

# Car of the Century? Ford's Model T, of course

**By Richard A. Wright**

The 20th Century was the Century of the Car. Right? So it follows that a whole lot of people would be anxious to select the most influential car of the past 100 years. And that's just what happened this past weekend in Las Vegas where the Ford Model T was declared the Car of the Century.

The Model T was selected for the significant innovation it represented in its day, as well as its design and its impact on the auto industry, and indeed, society itself.

"The COTC award represents the hard work of many people from all over the world," said Fred van der Vlugt, chairman of the board of the Global Automotive Elections Foundation. "We salute the Ford Model T for winning this award."

The Model T won with 742 points in the final voting. Closest runnerup was the Mini, which got 617 points. Then came the Citroen DS, 567 points; Volkswagen Beetle, 521 points, and Porsche 911, 303 points.



**The Model T Ford was built from 1909 to 1927, the same basic cars, but running improvements were**

**made. The first Model T was priced at \$850, the price dropped as low as \$265 in 1923. This 1926 model is still the same old Model T, but had such amenities as electric starter, headlights, electric ignition with generator and battery.**

Four years ago, a group of more than 100 automotive experts --journalists, museum curators, historians and "observers" -- decided to sort through all the thousands of nameplates that have existed to determine which single motor vehicle was the most significant, the most influential, the most memorable: The Car of the Century.

That's a no-brainer, right? The Ford Model T put not just America but the whole world on wheels. Henry Ford changed America to market his cars. He made it an everyday necessity by developing mass production techniques that would allow him to bring the price down to where anyone could afford a Ford.

And if that's not enough, he instituted the \$5 day, paying his workers twice what other industrialists paid, to make sure auto workers at least could afford a Ford. He set America on the path to the middle class.



**This '51 Volkswagen was one of the earliest Beetles to come into the United States. The car was designed in the mid-'30s, but production did not begin until 1946, after World War II. It continues to the present day (in Mexico and Brazil), although the bulk of production in Europe ended in 1979.**

He began to internationalize Ford Motor Co. early, establishing Ford of Canada in 1904 in Windsor. He began building cars in England in 1911, Brazil in 1919, in Germany and Australia in 1925. The Model T put not just American on wheels, but to a great extent, the whole world.

Many years, Ford accounted for more than half of American car production. A couple years he accounted for half the world production.

But that's too easy, too glib an answer. The idea of selecting a car of the century was advanced about 10 years ago and quickly developed into a global affair.



**This British Motor Corp. Mini, obviously for sale, was displayed at a Carnival of Cars. The greatest design of Alec Issigonis, it was popular for racing because of its road-hugging capabilities and sprightly performance. It influenced small-car design because of its transverse-mounted engine and front-wheel allowing for a larger passenger compartment.**

A network of respected individuals and organizations from within the automotive industry was established. One hundred and thirty-five automotive journalists representing 32 countries formed a professional jury.

A total of 716 cars were recommended for consideration. From them, the experts came up with a list of 100 cars and light trucks. Members of the public all over the world whittled that down to 25 by voting for their top 10 favorites from among the 100 pre-elected candidates. Voting was done through television, print media exhibitions and via the Internet.

From that 25, just five finalists were selected: Ford Model T, Volkswagen Beetle, Austin/Morris/BMC Mini, Porsche 911 and Citroen DS.

The Car of the Century organization is headquartered in Amsterdam and the jury is heavy in European journalists, which could explain the presence of four European cars among the five finalists. It also explains some of the nominees in other categories.



**Citroën DS was a sensation when it was introduced in 1955, with its pressurized self-leveling gas and oil suspension system which also powered brakes, steering, clutch and semi-automatic transmission.**



The international jury, which included 83 Europeans and 13 Americans, also voted on a "Gallery of Fame" to honor the people that built the auto industry over the last 100 years. Categories and finalists were:

**ENGINEERS:** Karl Benz, Rudolph Diesel, Henry Ford I, Alec Issigonis and Ferdinand Porsche.

**DESIGNERS:** Nuccio Bertone, Jean Bugatti, Giorgetto Giugiaro, Battista Pininfarina and Bruno Sacco.

**ENTREPRENEURS:** Giovanni Agnelli Sr., Enzo Ferrari, Henry Ford I, Soichiro Honda and Sergio Pininfarina.

**EXECUTIVES:** Giovanni Agnelli, Jr., Henry Ford II, Lee Iacocca, Bob Lutz, and Ferdinand Piech.

Giorgetto Giugiaro was chosen as the most important Car Designer of the Century. He is best known to Americans as the designer of the Eagle Premier. His best designs were for the Alfa Romeo Alfasud, the original Volkswagen Golf and Scirocco, Fiat Uno, Lotus Esprit and Lancia Delta.



**This 1972 Citroën SM is a later variation of the Citroën DS, a radically modern car with self-leveling suspension and full power.**

Better known and a better choice is Ferdinand Porsche, voted the most significant Car Engineer of the Century. He designed not only the Porsche which bears his name, but the Volkswagen, the most popular American car ever built in Germany.

Henry Ford was selected as the Car Entrepreneur of the Century. He was cited for achievement in three disciplines: that of a true motor car pioneer, entrepreneur and industrial visionary. He perfected his ideas for an automobile in 1893, founded his own company in 1903 and introduced the Model T Ford in 1908.

The Model T would become the world's best-selling car because of Ford's major breakthrough -- the introduction of a moving assembly line in 1913. It enabled Ford to cut its prices in half and double his workers' pay. After a production run of over 15 million Model T Fords, Ford surprised the world with the advanced Model A and the first inexpensive V-8 car before stepping down in 1945.

Ferdinand Piech was named the Car Executive of the Century. Grandson of Ferdinand Porsche, Piech played significant roles in the Porsche and Audi companies before taking control of Volkswagen group.

Among the car finalists, the Volkswagen Beetle is a selection few American journalists would be likely to disagree with. The VW Beetle was owned by more people around the world -- and was a best-seller here in the United States -- than any other car in history. Designed by Ferdinand Porsche in the early '30s, it survived in its basic form until the late '70s. Then a couple years ago, Volkswagen brought out a new Beetle in response to demand generated by a show car at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.



**This 1983 Porsche 911 Carrera is more powerful and faster than the first 911 introduced in 1963, but the body is hanged only superficially. It is one of the most recognizable cars in the world, having changed but little in 37 years.**

To a lesser extent, most would also agree that Alec Issigonis's Mini, based on his very successful Morris Minor, was a very important and innovative car that influenced generations of small cars to come.

Introduced in 1959, the Mini featured a transversely mounted engine with front-wheel drive, leaving more of the car for use in the passenger compartment. This configuration became the norm for generations of small cars.

What is the Citroen DS's claim to fame that would result in it being ranked third in the century? The DS, which still looks modern, was introduced in 1955, a radical change from Citroen's earlier long-running hits, the Traction Avant (front drive) and eccentric little 2CV. The DS had a pressurized self-leveling gas and oil suspension system which also powered brakes, steering, clutch and semi-automatic transmission. It was a futuristic luxury car at a time when luxury cars tended to be very conservative.



**This '63 Chevrolet Corvette was an everyday driver of Harley Earl, first to head a design studio at General Motors. I would have made the Corvette one of the finalists in the Car of the Century selection and Harley Earl as the Designer of the Century.**

There is no question that the Porsche 911 had a powerful influence on design of sports cars, racers and high-performance cars. But I would have put the Chevrolet Corvette in the top five instead of Porsche. The Corvette embodies modern American automotive design, styling, image, performance and attitudes. It does so much more clearly than does Porsche represent those attributes of the German automobile.

The "Engineers" category makes sense, but the rest of them reflect the European bias of the jury. American designers set the style in the '30s, '40s and '50s, but where are Harley Earl, who invented the profession of automotive designer and put General Motors in a leadership position which lasted decades; Gordon Buehrig, who designed classic Cords, Auburns and Duesenbergs; Raymond Loewy, who designed stunning Hupmobiles before World War II and Studebakers after the war; or Howard Darrin, designer of classic Packards and, after World War II, Kaiser-Frazer cars? None is among the finalists.

In the area of "Entrepreneurs," where is the man who put General Motors together, William Durant, one of the highest rollers of them all?

And for "Executives," why no mention of Alfred P. Sloan, the man who made GM the world's largest automaker and who wrote the text (literally) for modern corporate organization and practice?

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