CAR COLLECTION – CONNOISSEURSHIP AND ARCHAEOLOGY

This is one of a series of comments on the 8th biennial symposium “Connoisseurship and the Collectible Car” held at the Revs Institute for Automotive Research in Naples, Florida in March 2015. [Link]

The symposia at the Revs Institute bring together people passionate about collecting cars, passionate about thinking deeply around questions of conservation and restoration, historical significance, value and attraction, how to keep these machines running. And why this matters to us all.

This year I’m joining a wonderful group of faculty to facilitate the conversations among the 60 collectors here with us in Naples – restoration experts Eddie Berrisford and Paul Russell, trends analyst Jonathan Chavez, car connoisseur, artist, Revs founder Miles Collier, conservator Malcolm Collum (Smithsonian),

chemical engineer Owen Falk (Stanford), auto aficionado and Revs VP Scott George, President of Historic Vehicle Association Mark Gessler, classic car collector and expert David Gooding, champion to the car collector community McKeel Hagerty, media strategist and publisher John Lavine (Northwestern), collector enthusiast, writer and publisher Keith Martin, information designer Peter Mangiafico (Stanford), motor sports enthusiast Nick Mason, motor racing journalist Doug Nye, information scientist Bob Schwarzwalder (Stanford), designer Peter Stevens, auto enthusiast and collector car market specialist David Swig.

What's on the agenda?

As Mark Gessler has put it, we're seeing car collecting evolve from hobby to heritage. Old cars are being taken more seriously than ever.

And with this comes more and more sophistication regarding key questions of what cars to collect, why and how.

This year the symposium has flagged **legacy** as its theme. "Legacy" is about what's left over from the past and what to do with it. This is more neutral concept, with more valency, than "heritage", and instantly raises questions of value – personal, cultural, social, monetary, residing in the object, in what it represents, in how we see an artifact, in what it says to us. Questions of why we should be bothered about old things.

The symposia promote **connoisseurship** as a means of dealing with automotive heritage or legacy. This has really got me thinking. As an archaeologist of the ancient Greek world I was trained as a connoisseur – over nearly ten years becoming intimately familiar with artworks made in Corinth between about 720 and 600 BC, through museum-based research, hands-on work in ceramics, and through technical studies.

I was bothered by how connoisseurship, which developed out of the world of the eighteenth-century antiquary, had come to get a bad name, had come to be associated with esoteric high-cultural taste and interest, not open to the majority of people but quite monopolized by experts. Bernard Berenson, for example, revolutionized the art history of Renaissance painting by his connoisseurship, but became too closely connected with collectors who knew that his opinion of a painting could enormously increase (or decrease), its value on the market. And he took a 5% cut of any advised sale or purchase.

I dealt with connoisseurship of Greek art in my book "Classical Archaeology of Greece" [Link] – showing how we truly need deep knowledge of things like artworks. We need experts in art, material culture, and design history who can act as honest brokers, offering judgement of value (of all kinds) rooted in substantiated expertise. This is connoisseurship:

- deep knowledge of things
- rooted in close attention to making, design, style
- bringing together technical knowledge, social and cultural context, interpretation and analysis of style and form
- involving close reading of the artifact as a document informing us of its makers, consumers, of its times.

So I am offering a couple of talks to explore what this might mean for the car collector.

The first is a one-hour version of my class and forthcoming book about design – I talk through a collection of items, showing how things are always more than objects.

The second is an argument that we're all archaeologists – working on what remains.

Here are some points for the car collector:

- the car is always an assemblage – not just an object, but a bundle of stories, paperwork, contexts, as well as parts
- think less of the dates of cars and more of archaeological time – duration, encounter, presence, care
- a living past requires triage, intervention, engagement, mobilization – animation
- collecting the past is about choices made for the future
- rise to the challenge of the archive – it's who we are and it's always "we"

The world of the car collector, as with the world of the automobile, is no longer just about cars – because the automobile is a mode of modern experience, a way of thinking about things, it's a lens through which to view our world – and in sharp focus.

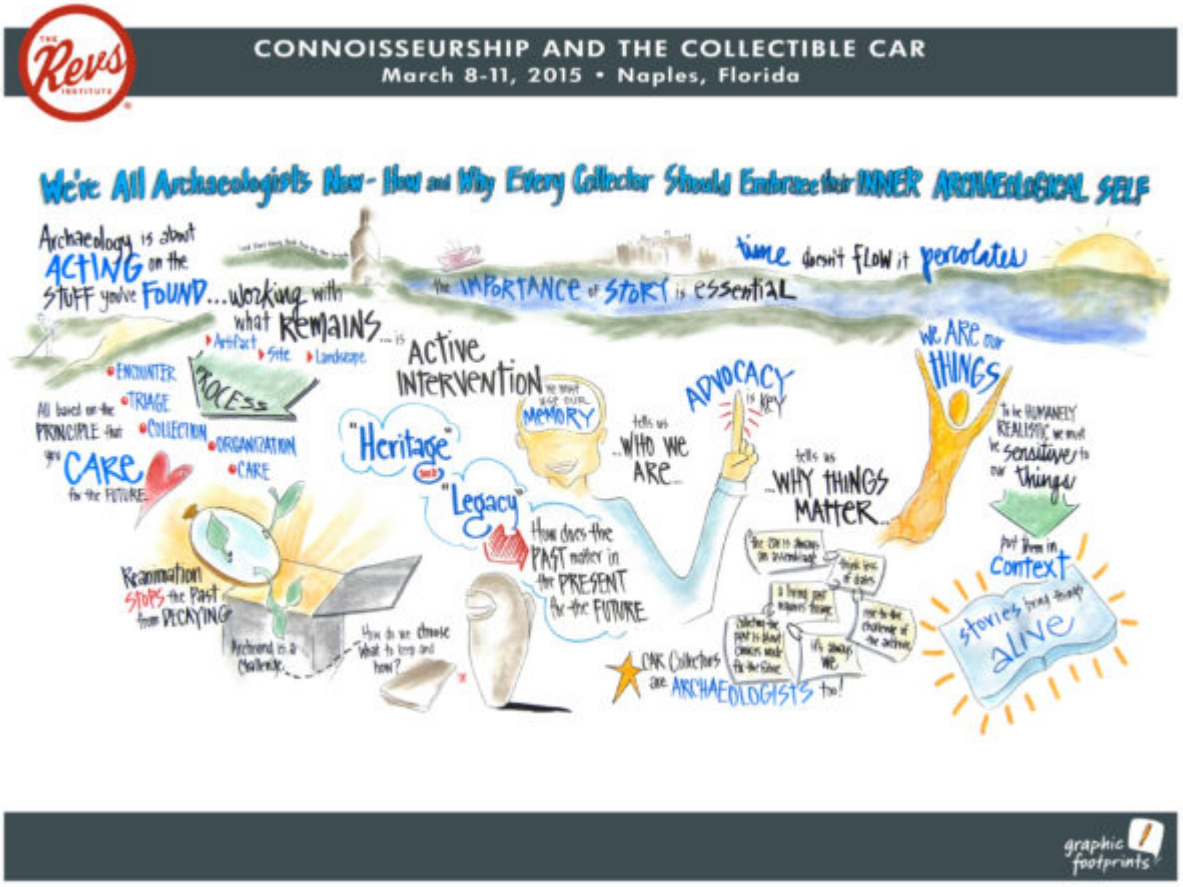
the Legacies of the Past
... Ten Things

Egyptian New Kingdom sculpture and a gravity/vacuum fuel pump for a pre-war Bentley – both appearing in my talk “Ten Things – how and why the legacies of the past matter so much”

Here are the slides for my talk “We’re all archaeologists now – how and why every car collector should embrace their inner archaeological self”

“We’re all archaeologists” – Revs Symposium 2015 from Slideshare

And here are Sara Heppner-Waldston’s superb graphic captures of what I have to say:



How and Why the Legacies of the Past Matter So Much... Ten Things
Michael Shanks
Archaeologists... are INTERESTED in what's LEFT of the PAST
what would it mean to LET GO?
...many ANCIENT ARTIFACTS lose their CONTEXT...
...all the PIECES are part of the BIG PICTURE...
...they are DESIGN HISTORIANS... it's the MARK of an EVENT...
ITEMS... signaled a NATIONAL IDENTITY
Produced by PRE-MODERN HOMO-ERECTUS
...how do we relate to physical things?...
what do we do with the REMAINS of the PAST?
Our CONNECTIONS to the past are LIMITED
Value
history
memory
is the LOSS of SKILLS an issue?
...the FUNCTION implicated in EVERY DAY LIFE affects the way we CONNECT to the object...
piece of ART that STILL WORKS...
Leica
PERSONALIZED TECHNOLOGY is revolutionary
1" DIGITAL CAMERA
it's about the RELATIONSHIPS between past and present...