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1926 ROLLS-ROYCE PHANTOM I "THE PHANTOM OF LOVE"

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This 1926 Rolls-Royce Phantom I, better known as "The Phantom of Love," is a motorcar of transcendent decadence, and the most famous surviving Rolls-Royce after AX 201.

Retrospectively known as the Phantom I, Rolls-Royce introduced their new Phantom, the 45/50hp chassis, in 1925 announcing 'After seven years of experiment and test, in the course of which no promising device had remained untried, the 45/50hp Phantom chassis emerged, and is offered to the public as the most suitable type possible for a mechanically propelled carriage under present-day conditions.' Of course, at this time, quality manufacturers only supplied rolling chassis leaving the client to commission coachwork and in this case, the client was Clarence Warren Gasque.

Gasque was the financial director of the UK division of FW Woolworth retailers and was married to Maud Meacham, heiress to the Woolworths fortune. The company had commissioned a number of motor bodies from the long-established Wolverhampton-based coachbuilder Charles Clark & Son so Gasque enlisted their proprietor, JH Barnett to build a body for his Rolls-Royce chassis with the intention of gifting the car to his wife. Barnett later recalled "As I believe is often the case with Americans, this Gentleman wanted a car for his wife which must be different to anything else, and also better. He would not stipulate what he wanted except that the design must be French, and left everything to me including price." Really Gasque wanted the car to surpass the Silver Ghosts bodied by Clark for fellow American and Woolworth's colleague, Surefire Snow. Whilst Gasque was American born he was of French ancestry and was a proud connoisseur of antique French furniture thus requested a salon to be constructed on chassis number 76 TC in an appropriate style.

It was to be a Brougham style body, fittingly a style steeped in romance itself having been named for Lord Brougham who required a discreet carriage for his visits to the Princess of Wales and categorised by the blind rear quarter. Very few examples of this style, which was truly a survivor from the horse drawn age, were built on Rolls-Royces and those few were ordered by the most fashionable in high society.

Seeking inspiration for this loosely specified commission, Barnett visited the Victoria and Albert Museum and was quite taken with "a very delightful little Sedan Chair which had once belonged to Marie Antoinette, and which had a painted ceiling." Antoinette's life was during the acme of the French Rococo movement which had come in response to the preceding Baroque movement. Unlike in Italy where the Baroque movement had served to exalt the Church, the French movement had enshrined the divine right of the king to rule and Rococo took that even further, celebrating a hedonistic society that prized pleasure, fantasy and individuality. The asymmetrical naturalistic gilt ornamentation, curvilinear shapes, pastel colours and exotic materials that comprise the Phantom of Love's palatial interior are all pillars of the Rococo aesthetic.

With sketches and plans drawn up, Barnett and his foreman set to work on the interior woodwork most of which was made in Wolverhampton although some of the carving was done in London. They crafted the panels and cabinets that were then painted by a Frenchman in a style reminiscent of Angelica Kaufmann whose work came on the tails of the Rococo movement. Barnett recalled "The interior metal fittings were made by Elkingtons to our design... The tapestry was made in Aubusson, and I well remember that it was a very hazardous job to make patterns for this before the job was really started, but as it took over nine months to make we had to get it in hand at an early date. The tapestry cost me over £500." In 1926, £500 would have bought the average UK home!

The resulting design was one of the most wonderfully crafted and exotic bodies ever built and featured highly polished satinwood veneer panelling with painted decoration and oval medallions, a sofa rear seat upholstered in the finest tapestries depicting

flamboyant and romantic Boucher-esque scenes, cherub lighting supports and a bow fronted drinks cabinet more akin to a Rococo commode than a division, which was flanked by concealed, fold down inward-facing occasional seats also upholstered in the rich tapestry. On either side of the interior are elaborate demi-lune vanities that contain 18th century English enamel boxes in fitted compartments and silver gilt bon bon dishes and still adorning the division today are the French omolu clock and porcelain vases filled with gilt metal and enamel flowers – bouquets that would never die symbolising their everlasting love. In honour of Gasque's French origins, Barnett devised a faux coat of arms which was applied to the rear doors. Opera lamps and a bowed dash panel with specially ordered white face instruments in the Sedanca compartment belied the quality hiding inside.

The Phantom of Love was delivered to the Gasques' Hampstead home in April of 1927 and was a wonderful surprise for both Mr and Mrs Gasque. They commemorated the momentous occasion with the photograph shown, in which the rich tapestries and gilding can be seen clearly. The car had taken 10 months to complete, three times the normal time taken by coachbuilders for bodies of a similar style and the bill came to £4,500 making the Phantom of Love by far the most expensive Rolls-Royce of her day.

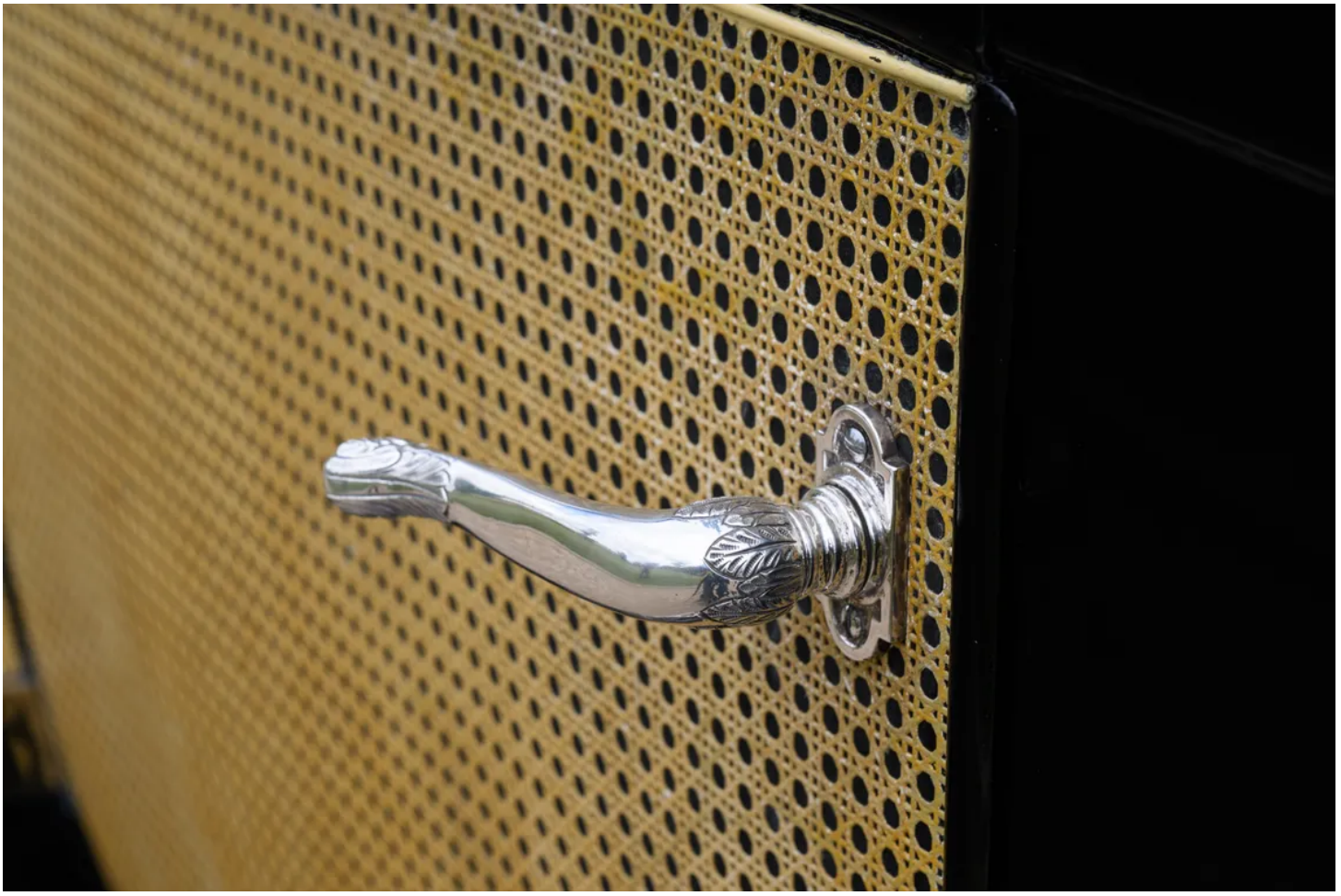
Sadly, Clarence Gasque died just 18 months later and the car was put into storage in 1937 where it remained until 1952, when she passed to another retailing giant Stanley Sears. Sears reportedly paid through the nose for the car but felt that her sombre black exterior didn't match the interior's opulence and had the rear flanks refinished in cane-work, the wheels painted a straw colour, and coach lines applied to the bonnet considerably lightening the Phantom's appearance.

Sears left the UK for Spain in 1983, selling off the bulk of his collection, though he retained the Phantom until 1986 when he sold her to a Japanese collector. She remained in Japan until 2001 when Jack Rich of Pennsylvania bought her through Edward Fallon of Cave Creek Classics in Phoenix, Arizona. During Rich's ownership the Phantom of Love became a regular on the US concours circuit and won many awards, including the Lucius Beebe Trophy at Pebble Beach in 2002. Rich sold the Phantom of Love to Charles Howard who reflected on his ownership in his autobiography, stating "I first saw and coveted 76TC in June 1975 in Kensington Gardens at the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Twenty Ghost Club. At the time the car was owned by Stanley Sears who had a superb collection of Rolls-Royces... I was most surprised in 2002 when the car resurfaced in America, having been discovered in a Japanese used car lot by an astute Japanese dealer with a Californian partner. I was able to buy the Phantom one in of my more complicated transactions and was thrilled when I got it home to England." Howard refurbished the Phantom, re-fitting the black wheel disks, and sold her to Rolls-Royce specialists P&A Wood who exhibited the car at Retromobile in 2004.

The Phantom of Love is on par with any truly valuable work of applied art. She has an extremely well-documented history, having been extensively described and illustrated in numerous books and magazine articles about the marque and her accompanying Rolls-Royce factory records. An item of extreme rarity and the highest quality, she is indeed unique in the truest meaning of the word. Remaining in largely untouched, original condition but having recently been re-gilt, she presents fantastically remaining in superb driving order.

Fiskens are proud alongside Jonathan Wood to have found this piece of automotive art a "loving" new home in a significant British collection.

SOLD








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YE 939




























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