss banker, he felt he couldn't have a Ferrari, or a Maserati, or anything too flashy. And this Aston was a breakthrough design in '52, the first Italian-style British sports car."

Visiting an Aston Martin restoration shop with a friend one day, Lutz saw a green DB2 with the wrong rear window. "I said, 'Gee, my dad had one of these, but it didn't have this backlight.' The guy said, 'Well, the former owner had that put in.' I said, 'Well, my dad's was metallic blue.' He said, 'Look under the hood. This one looks metallic blue.' I said, 'My dad's had recessed boxes under the pedals.' He reached into a box and said, 'Did



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they look like this?' I said, 'Yeah, but my dad's also had special chrome bumpers.' He reached into another box and said, 'Did they look like this?' Then he said, 'Let me go check the build ticket.' He went to his file, rummaged through it, and there it was, made out to Robert H. Lutz. I bought it on the spot."

Excited by his find, Lutz rushed right home to tell his father. "'Guess what I did today?' He said, 'What?' I said, 'I bought your old Aston Martin.' And he said, 'Why would you want to do that?'"

Then we walked to where Lutz's cherished pair of 1952 Cunninghams, a red C-3 Vignale coupe and a white C-4R racer, gleamed proudly in the afternoon sun.

"I just love Cunninghams," he grinned, twirling his unlit cigar. "I was smarting under the derision with which my Swiss car-loving friends held American products in general: 'American cars don't handle, American cars don't brake, and there's never been an American car that's done anything at Le Mans.' Then Briggs Cunningham started running and placing well at Le Mans with basically the prototype Chrysler 300 engine.

"This C-3 coupe came when Le Mans [organizers] told him, 'Look, Mr. Cunningham, Le Mans is not for prototypes. Le Mans is for car producers, and we've been very patient with you. You're on your third year, and you've got to pro-

1. The confluence of technology and design is a major reason why Lutz has made a 1952 Citroën 15-6 part of his collection. When the design first appeared in the Thirties, its combination of front-wheel drive, unitized construction, and torsion-bar suspension was a highly advanced engineering package. It resulted in a long, low look that was quite forward-looking in the styling realm, as well. 2, 3. Lutz's 1952 Aston Martin DB2 coupe is truly one of the family. It caught his attention in a restoration shop, and he asked questions about the car. The proprietor produced documentation that showed it was the very same DB2 that had once belonged to Lutz's father, a Swiss banker who admired Astons for their efforts at Le Mans.

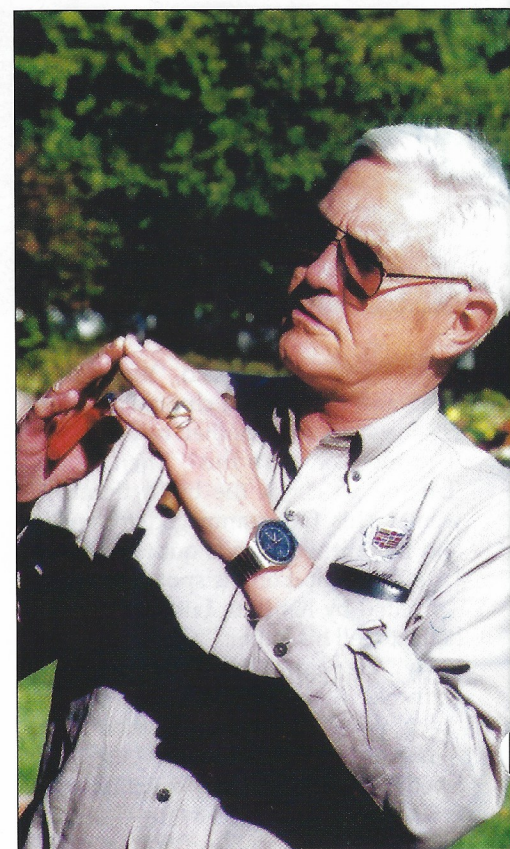


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1. Lutz thinks Cunninghams are just aces, and he's holding a pair: a C-4R racer and a roadgoing C-3 coupe, both '52s. 2. Light but lethal, the C-4R features a 331-cid Chrysler "hemi" engine. Originally built by American Briggs Cunningham to tackle the great French challenge of Le Mans, Lutz has run his C-4R in vintage-auto tours. 3. Lutz expounds on the virtues of Cunninghams. 4. To appease Le Mans authorities' demands that he must produce more than just racing cars, Cunningham began offering the Vignale-bodied C-3. Lutz has modified his to make it more roadworthy under modern conditions. 5. Even with some stylistic shortcomings, Lutz finds the C-4R exciting. "When you see it in the garage, and you're standing right here, the car has such an overwhelming presence," he says.



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duce a car or we're not going to let you run here any more.' So he put this coupe into production with a similar chassis to the C-4R racer, a slightly detuned engine, and this Michelotti-designed Vignale body.

"What Vignale did," he continued, pointing at the coupe's interior and laughing heartily, "whether you had a Ferrari, a Maserati, a Lancia, a Cunning-

ham, or whatever, this greenhouse, and the doors, and seats were always the same. Then he'd change the fenders, and grille, and do whatever he had to do to satisfy what the chassis was. Then there's his Italian interpretation of an American instrument panel, this wonderful blend of American flash with basic European design. I just think that panel is dynamite!

"This one is heavily modified underneath, with adjustable Konis, a Toyota Supra front bar, and 14-inch ventilated Corvette discs, and it's decambered a bit. I don't mind doing some minor chassis—and especially brake—modifications on the cars I use for going fast. These things are lethal with drum brakes! The performance is way the hell and gone, and then they grab . . . even worse if you can't rely on them going straight. I have all the old parts in case a future owner wants to take it back to original."

Turning to the C-4R racer, he said, "I just love this thing! It looks like a great big old Fifties Ferrari, and it still rumbles, and shakes, and twists with torque. It's an old triangulated, boxed, rectangular tubular space frame, very lightweight aluminum structure, about 2100 pounds, with a 331 Chrysler 'hemi' V-8, over 400 horsepower, on those skinny Dunlop racing tires. And there's nothing on it; no heater, no ventilation, no windows, no door seals, no door inner panels, no carpeting. It is a bare-bones sports car. At the California Mille Miglia, when Denise and I had it out there, we sucked the doors off all the Ferraris, and it hangs with the C-type Jaguars. It's really fast. Really fast!

"This car lives by its proportions, and there are bad features. The windshield is too vertical; that front-wheel cut is awkward from certain angles. A real professional design has no bad angles. But it has so much presence. When you see it in the garage, and you're standing right here, the car has such an overwhelming presence. Even the things that are bad, like that Pratt & Whitney air-cooled engine-oil radiator sticking up, or the clearance hump for the Weber carburetors. Nowadays, you wouldn't have that vertical face on it; you'd fair the front of it in. But all of those things give it character."

What's the significance of the roundel on the side? "That was the American warplane symbol in World War I, and it was the only thing the French remembered. So they said, 'Your car must carry the airplane colors for the United States.' And Cunningham said, 'Yeah, OK, that would be the star and bars.' And they said, 'No, no, see here in zees book, it must look like zees!' And he said, 'That was World War I. We stopped using that in 1918 or 1919.' And they said, 'That is what you will use!'"

We walked across the drive to his 1955 Chrysler 300 hardtop coupe. "This is



another one I always wanted. In '55, when I was in the Marine Corps, this was absolutely it. To the enthusiast, this meant more than a Cadillac, because it was the first American muscle car, the first car with 300 horsepower. And they dominated NASCAR for a number of years, so it was a genuine American high-performance icon.

"It was really created because of Cunningham. When Chevy came out with the Corvette and Ford launched the Thunderbird, Chrysler had nothing. So they reached into the parts bin and did a commercial version of the Cunningham racing engine.

"I also always liked the design, because it didn't slavishly imitate the '54 GM products, which were terrific with that reverse-slope A-pillar. All the GM cars at that time had the very horizontal hood and the very blunt front. But Chrysler

had some plan view, and a lot of tumble-home . . . and these Italian-style headlights. They show a very strong Virgil Exner influence, and Ghia influence from Italy. It's really a gorgeous car."

We commented on the Chrysler's chrome-fin taillamps. "Well that was interesting. Times were tough, the fin era was in full bloom, and Chrysler didn't have the money to do a new quarter panel for the fin. So they just had one of the suppliers do diecast fins that they could pop on.

"This car is externally 100 percent original. Internally, it's got adjustable Koni shocks, heavy stabilizer bars, 14-inch Corvette disc brakes, [and] a three-speed TorqueFlite instead of a two-speed because we use it for vintage car events. It's fun going over the California mountains chasing the Porsche Speedsters, and they can't believe it. 'I can understand

that this thing is faster on the straights,' they'll say, 'but I cannot believe a 1955 American car going through the corners that fast and being able to stop.' And then I always say, 'American cars were a lot better than you guys gave them credit for.'"

Awaiting us in the cool shade of the woods was his sleek, wedgy, Ferrari-like 1971 Monteverdi 375 High-Speed coupe. "I remember falling in love with that car at the '71 Geneva show," he recalled. "It was another one of those cars that, like Iso Rivolta, Bizzarrini, Lamborghini, was created by a wealthy individual, Peter Monteverdi, a Swiss, who was sick and tired of doing business with Enzo Ferrari. . . . Ferrari's obnoxious nature created a whole bunch of interesting brands. And everybody said, 'Why should I develop my own engine when I can go to the American parts bin and get all the



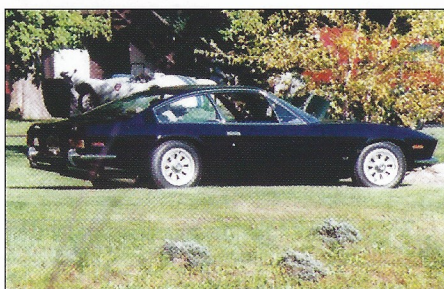
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power I need?' Chevrolet, Ford, Chrysler, Cadillac. MonteVerdi chose a Chrysler 440 'Wedge' with 375 horsepower.

"The design is by Frua, executed by Fissore. It has a lot of the same lines as the Ferrari 330, but I think it's much better. It's a wider and longer car, much better proportioned, with a much longer hood. I just think, for 1971, everything on the car is just so good! That proportion is still excellent today."

We observed that it has an interesting juxtaposition of angles and curves. "Yes, and that is exactly where design is again. It's not that far away from where we are with Cadillac right now."

"I saw it in a Christie's catalog for sale in Geneva. It was another of those 'always wanted one' cars because it's Swiss, it's beautiful, and it's almost unknown. No one's ever heard of MonteVerdi, so it's sort of a secret make. It was



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1. The timeless image of strength conveyed by looks and power of the 1955 Chrysler 300 made it another car Lutz had to have for his collection. It's another of his favorites for old-car touring events. 2, 3. Though the appearance of the 1971 MonteVerdi 375 High-Speed coupe is a world away from that of the 300, what they have in common is Chrysler big-block power under the hood. The rare Swiss-made coupe with low-slung Italian coachwork sports a 440-cid, 375-bhp V-8.

still in the original color, a very light metallic silver blue, but badly rusted, and it hadn't run in years. We got it for 7000 Swiss francs, about 4000 bucks. And then \$80,000 later . . ."

Isn't the parts bin a little shallow for such a rare car? "Well, no, not really, because this is what the Italian coach-builders always did—and it's a discipline that we [at GM] have to learn as we try to execute something like the Pontiac Solstice for very little money. This is a totally 'everybody else's parts bin' car. The rear suspension is Jaguar, the instruments are British Yaeger, the taillights and door handles are Fiat 124. Everything was stolen from somewhere else."

"Part of MonteVerdi's problem was that he was way too creative for his own good. He could never stick with one car. Instead of working on building and selling what he had done, that didn't interest

him any more. He was only interested in the creative act.

"If I let myself go, if I didn't have the discipline of a large corporation and finance guys who I know will say 'no,' if I had a limitless money pot, I'd do exactly the same thing. I'd build concept car after concept car, and probably never put anything into production. That's the challenge. That's where you have to blend your passion with your sense of responsibility." He laughed again. "The truly successful car people in the industry are the ones who can dampen their enthusiasm just enough to where they can actually make a business out of it."

What else is on his "always-wanted" list? "Well, I've kind of disciplined myself. I just know I'm going to own a 12-cylinder car at some point—might be a Ferrari. But I have to watch that I don't get too much stuff. It's at the ragged edge."

"I am in that in-between stage, sort of that little valley, where you have enough net worth and income to be able to own all this stuff [gesturing broadly to include the farm and everything on it], but you don't have enough net worth and income to hire a full-time staff of guys in uniforms with the beautiful semi-transporter that says, 'The Lutz Collection.' And all these guys do is work in a tiled garage all week, and on Friday you call up and say, 'George, for this weekend I'd




1. It's not just enough for Bob and Denise Lutz to possess a stable of interesting collectible cars; they enjoy driving them, too. 2. These eight cars arrayed at the Lutzes' Michigan farm are just part of the larger collection of 14 vehicles. Among the others are a 1941 Chrysler convertible, a pair of Dodge Vipers, and a high-performance '78 Dodge Li'l Red Truck.

like the Monteverdi. Make sure it's fully fueled and tire pressures checked."

In one Lutz garage sat a lovely 1941 Chrysler convertible and a brace of Dodge Vipers, a 1992 R/T-10 roadster (VIN 00002) and a 1998 GTS-R coupe (number 99 from a series of 100). Outside was a '78 Dodge Li'l Red Truck ("the quickest American vehicle in 1978") with its hood up; he had been trying to troubleshoot its dead battery, cleaning its corroded terminals, when we arrived. Unseen in another garage was an Autokraft Mk IV replica 427 Cobra and a collection of eight historic motorcycles.

We asked the significance of the '41 Chrysler. "My dad had one of those in exactly that color," Lutz responded. "And '41 was a fabulous year for American design: '41 Buicks, '41 Cadillacs, '41 Oldsmobiles, '41 Chryslers and DeSotos. It was when the designers discovered surfacing, and they had these beautiful full surfaces that blended into each other. It was the beginning of a great era of American design."

"I think good design is coming back now."

Lutz signed on at GM for three years, through 2004, but he'll likely stay longer. He is doing a terrific job of leading the company's product revival, and he's enjoying himself too much to quit—so long, he says, as "Rick [Wagoner] and the Board are happy." 



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