

# THE AUTOMOBILE AS DOCUMENT



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 skill set of the sophisticated collector**

Miles Collier took us round some of the cars in the collection of the Revs Institute to show how artifacts are kinds of documents that can be subject to close reading.

The case of the 1966/1967 Ford GT40 Mark II-B 1031/1047

The palimpsest of paint on the body of the car witnesses the races of 1966 and 1967.

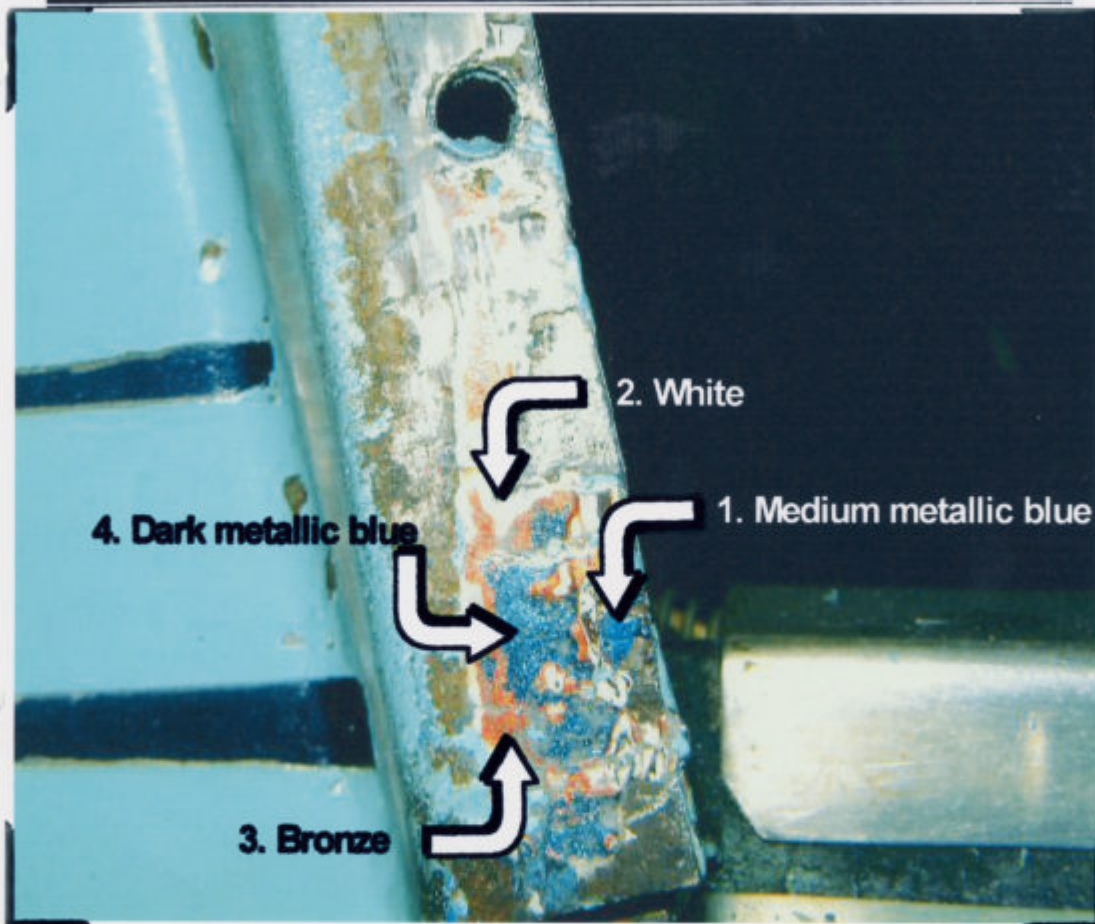
### **The life of the car written in its material fabric**











The final part of the body to check for underlying paint layers was the most important: the "greenhouse". Common sense and history tells us that fiberglass body panels were often changed or replaced... therefore the "greenhouse" would probably carry the most complete "timeline" of paint layers.

So as to minimize any damage to the exterior paint... the weatherstripping on the right side "B" pillar was removed and the pinchweld was examined. The bottom 2 inches of the pinchweld appeared to have a fairly thick layer of paint, so it was scrapped for underlying paint evidence...

The following chronological paint layers were found and photographed for documentation, starting with: medium metallic blue (#2 '66 Sebring?), red primer, white (?), bronze (#5 '67 Daytona), dark metallic blue (#2 '67 Sebring?), gray primer, turquoise blue (post '67 LeMans).

Miles also showed how we might use careful inspection and reading of a vehicle's material form to confirm its history and authenticity. Comparison of minute details of the collection's 1971 Porsche 917K with period photographs confirms its identity and permits us to use the vehicle as an historical source.

This is a kind of source criticism – the close reading of ancient manuscripts to identify authentic historical references and information – close reading and attention to a text to determine whether it’s a reliable witness or not, by seeking internal contradictions or finding corroboration through other sources, for example.

Material traces can be read as signs. From traces and remains we can infer events, and so much more – like a detective investigating a crime, we can piece together evidences (traces and remains) to recreate sequences of events with their protagonists and motivations, even their dreams and emotions.

Of course, if the traces and remains are removed or lost, through restoration, for example, we will no longer be able to read the past in a vehicle.

Our tour of the Revs galleries reminded me of some key features of my discipline of archaeology. The principle that material form is a kind of text is a mainstay of the archaeological sciences.

At the end of the eighteenth century passion for ancient Greece and Rome was expressed by collection, imitation of ancient works of art, and study of literary sources: the collector, the artist, and the philologist were the three symbolic figures of antiquarian curiosity. A key component of the emergence of archaeological science in the middle of the nineteenth century was to bring these three figures and their skills together in a new way – to apply the skills of the reader, the literary/linguistic expert to material artifacts held in collections, and to have this happen in the new academic institutions of modern nation states.

In the field of design, museums like the Victoria and Albert in London inspired the likes of Owen Jones’s extraordinary compilation of the decorative arts – his book “The Grammar of Ornament”. Things can have a structure just like that of the grammar that lies behind language.

And then from the 1970s I was one of many who took this up in a new way – to treat artifacts as communicative media, material culture as text. Things, in their making and form carry information, meaning and messages. Culture is all about communication. I looked at how perfume jars in the early days of the Greek city states of the Mediterranean were signs of their times, conveying messages about their makers and users, beliefs and values, aspirations and plans of the citizens

of these new communities.

Cars do indeed also convey messages to us, of course – about who we are, and what we aspire to be, as well as about their times.

My friend Bjørnar Olsen has written a great book about all this in archaeology – [\[Link\]](#) – taking us further into ideas about how we get on with things in our lives.

And here is Alain Schnapp on Eduard Gerhard, one of the first to make the connection between the world of the collector and philologist, back in 1850:

Alain-Schnapp

Gerhard

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