

A
star
is





reborn

This recently revived coachbuilt beauty made the final four at the Pebble Beach concours in August

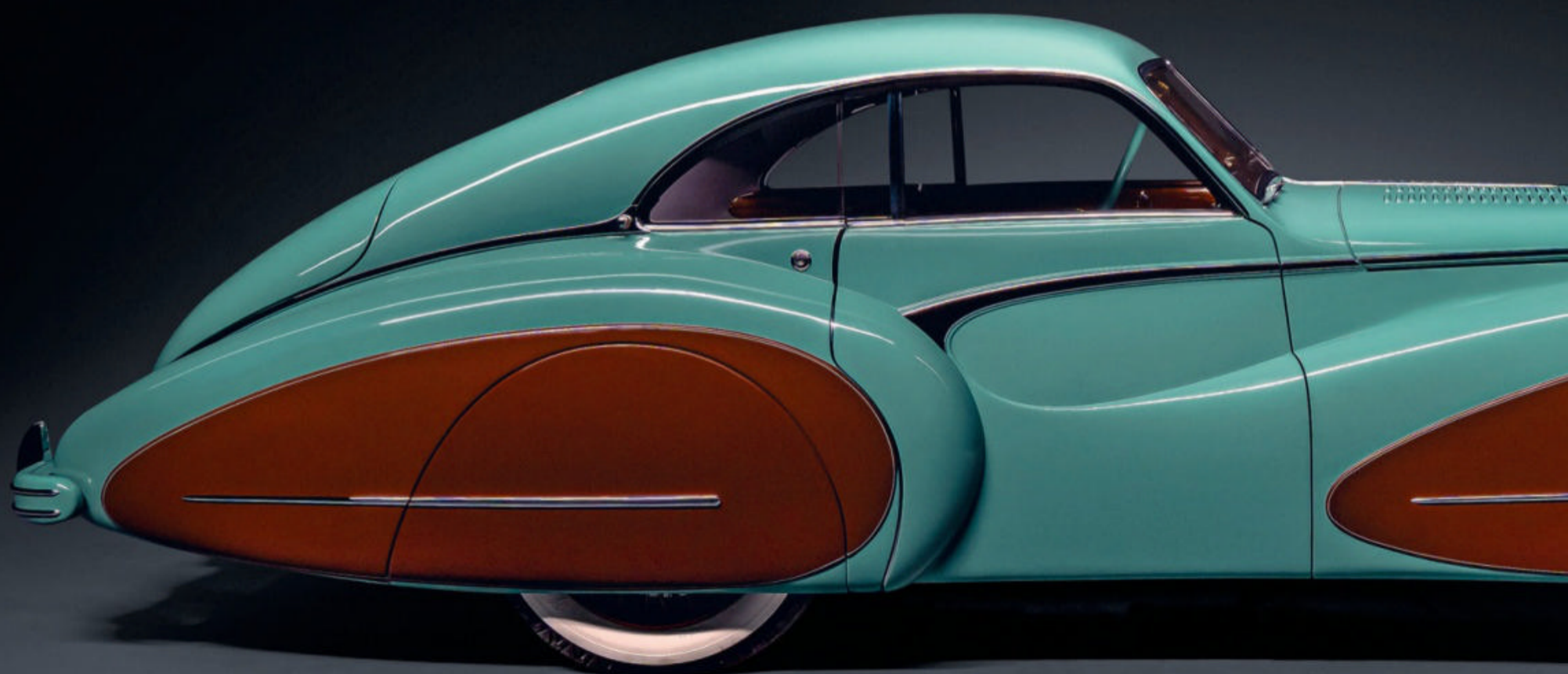
Words **Peter M Larsen** Photography **Petr Michalek**

The 35th Salon de l'Automobile opened its doors in the centre of Paris on 7 October 1948. The location was the Grand Palais, close to the Place de la Concorde and sandwiched between the Champs-Élysées and the river Seine. With its grandiose illumination, the venue was a beacon of light in a world of post-war austerity. Yet despite the widespread hardship, the great coachbuilders were out in force: Figoni et Falaschi, Pourtout, Franay, Chapron and others showed exquisite machinery that all wanted, but hardly any could afford.

Prominently displayed on the stand of the Carrosserie de Luxe Jacques Saoutchik was the undisputed star of the Salon: Talbot-Lago T26 Grand Sport no.110101, the first GS chassis made. The voluptuous Saoutchik body it wore was a first showing, a world premiere of its design. It was a dazzling fastback coupé that would become the 'signature' body style for the Grand Sport chassis. A total of six of these coupés were built, no two completely alike.

The story begins in late 1942. Paris was occupied by the Wehrmacht, and the Talbot-Lago factory had been commandeered to manufacture for the Nazi war machine. With German defeat a small but growing hope on the horizon, Anthony Lago and his chief engineer Carlo Marchetti surreptitiously set about developing a new powerful six-cylinder engine for the post-war market. Reliability and power were assured by a seven-main-bearing crank, wet sump, an iron block and a capacity of 4482cc. This equated to 26CV, or fiscal horsepower, hence the T26 model designation.

Twin camshafts, one either side of the block, operated large overhead valves (inclined at an efficient 90° to one another) via short pushrods and rockers. The single spark-plug was in the centre of the hemispherical combustion chamber; to the casual observer, the engine looked like a DOHC design. This top end provided some of the advantages of a chain- or gear-driven overhead-cam configuration without incurring high development and production costs, which was always a problem for Talbot. The large valves gave good breathing, while the light



reciprocating parts made the engine relatively free-revving, if rather short of the dizzying heights of the V12 Ferraris that came just a few years later.

Equipped with two Zénith-Stromberg carburetors and a compression ratio of 7:1, the engine's output was 170bhp at 4200rpm, which made the big Talbot six one of the most powerful passenger car motors in the world at the time. Given the company's shoestring budget, it was a remarkable achievement for Lago and Marchetti, and this great engine would remain unchanged in essence until the end of Talbot six-cylinder production in 1954.

In October 1946, Talbot-Lago had only a small stand behind the huge Peugeot layout at the Paris Salon. The brand-new Lago Record model was shown, a four/five-passenger *grande routière* available in four body styles, including a lovely convertible. However, the real jewel on the stand was its magnificent T26 engine. Not only was it lovely to look at, with its polished valve covers featuring prominent Art Deco-style TALBOT-LAGO script, it also gave exceptional torque and made the Lago Record one of the most capable passenger cars on the market. It was the start of something remarkable.

‘The Grand Sport remained a true sports car chassis, more akin to a Bugatti T57S than a grande routière’



Pebble Beach star 1948 Talbot-Lago Grand Sport





In October of the following year, the Lago Grand Sport chassis made its debut at the 1947 Paris Salon, fitted with a tweaked T26 engine that was conservatively rated at 190bhp. The wet sump and iron block were carried over from the Record but, like the Talbot Grand Prix engines, the cylinders were sleeved, the cylinder head was aluminium, compression was raised to 7.9:1 and three capped Zénith-Stromberg carburettors were present *sans* air filter.

The chassis itself was a continuation of the legendary pre-war T150 C-SS model and shared virtually all of its specification with the exception of the new powerplant. It was a very exclusive roadgoing sports chassis for the carriage trade, as close as technically possible in its conception, feel and drivability to the Grand Prix cars. Concise sports car handling was a must. This necessitated a short 2.65m wheelbase that would also ensure the car was very fast indeed on the road and competitive on circuits for certain disciplines. Consequently, like the T150 C-SS, the T26 Grand Sport was conceived strictly as a two-seater.

Making a virtue of financial necessity, Anthony Lago took the direct route. He simply mounted his revised engine, a Wilson pre-selector gearbox and GP-derived suspension components on the pre-war T150 C-SS chassis rails with few modifications. It worked: the complete Grand Sport chassis with all its mechanicals and ancillaries weighed a mere 850kg dry compared with the 1280kg of the Record family car chassis. Even full of fluids, the entire assembly still came in at just about a ton.

But it was a layout rooted in pre-war technology: the engine, gearbox, firewall and suspension components were bolted directly onto the chassis. The front suspension remained independent with a transverse leaf spring. The live rear axle was suspended by half-elliptic leaf springs with their mounts on top of the chassis rails. As with the T150 C-SS, there was a very short propshaft between the engine and the gearbox, followed by another short propshaft, and the chassis was available only in right-hand drive.

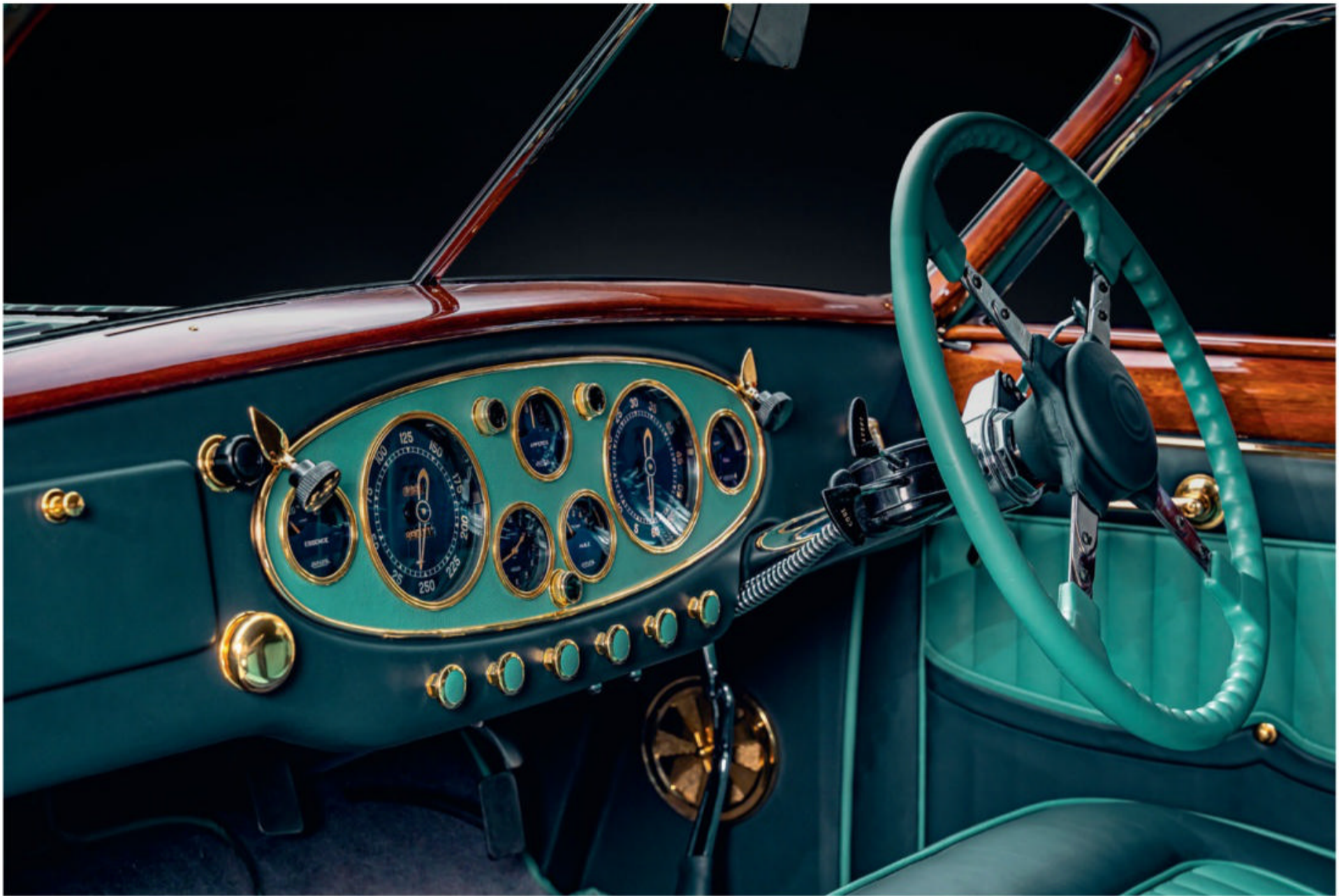
This short-wheelbase T26 Grand Sport therefore remained a true sports car chassis in the pre-war idiom, more akin to a Bugatti Type 57S than to a luxurious *grande routière* such as the Delahaye Type 135 or the Delage D8-120. It was a chassis aimed at a moneyed, sporting clientele that wanted a fast daily driver and would not be averse to entering rally and racing events as privateers, with the odd appearance at a concours d'élégance thrown in for good measure. It was a profoundly bespoke and outrageously exclusive motor car for the genuinely sophisticated driver who could appreciate its classic pedigree and aesthetics.

In retrospect it is evident that, although the target group may have existed, the market did not. While great fortunes had been lost during the war, just as many had been made. But times had changed. A cold financial climate had dawned,

1948 Talbot-Lago T26 Grand Sport

Engine 4482cc twin-cam OHV straight-six, three Zénith-Stromberg carburettors **Power** 190bhp @ 4200rpm
Torque 251lb ft @ 3000rpm **Transmission** Four-speed Wilson pre-selector, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack and pinion
Suspension Front: double wishbones, transverse leaf spring, hydraulic dampers. Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, hydraulic dampers **Brakes** Drums **Weight** 1350kg
Top speed 124mph **0-60mph** 8.7sec

Pebble Beach star 1948 Talbot-Lago Grand Sport



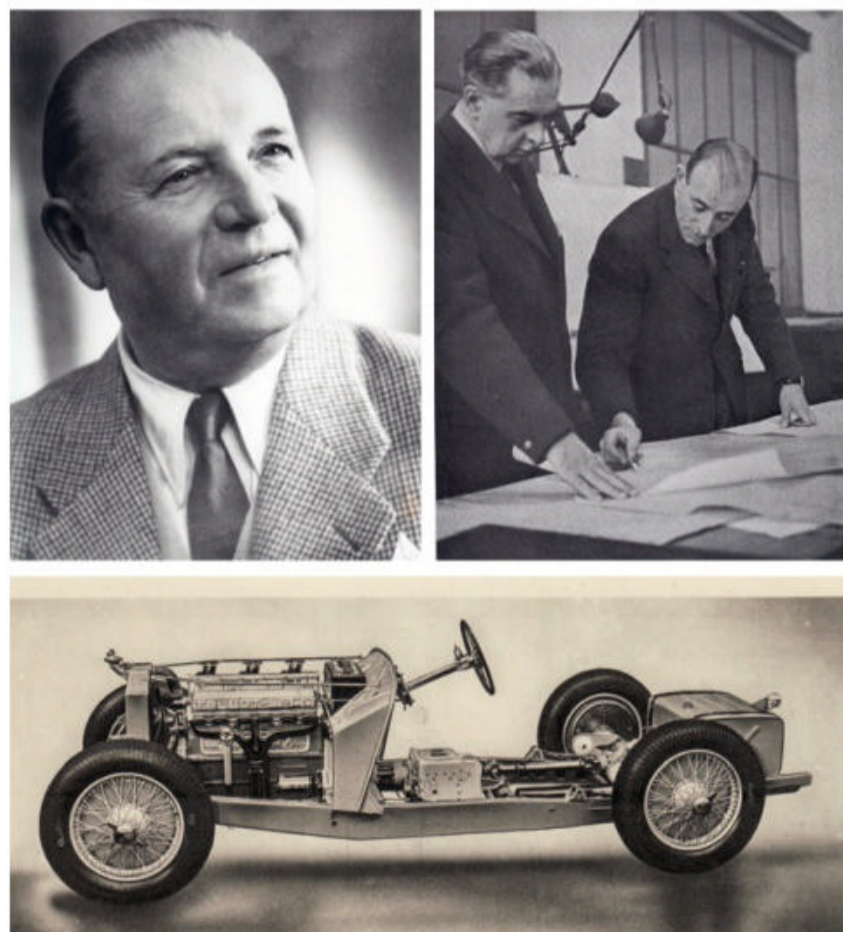
Clockwise, from above

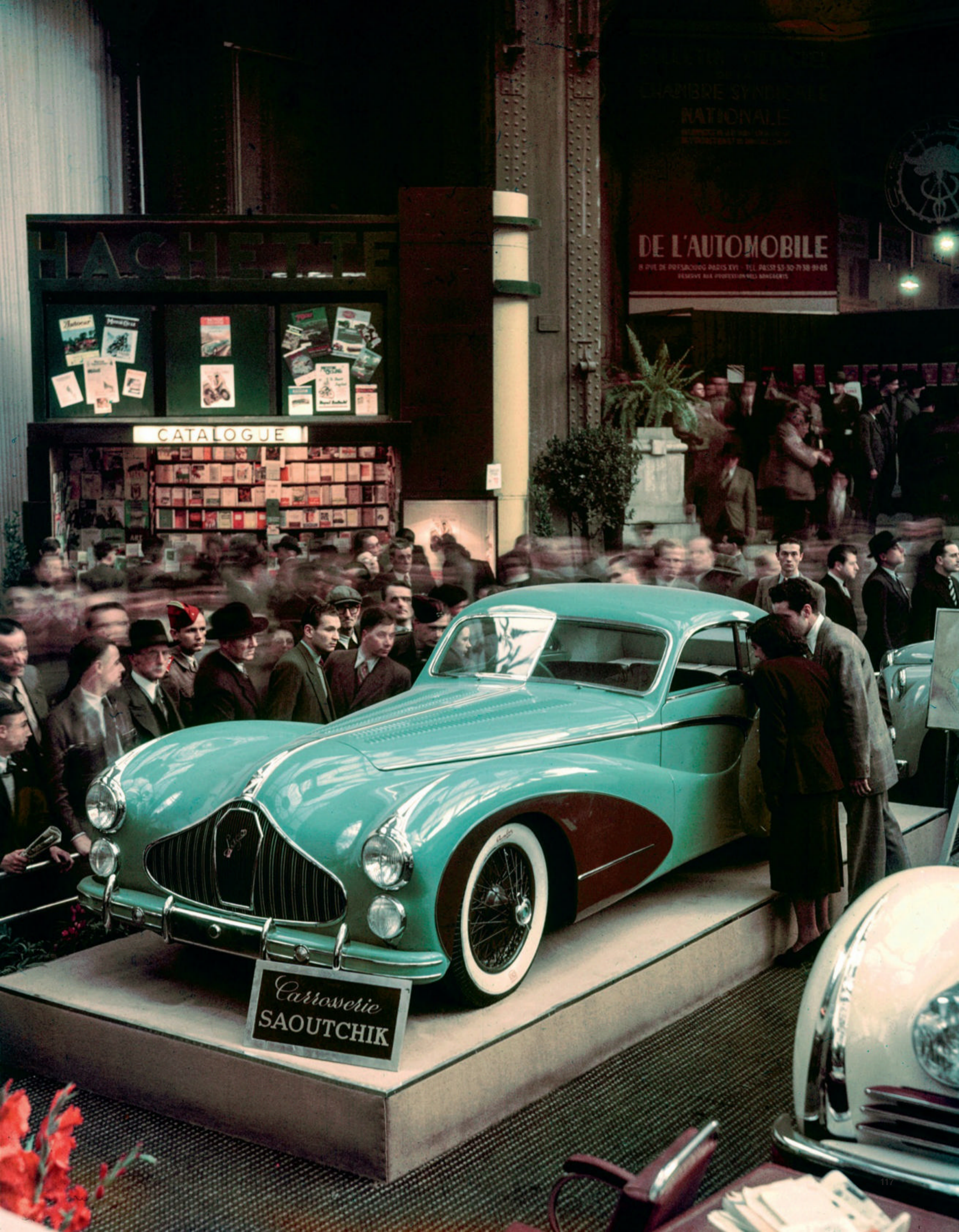
Gold-plated instrument bezels; 110101 at the Paris Salon in 1947; T26 Grand Sport chassis as shown in brochure; Jacques Saoutchik in 1947; Anthony Lago and Carlo Marchetti.

the hunt for collaborators and war criminals was in full swing, and few were willing to draw attention to their gains, ill-gotten or otherwise.

And the staggering price did not help. By a considerable margin, the Talbot-Lago Grand Sport was the most expensive domestic chassis available in post-war France, if not the world, and even if one were to factor out the reluctance of people of means to display their wealth, the T26 GS was so pricey that hardly anyone could afford it, no matter what. As a result, 32 or 33 Grand Sport chassis were manufactured from 1948 to 1952, at least seven of which (possibly nine) were sold directly for export in spite of being RHD-only. In five years, somewhere between 23 and 25 Grand Sports were sold into a French domestic market of 40million people. It could hardly be called a sales success.

Chassis 110101 was the first Grand Sport chassis delivered to the trade, leaving the Talbot factory in the Paris suburb of Suresnes on 10 July 1948 as a *chassis nu*, or bare chassis, for the Saoutchik works in nearby Neuilly-sur-





FACILE



CATALOGUE



CHAMBRE SYNDICALE
NATIONALE
DE L'AUTOMOBILE
18, RUE DE PONTAIGNY PARIS XVI - TEL. PARIS 53-30-71 30-81-05
RESERVE AUX PROFESSIONNELS BOURGEOIS

Carrosserie
SAOUTCHIK

Pebble Beach star 1948 Talbot-Lago Grand Sport

Seine. That same day the chassis was registered to its first owner, the man who had placed the order and decided to have Saoutchik execute a body for him: Jean-Louis Robert Bogey of Levallois-Perret. How convenient to be able to use local craftsmen when ordering what was possibly the most spectacular car built in post-war France, as if you were merely renovating your house!

Bogey was 40 years old when he indulged himself with one of the most expensive cars money could buy. In 1956 and 1957 he filed patents in France and the US for 'Sinker Heads of Rectilinear Knitting Machines'. Perhaps he was an inventor or a manufacturer, but he was clearly a man of considerable means. He died in 1990 in Neuilly-sur-Seine.

Details of the dealings between Bogey and the Carrosserie Saoutchik are not known, but it can be assumed that

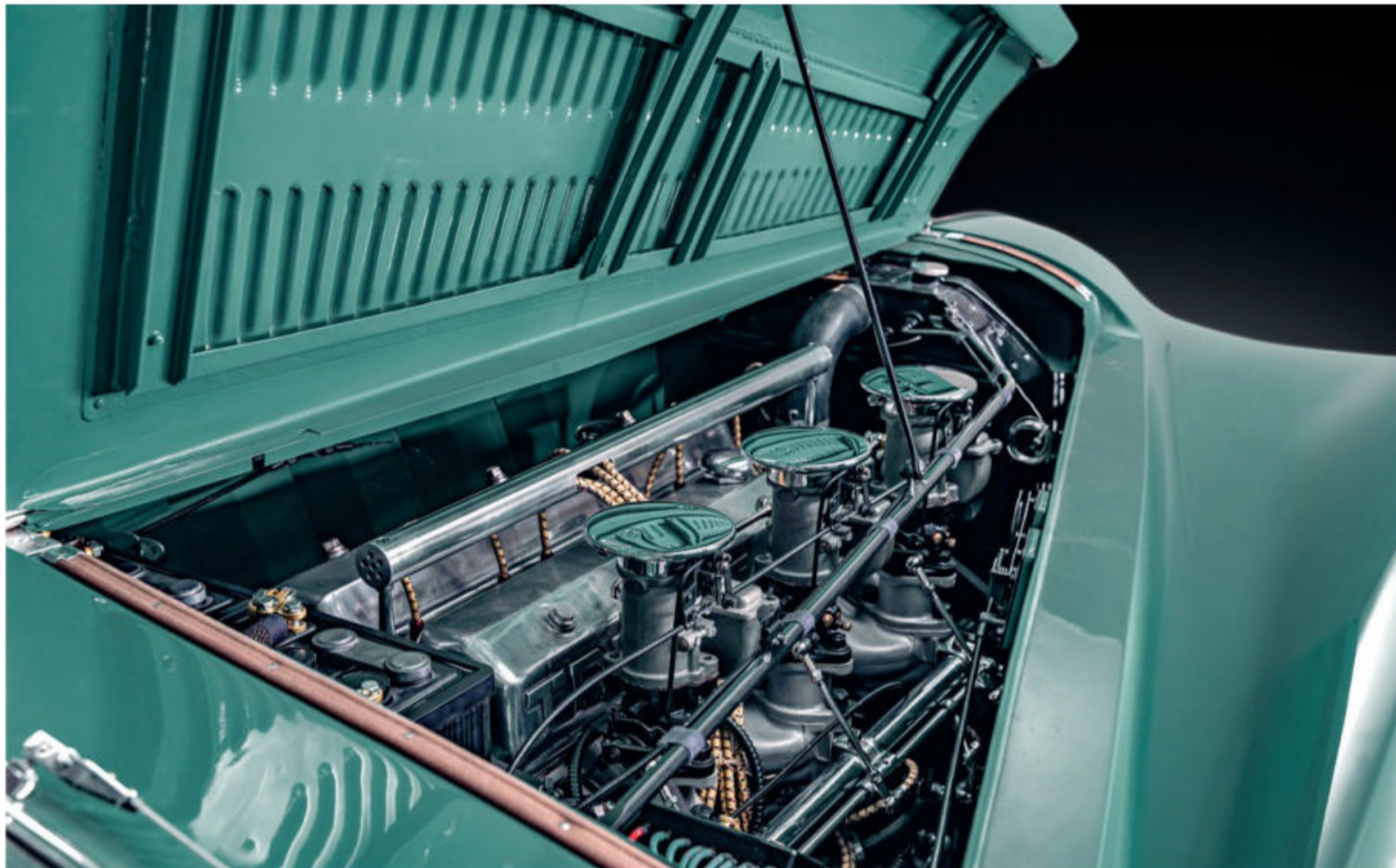
Saoutchik presented several designs for approval, and whether Bogey received a favourable price for allowing Saoutchik to display the finished car at the Paris Salon and later at the Brussels Motor Show in January 1950, or was merely content with his new plaything being the centre of attention, will likely never be cleared up.

For chassis 110101, Saoutchik created a fastback coupé with astonishing proportions, a masterpiece, a true *chef-d'oeuvre* of the coachbuilder's art. The design synthesised an elaborate interactive flow of alluring, gorgeous yet delicate curves – as close to the essence of automobile-as-sculpture as any carrosserie has conceived in the history of automotive style. The Saoutchik fastback coupé is justly regarded as a crowning achievement of post-war French car design, and is one of the most sensational bodies ever created in France.



This page and opposite

Grand Sport had a comprehensive restoration to original spec and period-correct colours, carried out in Czechia by Chropynska; engine looks like a DOHC and is a twin-cam – but via pushrods.



***‘As with the complex
and sinuous curvatures of the
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harmony from chaos’***

Its unique livery was no less audacious, a daring paint scheme that blended a pastel mint green body colour with chocolate brown fender panels, matching brown wire wheels and a grille with alternating green and brown vertical stripes. It was trimmed in dark blue and azure leather, with instrument bezels and fixtures plated in 24-carat gold. One would have thought it would all clash horrendously. Not so. As with the complex and sinuous curvatures of the metalwork, Saoutchik had achieved harmony from chaos.

For the duration of the 1948 show, multitudes passed by and were swept off their feet by the almost carnal voluptuousness of this Saoutchik Talbot-Lago, as their drab post-war austerity garments provided a grim counterpoint, all the while highlighting that, despite the years of privation inflicted by the war, refinement, elegance and sophistication remained alive and well in the world. It was unquestionably the star of the Salon.

Bogey kept 110101 until the spring of 1956. On 25 May that year it was registered in Paris to Jean Foulon, but by November 1961 chassis 110101 had crossed the Pond to a new owner in the State of Washington, repainted in a single colour, likely dark blue.

Sometime around 1965, Tom Owens of Grafton, West Virginia, owned a Saoutchik fastback coupé that is virtually certain to have been 110101. The next owner was Edsel Pfabe of Painesville, Ohio, likely from the early 1970s. Exactly when 110101 stopped being a runner is not known, but sometime in 1976 or 1977 the car was discovered in an Ohio barn by Marvin Newman and Bill Ziegenbein, who operated Prestige Motors in Madison Heights, Michigan.


Newman was another Ohio collector. While Newman was aware that he had become the owner of a Paris show car, when he gave 110101 its first restoration it was of a kind in which questions of originality and authenticity did not carry the weight they do today. So when the car was shown at Hershey in 1979, it had been kitted out in two intense shades of ‘French blue’, a livery that would stick for the next 38 years. The original dark blue and azure interior was leather-painted in a single dark blue shade to match the greater part of the exterior.

The one thing to be thankful for is that the car was at least saved for posterity and not allowed to sit on its axles, sinking into the ground and oblivion in a remote barn in the American Corn Belt.

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In the early 1980s, 110101 was acquired by the late collector Jacques Harguindeguy, aka 'Frenchy', of Walnut Creek, California, and was subsequently shown by him at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elégance. The car then went to the Blackhawk Collection before being sold to the late Peter Mullin and his wife Merle in 1990. The Mullins continued to show 110101 at the Pebble Beach Concours as well as at other leading events, while also having it on display at the Mullin Automotive Museum in Oxnard, California, which closed its doors for the final time on 10 February 2024 before the bulk of the collection was broken up.

In 2017, chassis 110101 was bought out of the Mullin Collection, and a seven-year restoration was embarked upon by Chropynska that finished in 2024. The result can be admired in these images. All the grace, refinement and style that eclipsed the 1948 Paris Salon is present and accounted for. This Talbot-Lago truly is a star reborn. 



*Jacques Saoutchik
Maitre Carrossier: 1948
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