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EXCAVATING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AUTOMOBILE: A CONVERSATION WITH MILES COLLIER



Source: the author's collection

With no photo-op during the interview, this image of Mr. Collier was cropped from a picture of all the honorary judges at the 2012 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, where he has served (as of today) for more than 20 years.

It all came about rather unexpectedly with a call from *Kandace Hawkinson* asking if I was going to be at Amelia Island for the concours. When the conversation ended I was set to interview *Miles Collier* at the Ritz-Carlton at 4pm on March 3rd in connection with the release of his new book, *The Archaeological Automobile*.

I'm pleased to introduce *Miles C. Collier* by first mentioning that he was the 2010 recipient of the SAH's highest award: Friend of Automotive History. Most will know that he is the founder of the Revs Institute, a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit, working museum and library (see: revsinstitute.org), and so much more that to go on would wholly displace what follows.

In preparation for the interview I read the new book, noting that there are many parts I want to go back and re-read to digest them further. I also kept in mind his earlier chapter contribution appearing in *The Stewardship of Historically Important Automobiles* (see *SAHJ* #261 p. 10) to help calibrate his progression of thought over the last decade since that book was published.

We sat in an open room off the hotel lobby, which was fine for conversation at proximity, but it wreaked havoc for my recording with the pronounced fidelity of the

background rumble of others and an amplified acoustic guitar player adding ambiance with his rendition of standards, like *Speak Softly, Love* (theme from *The Godfather*). Yet, all went well by the measure of the hour and forty-five minutes we conversed... but our limited space only allows a small bit of it to appear here to dovetail with the book review on page 10.

> On writing (mostly summarized):

The actual writing of the book was the fairly easy part, but the physical production of the book was the hardest part. You imagine handing off the manuscript to the sound of choir music and a few months later all these books appear free of errors. The work is in the copy editing, making sure the footnotes, for example, are as correct as possible that the footnotes are right, etc.

> From *Stewardship* to the new book (in the area of replicas):

"The piece in *Stewardship* is a very short piece... the evolution in my thinking towards replicas in some ways is one of degree, and in some ways it's actually fairly radical, so how could those two things exist at the same time. What I say in the *Stewardship* book is that for many applications that people out there in the world want to use old cars for, would rather use a replica... in thinking about that subsequently and ultimately writing *The Archaeological Automobile* the conclusion I came to is for many uses that people want to put historical automobiles to, replica automobiles *absolutely* make more sense [*then uttered rhetorically*]—I don't know why you're not doing that.

"So essentially what I've done is I've gone from saying (y'know—kind-of slightly snarky) 'use a replica if you think that way'... to now having considered it with some care I actually surprised myself when I came out on the other side and say, *hot damn*, for a whole host of applications a replica is by far a better thing to use than a historically significant artifact. Now that raises another epistemological question, which is: how do you know it's real, especially if it has been restored to the standards that people do today?

"So here's my thinking: under certain applications, replicas are better than

historical cars. This applies under certain fairly narrow circumstances, one of those circumstances is with respect to original cars where there are very few of them. I'm not talking of a production model where there were 3,000 or 30,000 cars, or maybe even 300 cars... those are sufficient numbers where nothing terrible is going to happen if you roll one up into a ball at Goodwood or something like that.

"On the other hand, those limited number of absolutely spectacular automobiles that are in amazing original condition (narrowing down the field I'm talking about)... those cars, you probably don't want to use in high risk, high wear-and-tear, high consumption environments like vintage racing.

"Here's another part of the criterion that absolutely has to apply: if you're going to make a replica, it has to be dead-nuts exactly like the real car was, including all the performance factors—no funny shocks, no funny brakes... you have to build it no faster, no different."

For a substantial part of the discussion, Miles covered aspects of the book's central theme of looking at an automobile through the lens of an archaeological mindset. A car, like everything else, exhibits the effects and consumption that its journey through time places on it, making it unique—beyond however rare or commonplace it was when first manufactured. The book's discussions of the many branching issues that arise from applying the archaeological mindset brings about engaging fresh perspectives on how we live with the reality of automobiles as culturally valuable artifacts.

The book persuades, but any "take-away" is in the hands of the reader. When asked what future observable manifestations he would most like to see come from the perspectives championed in the book, Miles asserted that, ideally, he would like the book to be the standard text on the subject, not only on old cars, but on "active matter"—a term used dozens of times in the book to describe those artifacts that can only be understood when experienced while functioning (not when on static display).

—R. Verdés

Book Reviews

The Archaeological Automobile: Understanding and Living with Historical Automobiles

by Miles C. Collier

Collier AutoMedia LLC (2022)

CollierAutoMedia.com/

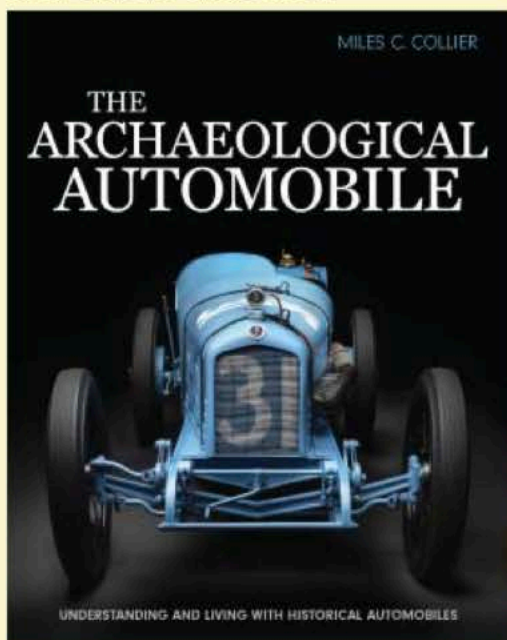
392 pages, 8¾" x 11½" foil embossed hardcover

123 b/w (includes endpapers) & 159 color images, chapter endnotes, bibliography, illustration credits and index

Price: \$149.95

ISBN-10: 1735645109

ISBN-13: 978-1735645100



It seems likely that the thinking that led to Miles C. Collier writing and publishing this book *The Archaeological Automobile* likely traces at least back to the 2013-published *The Stewardship of Historically Important Automobiles* from the (Dr. Fred) Simeone Automotive Foundation and to which Miles Collier and L. Scott George, whom Collier describes as “my superb curator and collections manager,” each contributed a chapter. (Refer to *SAH Journal* 261 March/April 2013) *The Stewardship* book advocated for preservation whenever and wherever possible rather than restoration.

With this book Collier advocates that when it is deemed restoration is absolutely

necessary, it be viewed, and thus approached, from a different perspective, an archaeological one. The National Geographic Society defines archaeology as the study of human past using material remains. Further, if the object being studied is portable, it is “usually called an artifact.” Accordingly, Collier makes the case that the automobile is a particularly “rich artifact” having been a “social and cultural change agent” as well as a disruptive technology from which we can learn “about the future implications of other radically transformative technologies.”

Once Collier has established “The Archaeological Mindset,” as he titles one of his chapters, he explains how that applies to the restorations he and his staff undertake. He does note that his approach currently means his cars “don’t win many actual awards and would probably sell for less as their bling level is lacking in various areas” for the restorations he oversees have “documented fidelity to original build quality that includes the appropriate overspray, paint runs, and crude workmanship in hidden places” just as they did when originally constructed, thus more accurately reflecting their own and humankind’s history.

The book is the deeply contemplated effort of a noted collector. If I could have but one wish for this book it is if or when a subsequent printing is considered that serious thought be given to producing it in a more affordable form making the message it carries available to a greater, rather than fewer, number across a wider spectrum of the automotive enthusiast realm.

In the closing pages Collier makes what he heads “A Call for Action” writing that he hopes for “a base of many minds, many hands, many connections, and many resources. My idea is for a worldwide, not-for-profit, information and support hub with no ulterior agenda.”

When he writes that “Nothing like this exists anywhere,” I can’t help but wonder if maybe it does although not as a single global entity. Isn’t that “information and support hub” and the preservation of the material and knowledge of the artifacts as well as their care and use and their cultural influences what every transportation-oriented historical association, including this one we call Society of Automotive Historians, are all about? Could it be that pioneering better, stronger interfaces and communications between existing societies and institutions could go a long way toward fulfilling your call, Mr. Collier?

—Helen V Hutchings

Ken Miles: The Shelby American Years

by Dave Friedman

Car Tech (2021)

CarTechBooks.com/

240 pages, 11" x 8½" softcover

304 b/w & 46 color images, no index

ISBN: 978 1 61325 597 1

Price: \$38.95

ISBN-10: 1613255977

ISBN-13: 978-1613255971

—and—

Ken Miles

by Art Evans

Enthusiast Books (2019)

ertelgiftshop.com/motorsports/ken-miles

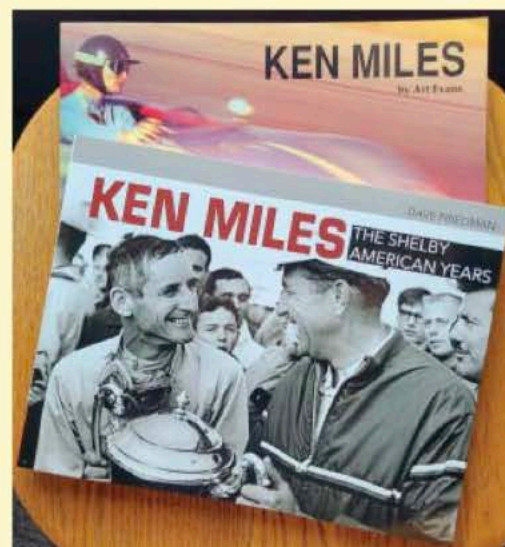
124 pages, 11" x 8½" softcover

148 b/w images, appendix, no index

Price: \$34.95

ISBN-10: 1583883762

ISBN-13: 978-1583883761



There are two books titled *Ken Miles* from different publishers and writers. Yet, to truly learn of Ken Miles’ complete story as well as of his racing prowess and career, you truly need both books published not quite twenty years apart. A quick search indicates the older one is as readily available as the newer.

The 2004-published book was written and assembled by the late Art Evans (see p. 14) and published by his own Photo Data Research, LLC, then again in 2019 by Enthusiast Books. Evans was a fellow road-racer with Miles, once Ken, with wife Mollie and son Peter, all UK-born, had arrived in the US. Evans writes some words but also relies on words and images from others to relate Miles’ life (1918 to 1966) and career.

The newer book by photographer *Dave Friedman* begins when he and Miles were each hired by Carroll Shelby; Dave to be the full-time Shelby American team photographer and Miles carrying the title Competi-