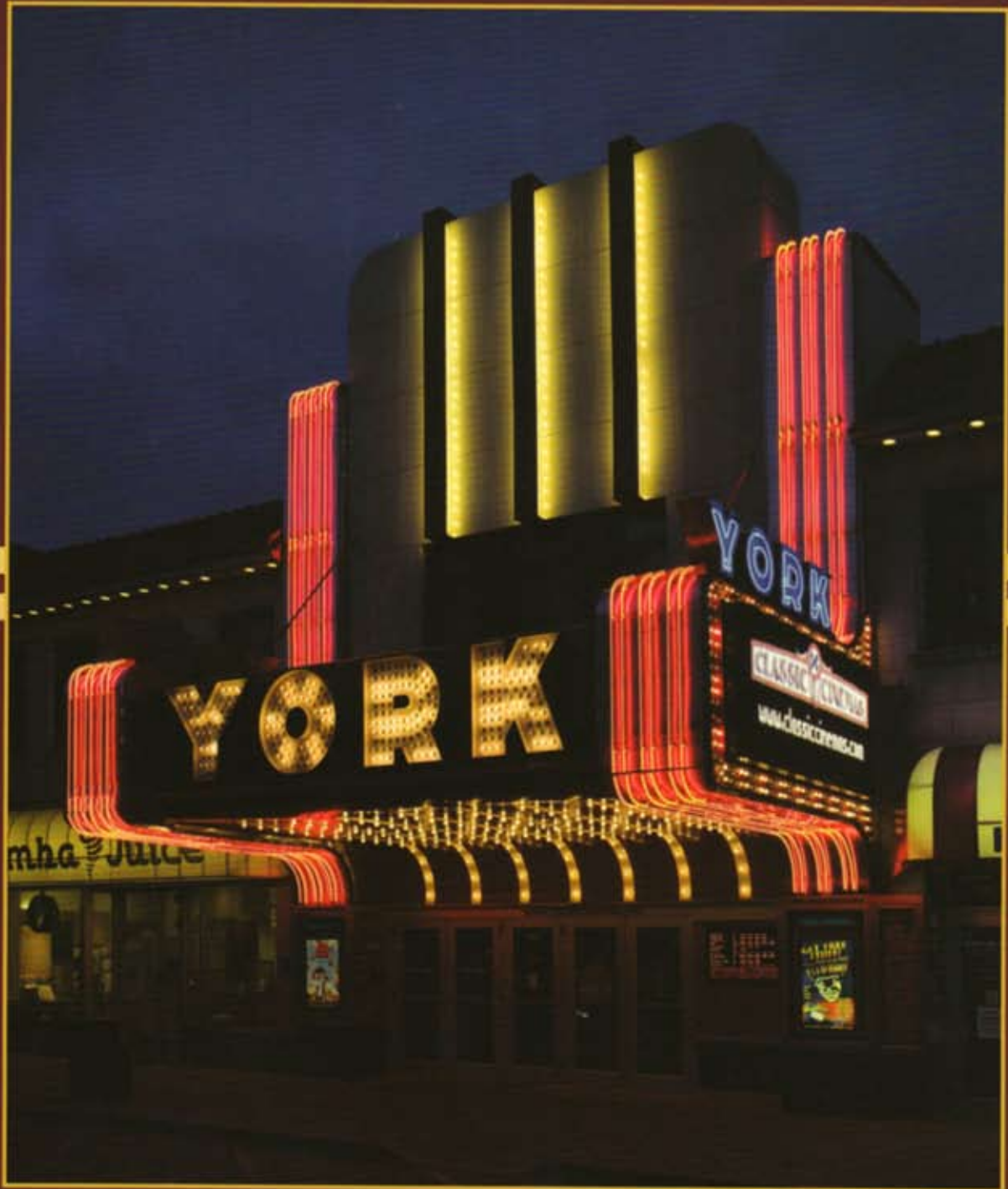




# CHICAGO ART DECO SOCIETY

Magazine



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1937 Delage D8-120 AéroSport Coupe. Photo taken outside the Paris Salon, October 1937. Archives of Les Amis de Delage.

Body of AéroSport under restoration. Wood structure reconstructed just as original, 2011.

Restored AéroSport body work nearing completion, February 2012. Cooper Technica.

## MILLICENT ROGERS' REMARKABLE 1937 DELAGE D8-120 AEROSPORT

By David Cooper

Millicent Rogers' third husband, Ronald Balcom, loved cars. In the twenty-two months following their January 1936 marriage, the couple bought a number of automobiles, including a Mercedes 500K, a BMW, a Steyr, a Ford woody wagon, and a Cord, housing them at their home in St. Anton in the Austrian Alps and in Vienna, which they visited frequently. In October 1937, Ronald set his sights on one of the most beautiful touring cars in the world, the Delage D8-120 AéroSport.

In the 1930s, the advent of high-speed roadways, new concepts of aerodynamics, and technological advancements converged to create a demand for luxury travel by private automobile. The finest mechanical designers of the day turned their attention and creativity to satisfying this market. In the United States, great distances between cities and limited public transportation fostered the growth of inexpensive mass-produced cars.

The situation in Europe before the war was quite different, with cars limited to the wealthy. Although not widely known today, at that time many of the finest cars were built in France by Bugatti, Talbot, Delahaye, and Delage. Clients would purchase the top models and bring in a coachbuilder to custom design and build the bodies. The rivalry

that developed among coachbuilders led to the creation of extraordinary limited-production cars that combined elegant streamlined design, inventive state-of-the-art engineering, and superb detailed craftsmanship.

Letourneur & Marchand was one of the great French coachbuilders, renowned for their superb workmanship and streamlined design ideas, including the long hood, elegant flowing fenders, and pillar-less construction featured on the D8-120 AéroSport Coupe. The AéroSport was born when Louis Delage asked Letourneur & Marchand to create a new coupe design, even more aerodynamic and striking than prior designs, to be built on the powerful new D8-120 chassis. Letourneur & Marchand's AéroSport Coupe was formally introduced to great acclaim at the October 1936 Paris Salon, the most important car show in Europe. Orders were taken and limited production began.

For the next year, in preparation for the 1937 Paris Salon, Letourneur & Marchand evolved their original design considerably, incorporating Delage's new larger 4.7 liter engine along with mechanical improvements. The new car was more elegant and graceful, with headlights integrated into the fenders, a lower roofline, and rear fenders terminating in sleek boat tails. This was the car that Ronald Balcom took his wife Millicent Rogers to see in October 1937.

The AéroSport, displayed on a raised platform in the center of the Delage booth, was one of the stars of the 1937 Salon. The car was painted silver-grey metallic and had a dark-grey leather interior, complemented with fine woods. However, it was one of the world's most expensive automobiles, and Millicent was hesitant. She and Ronald went back to their home in St. Anton for Christmas to discuss the purchase and eventually decided to buy the Delage.

Millicent had a remarkable eye for design. For years she was one of the world's best-dressed women, and worked closely with fashion designers like Elsa Schiaparelli, Mainbocher, and Charles James to create her own original look. She was often photographed in *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. She fabricated original jewelry designs and decorated her houses with an eclectic mix of fine art, folk art, sculpture, and Biedermeier furniture. So when she decided to purchase



# AN ICONIC AUTOMOBILE AND THE STYLE ICON WHO OWNED IT

*Cooper Technica, Inc. is currently restoring the 1937 Delage D8-120 Aérospout Coupe once owned by Standard Oil heiress Millicent Rogers. In these two articles, David Cooper, president of Cooper Technica, profiles the history and design of this amazing automobile, and Cherie Burns, author of a recently published biography of Rogers, examines the life and loves of this fascinating woman.*

the Delage, Millicent had the car returned to Letourneur & Marchand for aesthetic alterations to reflect her taste and sense of design.

In the spring of 1938, Millicent and her family visited Letourneur & Marchand's atelier to explain the changes she wanted. Her son Arturo vividly remembers his mother using her lipstick to draw a new shape on the rear fender sheet metal. The effect was to make the rear fender look longer and sleeker, complementing the shape of the front. The car's designers liked the change, and subsequent Aérospouts incorporated the same design. Millicent had the car repainted in a dark grey metallic and the interior changed to a dark red calfskin. Finally, she had the radiator cap moved into the engine bay to make the radiator shell shape cleaner.

By the time the car was completed, the Nazis had taken over Austria and Millicent chose to leave the car in Paris. Anticipating the war, Millicent traveled to the United States in the fall of 1938 and purchased Claremont Manor, a Virginia estate. She shipped the Delage to Virginia in 1939. Cooper Technica recently obtained two fuzzy photographs of the car taken shortly after it arrived. These photos were included on a roll of negatives taken in 1939 and had been sitting in Millicent's family's archives since then.

When Millicent and Balcom divorced in 1941, she kept the Delage. She was able to drive it during the war because Claremont Manor was a working farm and therefore exempt from fuel rationing. In 1949 the car had an engine failure. Because no one in Virginia was able to repair the exotic automobile, it was shipped to New York. Eventually the car was repaired and sold to a buyer in France. Years later he sold it to an American collector who started restoration work, but the project was halted for financial reasons, and the Delage was offered for sale.

Cooper Technica purchased the car in 2008 and began a full restoration. Our first step was to track its provenance and history, which took several years. Our research involved travel to various cities in the United States and Europe and interviews with surviving members of Millicent's family, Ronald Balcom's second wife Lulu Vanderbilt, auto historians, and the archivist of the Les Amis de Delage

in France. We even contacted the grandson of Marcel Letourneur and obtained original drawings of the car.

The wood structure under the car's sheet metal skin needed complete restoration.

Some of the original body parts were missing and had to be re-fabricated. With a small sample of the original leather, we were able to order leather made to the 1930 specifications using the original vegetable dyes. The interior wood trim is being refinished with the same Moroccan thuya wood veneer and walnut window trim. Restoration is scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2012.



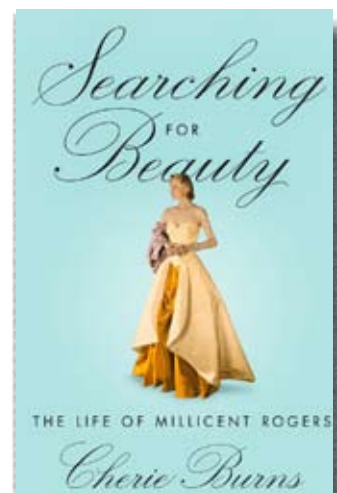
*Scale model by Cooper Technica of Millicent Rogers' Aérospout showing the changes she made to the rear fender design. Made from resin using a 3D printing process. Cooper Technica, 2011.*

## THE GLITTERING LIFE OF MILLICENT ROGERS

*By Cherie Burns*

Millicent Rogers, the subject of the biography *Searching for Beauty* (St. Martin's Press, 2011), is best remembered as the Standard Oil heiress and fashion icon who became a trendsetter in the 1930s while living in Europe. She continued to influence the fashion world until her death in 1953.

Millicent, born in 1902, was the granddaughter of Henry Huttleston Rogers, one of John D. Rockefeller's original partners in Standard Oil. In 1909, her father inherited seventy-five million dollars. Millicent grew up like a princess in the Gilded Age of New York society until, like a heroine in an Edith Wharton novel, she eloped in 1924 with an impoverished Austrian count. Although the marriage was quickly dismantled by her father, Millicent continued to live primarily in Europe with two more consecutive husbands



# AN ICONIC AUTOMOBILE AND THE STYLE ICON WHO OWNED IT



until the outbreak of World War II. During her European years she began to make her mark in the world of fashion.

Her particular style began to attract attention when she returned from Europe after living in Austria where she had carefully observed Tyrolean fashions—the dirndls, aprons, and hats of the local townspeople. She was exacting enough to sketch the nineteenth-century costumes that she saw in the museums of Innsbruck and then ask the St. Anton village tailor to replicate them per her instructions—and modifications—when she got home. She commissioned local seamstresses to fashion jackets, dresses, peasant-style blouses, quilted skirts, and hats that she mixed with the high fashions of Paris designers like Elsa Schiaparelli and Mainbocher.

Millicent's Tyrolian variations were widely noted when she returned to the United States in 1938, and fashion editors who had noticed her only when she appeared in debutante and society news now snapped to

attention. She incorporated a peasant style into high fashion and became a sensation. "Byzantinely beautiful, independent in taste, she has a real sixth sense for clothes," *Vogue* purred over her in the January 1939 issue, adding that she was "as *soignee* on skis as she is in her town clothes."

Perhaps the most audacious assertion of her distinctly original style occurred when she bought the luxury Delage Aérospot Coupe she had seen on display at the Paris Salon of 1937 for her third husband, Ronald Balcom. Balcom coveted the car the moment he saw it and appealed to Millicent, who held the purse strings, to buy it. As she did with her couturiers, she added a few modifications (see David Cooper's article for more about these modifications).

In 1930 Millicent established what was perhaps her most important relationship in the world of fashion when she met Charles James, the American designer who would put American couture on par with the leading Parisians of the day. Millicent is remembered as James' patron and muse, and together they spurred each other to great heights. She wore and tweaked his sculpted ball gowns with their lavish fabrics

and inventive colors. The two seemed to complement and feed off of each other, helping to create the "New Look" for modern women after World War II.

Millicent, whose flair and creativity went beyond sheer buying power, also directed and designed jewelry for the master jewelers of her day. She sent one of her first designs to Rene Boivin in Paris in the thirties. Boivin's wife, Jeanne Poiret Boivin, a designer herself, deviated from the popular Art Deco styles of the time to create large pieces with exotic themes. Her designs appealed to and influenced Millicent, whose later puffy hearts, whimsies, and "barbaric" bracelets brought her attention and collaborative relationships with the American masters Paul Flato and Fulco Verdura.

Along with other American expatriates, Millicent returned to the United States when Paris fell to the Nazis in 1940. In Washington, D.C. she pitched into the war effort by heading up the Medical Surgical and Relief Committee that collected supplies for British field hospitals. Ever style-conscious, she bought and refurbished Claremont Manor, a seventeenth-century Tidewater estate on the south shore of the James River in Surry, Virginia. Her beloved Watteau, Fragonard, and Boucher drawings, *gros-point* rugs, crystal lusters and girandoles, and much-admired Biedermeier furniture were brought from Paris. She commissioned the designer Mainbocher to create ornate upholstered dresses to wear in her new pastoral surroundings. Although she and Balcom had divorced in 1941, Millicent was seldom lonely. Her lovers in wartime Washington included Roald Dahl, Ian Fleming, and James Forrestal, undersecretary of the Navy.

Soon after the war's end Rogers was introduced to Clark Gable, one of America's leading film stars. They embarked on a love affair that took Rogers to Hollywood, where she soon realized she was playing second fiddle to Gable's other love interests. To mend her broken heart, her friends, the actress Janet Gaynor and Gaynor's husband, couturier Gilbert Adrian, took her to New Mexico, where Rogers fell madly in love with the landscape and beauty. "Why has no one ever told me about this?" she gasped after arriving in Taos and looking onto the Rio Grande Valley.

In Taos, Rogers recreated her life and style yet again. The broomstick skirts and short jackets worn by Indian women on Taos Pueblo and neighboring reservations were the new primitive fashion elements that she incorporated into her personal style, and in so doing, introduced to the American public. Her friend, Diana Vreeland, editor of *Harper's Bazaar*, featured Millicent in the magazine, her arms covered in silver Indian pawn jewelry and turquoise. Her combination of rustic elements with fine fabrics and details created an enduring look that became a cornerstone of classic American southwestern style. ■

Top: Millicent Rogers, 1926.

Millicent Rogers and Ronald Balcom, St. Anton, Austria, 1937. Archive of Willi Salm.