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Classic Beauty

ELEGANTLY WOVEN INTO DESIGN HISTORY, THE FERRARI 250 GT SWB CALIFORNIA SPIDER IS A TRIUMPH OF THE MOTORING WORLD

WORDS RICHARD HOLT



Enzo Ferrari cared about winning races, not beauty contests. The single-minded genius insisted: ‘I don’t sell cars; I sell engines. The cars I throw in for free since something has to hold the engines in.’ The point was clear, and it was one that Il Commendatore returned to throughout his life. Well, for someone who claimed not to care too much about how his cars looked, he certainly made some unbelievably magnificent ones, none more so than the stunning 1961 Ferrari 250 GT SWB California Spider pictured here.

Thankfully for the car-loving world at large, although Signor Ferrari only cared about winning races, he was also Italian and therefore surrounded by the finest coachbuilders in the world. So, while he concentrated all his efforts on making cars that could outperform their rivals on the track, he employed people to make bodies so beautiful that they could break hearts without firing a single cylinder.

As a pure object of beauty the California is hard to beat. This particular example was bought new by the renowned Italian architect and designer Gianfranco Frattini in 1961. While in his ownership it had a cinematic star turn with a cameo in the cult 1963 film *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. The renowned Vittorio De Sica directed this Oscar-winning film of comic tales of love and sex in three Italian cities. In Milan, the well-heeled but frustrated Anna, played by Sophia Loren, tries to escape boredom through escapades with Marcello Mastroianni’s struggling, handsome journalist – until he prangs her Rolls-Royce during a drive out of the city. Stuck on the roadside, Anna flags down a car – which just happens to be this very Ferrari – whose driver rescues her from being stranded with both a car and a man who were going nowhere.

But do not let this romantic role blind you to the seriousness that lies beneath the exquisite curves. Yes, the car is beautiful, but Enzo Ferrari was very much in charge, and beneath the bodywork he was making the cars exactly as he wanted them. A combination of factors help explain why the California – particularly a short-wheelbase, covered-headlight example like this one – is among the most desirable cars in the world.

At heart this is a racing car, with the V12 Colombo engine that was key to Ferrari’s dominance of sports car racing. As America’s



From top Sofia Loren on the road in the California Spider in *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Scenes from the 1963 movie. A promotional poster for the picture, which also starred Marcello Mastroianni



Top left Ferrari specialist DK Engineering led the full car restoration. **Top right** The California's impeccably stylish interior. **Below** A robust engine gave it the edge over other road cars of the day



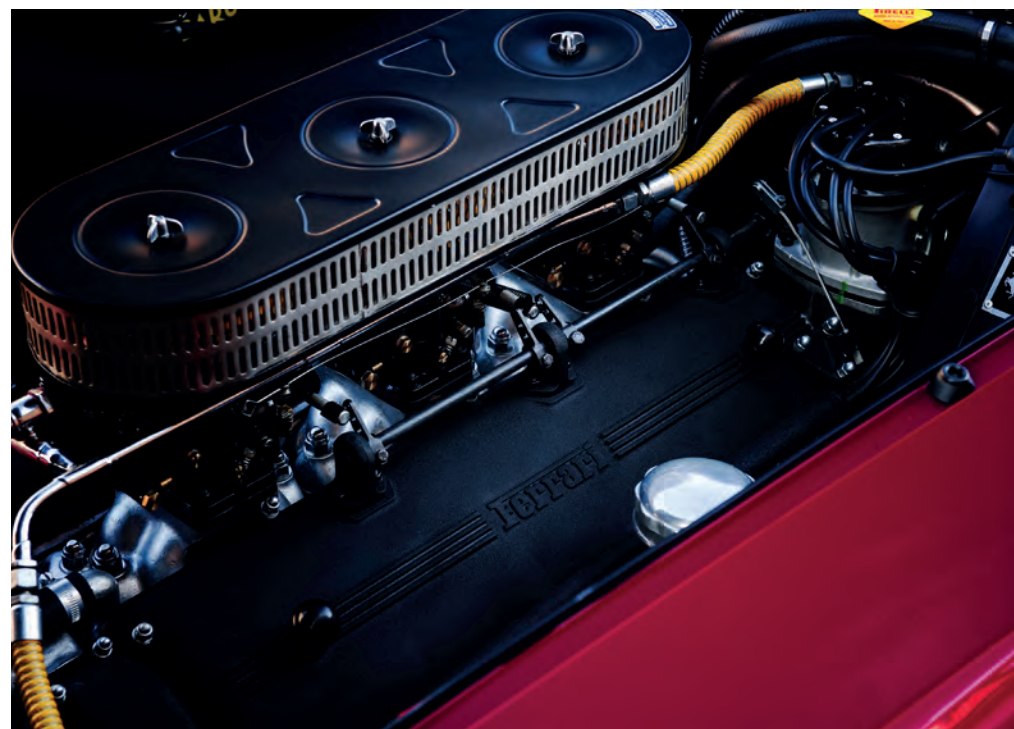
All 250 GTs are rightly highly prized as *thoroughbreds* from a golden era for Ferrari. The California is seen as the very best of its kind

post-war wealth created a swelling luxury car market, the US importers Luigi Chinetti and John von Neumann saw the opportunity to create a little something especially for them. They persuaded Enzo Ferrari that there was the need for a newly designed open-topped body that would allow West Coast buyers to enjoy the sunshine and the glorious V12 engine at the same time.

The renowned coachbuilder Scaglietti was employed to make the body, and when the first examples of the California rolled off the production line in 1958, it was clear that a star had been born. It was the very last word in glamour, and it became an object of passion for petrol-headed Hollywood royalty James Coburn, as well as the French film star Alain Delon, who was photographed in his California along with A-list passengers that included co-stars Shirley MacLaine and Jane Fonda.

Just over 100 Californias were built. Most sought-after are the later cars like this one, which benefitted from technical upgrades and a shortened chassis that made it handle better, as well as a subtle style redesign that made it arguably even more handsome.

When this California was bought by Laurence Graff at auction in 2016 it had been with the previous owner for 30 years. It is now at the end of a full, two-year restoration undertaken by the Ferrari specialist DK Engineering in Buckinghamshire. The process is particularly painstaking due to the fact that the coachbuilders



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would work by hand and eye, so no two cars were exactly alike when they left the factory. During the restoration, everything is stripped and rebuilt, leaving the car as close to new condition as is possible without compromising originality. At the request of Laurence Graff, the original colours have been changed from Rosso Cina over black leather to Rosso Rubino with dark tan leather. The result is as close to road car perfection as it is possible to imagine.

'I grew up around these cars and for me this really is the ultimate convertible Ferrari,' says DK Engineering's James Cottingham. 'So it was a huge privilege to be entrusted with restoring such a wonderful car. We are in a unique position of having the expertise to manage every stage of this process, from assisting in the purchase of the car to overseeing the meticulous restoration. The best part is the moment when you hand the car over to the client. Whenever I see this car in the future I will be hugely proud.'

Although Enzo Ferrari only had eyes for racing, he understood the necessity of selling road cars to fund the races. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, Ferrari dominated the motorsport world. Normally, car companies decided to go racing and start from there. But Enzo wanted to run a race team and road cars were just a by-product. This meant incredibly capable road cars from the offset.

In the modern era, the criticism often levelled at fast road cars is that they are too 'track-focused' and if you drive them over broken

surfaces they will shake you so hard that important bits of you will break off. Not so with the California, which was born in a time when racing cars had to cope with tracks more like the pot-holed streets of Britain than the smooth circuits of the modern era.

The race cars were built in a way that was all about reliability, longevity and the ability to be hardworking cars. The race cars had to deal with rough surfaces, and that carried through to the road cars – and they do ride very well in the modern environment.

Enzo Ferrari's genius lay in managing the best people to carry out each part of the production process, using the terrific engines they built in-house, then chassis built by specialists like Gilco and Vaccari, and then choosing from coachbuilders with names that still resonate today, like Touring, Scaglietti and Pininfarina.

But the motor is at the core of everything, the mellifluously screaming power at the heart of the car. If it is just the heart that you are after, however, there are much more accessible cars than the California. There are Ferraris of the era that share similar underpinnings, but can be bought for a fraction of the price.

All 250 GTs are rightly highly prized as thoroughbreds from a golden era for Ferrari. The California is seen as the very best of its kind, valued many times more than other Ferrari 250 road cars largely due to its desirable body – which is not at all bad for something that was thrown in for free.

Below Laurence Graff's restored California, now in Rosso Rubino

