



Paul Bracq

YESTERDAY & TODAY

Mercedes enthusiasts are indebted to renowned automotive stylist Paul Bracq for such timeless masterpieces as Der Grosse 600, the 300 SE Coupe and Cabriolet and the eternally bewitching Pagoda.

Paul Bracq is a living legend. An extremely talented artist and sculptor, he made his mark as a body stylist for Mercedes-Benz and BMW and as an interior stylist for Peugeot. His portfolio includes some of the automotive industry's most timeless designs from the period 1957-1975.

Bracq clearly distinguishes the design and engineering of automobiles from their styling; in his native French, Bracq calls himself a *maître carrossier*, a term derived from the French word for carriage, harking back to the days when a car chassis was designed by engineers while the body was separately styled and constructed by carrosseries.

An artistic virtuoso who created brilliant designs at an incredibly young age, Bracq is responsible for the enduring body styles of not only many of the Mercedes-Benz models of the early 1960s, but the first generation 3-, 5-, 6- and prototype 7-series BMWs as well. He was just 27 when he produced the sketches that became the Mercedes-Benz 230SL Pagoda. When you tally the number of cars that have his touch, it is an unmatched oeuvre (a French term seems appropriate here as well) of beautiful designs that remain looking remarkably fresh today.

Though most of his contemporaries are gone, Bracq is still with us today, a happy, gregarious man of 77 years. I was recently privileged to spend two days with him at his home in France. Though I speak little French and Bracq isn't fluent in English, our love for classic-car design in general, and Mercedes-Benz in particular, transcended any losses in translation.

Bracq's automotive career began in 1953 when he joined the design firm of Phillippe Charbonneau. Charbonneau primarily penned specialty cars such as Spain's Pegaso Coupé. Compulsory French military service abruptly ended that first appointment and Bracq soon found himself in uniform, stationed at an air base in the Black Forest of western Germany.

Free time was spent filling sketchbooks with ideas for new automobile styles until one day he was assigned to drive an officer's 300 Adenauer to



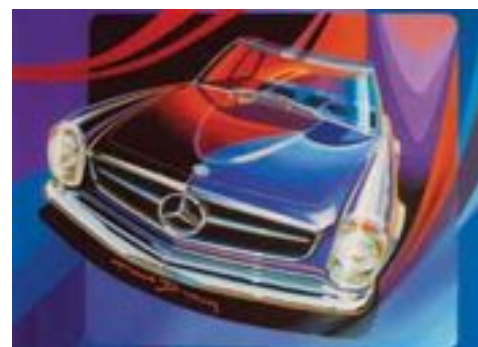
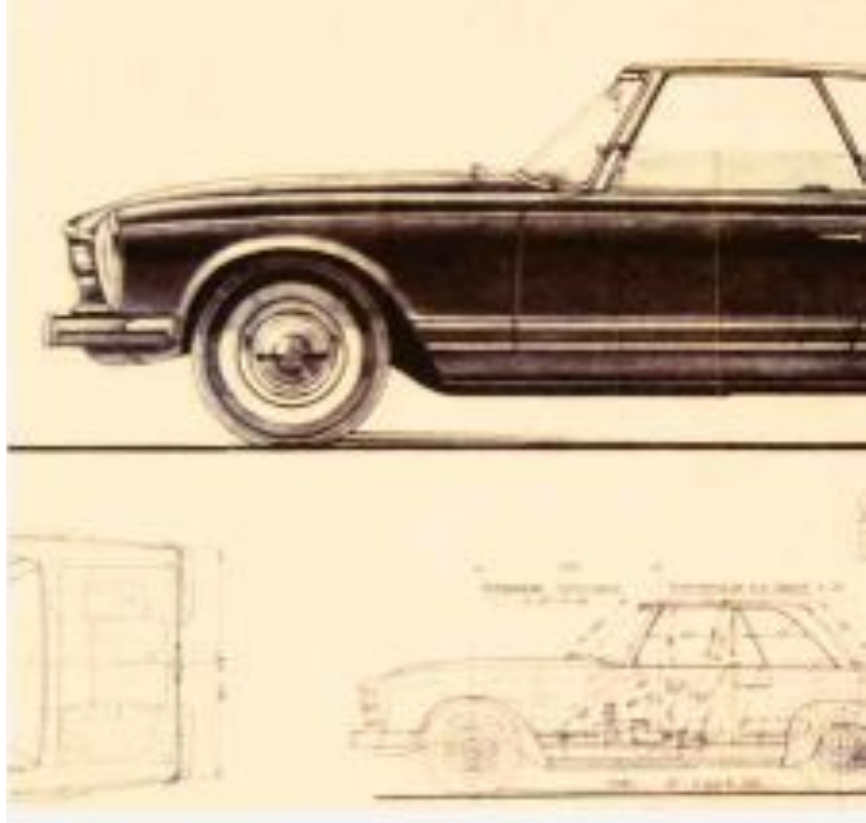
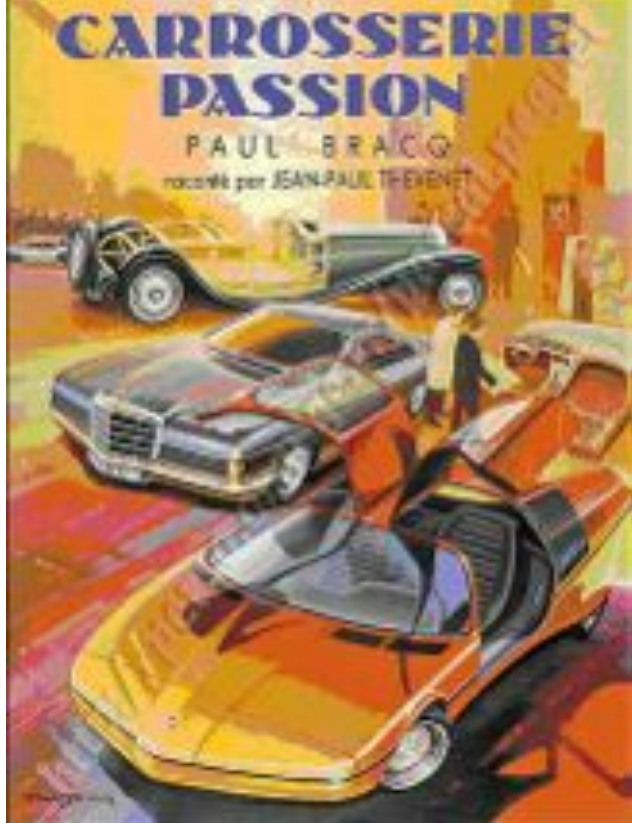
the Mercedes factory in Stuttgart. Sensing an opportunity beyond driving a fabulous car, Bracq brought his sketchbooks along and looked up the Press Department. "Although I only wanted to collect a few photos and posters for my room, I was warmly welcomed by press attaché Albrecht Fürst von Urach," Bracq recalled. Wanting to share his passion for Mercedes with von Urach, Bracq produced his sketchbooks, which included drawings for a Gullwing successor. Von Urach was impressed.

The visit would forever change Bracq, Mercedes-Benz and automotive styling. Soon he was contacted for a proper interview. "So I rented a small Lloyd to meet Karl Wilfert, the chief of car-body development." On his first trip, Bracq traveled in Germany's finest automobile, the 300. In stark contrast, the second trip was in its most forgettable car, a 10-horsepower, two-stroke, cloth-over-wood-bodied Lloyd.

Wilfert and Bracq had immediate rapport, and Bracq was offered a position as a stylist. When Bracq's military service was extended due to political troubles in Algeria, Wilfert kept his promise – and the job – until Bracq mustered out 10 months later in 1957. He then began an illustrious 10-year career at Mercedes-Benz Cars. So close became the relationship with Wilfert, that when Bracq left in 1967, "Karl said he was losing a son."

The year 1957 was a time when Mercedes-Benz was transitioning to more highly styled cars. Until Bracq's arrival, it was mainly engineers who directed styling. It was also a time when Mercedes was embarking on intensive research to improve passive safety, a time that brought art and engineering together with the contributions of Béla Barényi. Wilfert possessed supreme prescience in meeting the future needs of Mercedes-Benz and advancing the state-of-the-art body, structure and design styling.

This was a rare combination of the right people together at the right time. Bracq worked as part of a synergistic and extraordinarily talented automotive design, styling and development team, including Wilfert, Barényi, Rudi Uhlenhaut, Fritz Nallinger, Friedrich Geiger and Bruno



Sacco. Bracq's first project as a young stylist was the second-generation hard top for the 190SL. In more complete car projects, the designs generally attributed to Bracq include the Pagoda (W113); the Grosse 600; the 300SE Coupé and Cabriolet, the 250SE and more. Bracq removed the trendy fins from the 4-door Heckflosse (finback) cars, creating the beautiful Coupé and Cabriolet W111/W112s.

After 10 years at Mercedes, Bracq returned to France to work at a contract-engineering firm that led to a four-year stint at BMW. That tenure was perhaps more productive than his time at Mercedes. In four years, he styled the first 3-, 5-, 6- and prototype 7-series cars, as well as the BMW Turbo, an award-winning prototype designed for the 1972 Munich Olympics that was later the basis for the M1. Bracq's designs helped launch BMW from a boutique manufacturer toward the enviable position in the luxury market the company holds today.

After his stint at BMW, Bracq began a 26-year career at Peugeot in 1974, responsible for the interior design on cars such as the 205. True to form, the wildly popular little 205 helped save a struggling Peugeot.

This page, clockwise from upper left: A book jacket design of several Bracq projects; the final rendering of the first W113; a recent giclée print of the Pagoda; The 230SL and a concept design for the R107; and Paul and his wife Alice at home today. Opposite page top and bottom: Bracq concept for the 600 Benzomino against the streamlined locomotive designed by Henry Dreyfus for the NY Central RR 20th Century Limited; and Elegant Alice, accenting the 230SL on its introduction in Paris.

I fell in love with the Pagoda as an 8-year-old child when my uncle bought a 1964 230SL. My neighbor Bob Guckenberger, an advertising copywriter on the Mercedes-Benz account, had Pagodas as well. Ten years later, I was enchanted with the first 3-Series BMW. I decided that one day I would own these beautiful cars.

Discovering that both were styled by the same man was my "a-ha" moment when I understood why these two autos appealed to my senses like no others. I researched Paul Bracq and was astounded at his body of work. Surprisingly, he was not an Automotive Hall of Fame inductee; on behalf of the MBCA, we nominated him in 2006. We are still hoping for his induction one day. As I prepared the nomination, Bracq and I became friends and often spoke, but our first meeting would wait until March 2011.

Books on Bracq are rich in history and photographs, fully illustrating *what* Bracq has accomplished. The time and place tells us *why* he created his automotive styles; I wanted to know the *how*. In the two days I spent with him, Bracq's genius was revealed; the *how*.

As he parked the borrowed Citroën C6 next to his neighbor's Renault Mégane, we began the first discussion on style. I admired the C6, but did not like the rear of the car; there is visual discontinuity and the rear window has strange curves. He agreed, but saved his most vocal musings for the poor Mégane. Grasping for the correct English phrase, he said "visual pollution," pointing out discontinuity in line and form. "This car will not stand the test of time," he said. His wife Alice, an artist herself, contrasted it with the BMW 6 series – a car that still looks fresh 35 years after its introduction. "That car is timeless," she said, and the couple smiled at me. They knew a secret, and I was going to discover it.

At home, Bracq showed me everything in his ever-busy studio. He works a full day, everyday, on a mix of commissioned designs and paintings and his own creative explorations. Often, breakfast is critique time, especially



when son Boris and daughter Isabel are in town. The family will analyze yesterday's work, and suggest changes for today. We talked about design, and with each point he made, Bracq used a prop, opened a book, grabbed a photo or pointed to a model. Theory comes alive when clear examples are within the master's reach.

Creativity never retires, so in spite of his distinguished past, this man is always looking ahead. Commissions come in, new editions are planned and he works with new materials. And while Bracq is constantly creating, he believes true happiness lies in family.

"Every day I wake up next to Alice, and I am a happy man," he said. He is most proud of his son, a rising industrial designer, and his daughter, who works for the House of Armani in Milan.

In June 2011, Bracq was invited to Paris to speak at the opening of the exhibition "L'Art de L'Automobile: Masterpieces from the Ralph Lauren Collection." To reach France's capitol, he and Alice boarded the TGV Atlantique high-speed train in Bordeaux. It is a beautiful train, and Bracq should know – he collaborated on styling the first-generation prototype, the TGV001, in 1968. ☺

The Design Principles of Paul Bracq

I have read all I can find on Paul Bracq, even having articles about him translated from other languages. Bracq himself has kindly provided copies of a selection of his works and summaries of his shows. After spending two days in deep discussion with him, I believe I am beginning to understand his creative process. Bracq has complete mastery of myriad design rules, bending them to his aesthetic vision to create a greater harmony that stands the test of time. As I understand them, these are Bracq's design principles:

- **Mastery of curves, symmetry and continuity**, as well as a measure of French artistic sense. Do not underestimate the latter; yesterday's French curve has been replaced by today's Bézier curve. Both are French, with the Bézier firmly rooted in automotive design. Symmetry has shown to be an essential defining element of beauty. Continuity is paramount; the lack of it creates disturbances Bracq calls "visual pollution." These elements together are why we call a Lockheed Constellation airplane and a Bugatti Atlantic automobile beautiful. It also explains why a Citroen 2CV is called an ugly duck and a DC9 is merely a jet.

- **Ability to move between dimensions.**

Bracq has a rare cognitive skill: he readily moves and translates between two and three dimensions. Bracq envisions something, sketches, draws or paints it in two dimensions, and then sculpts it in three dimensions. This rare skill set helps explain why Bracq was chosen to help re-body the \$20 million Bugatti Royale Esders. Working only with a series of photographs, he guided the reconstruction of this one-off masterpiece, moving repeatedly from drawing to sculpture and back again. The re-bodied car now resides at the Musée Nationale de l'Automobile in Mulhouse, France.

- **Understanding scale and light**, the fifth and sixth dimensions. Understanding the effect of scale is crucial because size can change the behavior of light on an object. For this reason, Bracq creates final renderings at 1:1, refining them from smaller sketches. Equally important is the finesse of light. When working on 1:1 plaster models, Bracq and his team painted the model a flat black. Alternating between black paint and the white plaster allowed the team to study the play of light and shadow on the model's curves and add or subtract mass as needed. Beauty must work in all lighting conditions.

