REVS AT STANFORD

We are less than a week away now from the launch of a major new program at Stanford devoted to the history of automobile design, and a whole lot more.

I am heading the faculty effort with Cliff Nass and Chris Gerdes.

Here is a press report from Andrew Myers in Stanford Engineering.

Anyone who knows my work will recognize that we are launching here an archaeology of the contemporary past with an exploration of the life of an artifact, in this case a remarkable Bentley raced by Eddie Hall in the 1930s and then again in 1950.

In *The Great Gatsby*, it was a murder weapon. In *The Graduate*, it was a symbol of youthful rebellion. In countless songs it has served as a metaphor for everything from sexuality to social status. It has shaped our cities and morphed our history. It has expanded our horizons and determined our politics.

It is the automobile.

No other invention has defined (and redefined) the past century more fully or more profoundly than the automobile, but there is a dearth of scholarly work

focused on the car.

“The automobile is surprisingly under-studied by scholars,” said Professor Clifford Nass, a director of the Revs Program at Stanford, a new multidisciplinary center dedicated solely to the study of cars.

“But this cultural icon is worthy of – and overdue for – deep understanding on every front.”

As Michael Shanks, a Stanford professor of archaeology, puts it: “With the automobile, everyone has a story that deserves to be told.”

The kick-off event

On April 7, during an all-day event called “Celebrating the Automobile,” devotees, experts, collectors, archaeologists, social scientists, engineers, designers, humanists, legal scholars and race-car drivers will gather as Stanford launches the Revs Program to secure a place for the automobile in a broader cultural, historical and technological context.

“Our primary goal for the Revs Program at Stanford is

to create a vital and much-deserved intellectual community around the car as technological and aesthetic artifact and cultural symbol," said Nass.

Stanford was the logical home for the Revs Program, according to Sven Beiker, its executive director and a lecturer at Stanford's School of Engineering. "Over the last few decades, as our cars have grown more complex, more computerized and more connected, Silicon Valley has become increasingly important for automotive innovation," he said.

Stanford is involved in a range of automotive research, from autonomous cars to driver psychology to design, history and culture, he said.

An "auto" biography

The centerpiece of the April 7 kick-off event will be a 1933 Bentley, a sports racer that belonged to English sporting legend Eddie Ramsden Hall. The car is a 4.25-liter, boat-tailed beauty in British racing green that is the envy of car collectors the world over.

Experts in automotive history have been busy tracing

its remarkable history to the last detail – part of the process known at the Revs Program as an “auto-biography,” which explores archaeology, psychology, engineering and design.

“These cars are works of art as well as marvelous and influential machines: they should be examined with the care of any great historical artifact – with exacting attention to detail and thorough documentation,” Nass said. “There is no center, anywhere, doing this breadth and depth of work.”

A hive of activity

The Revs Program will be a hive of interdisciplinary activity for studying every aspect of the automobile, including the seemingly endless stream of literature, film and song.

“Our challenge is to dive deep into a human-centered understanding of the design of the car – an understanding that gives priority to the experiences of people who engineer and drive them, love them and hate them,” Shanks said.

Added Nass: “The automobile is machine and metaphor. It is art. It is at the core of understanding the 20th century and the 21st. The Revs Program at Stanford is inspired by these challenges.”