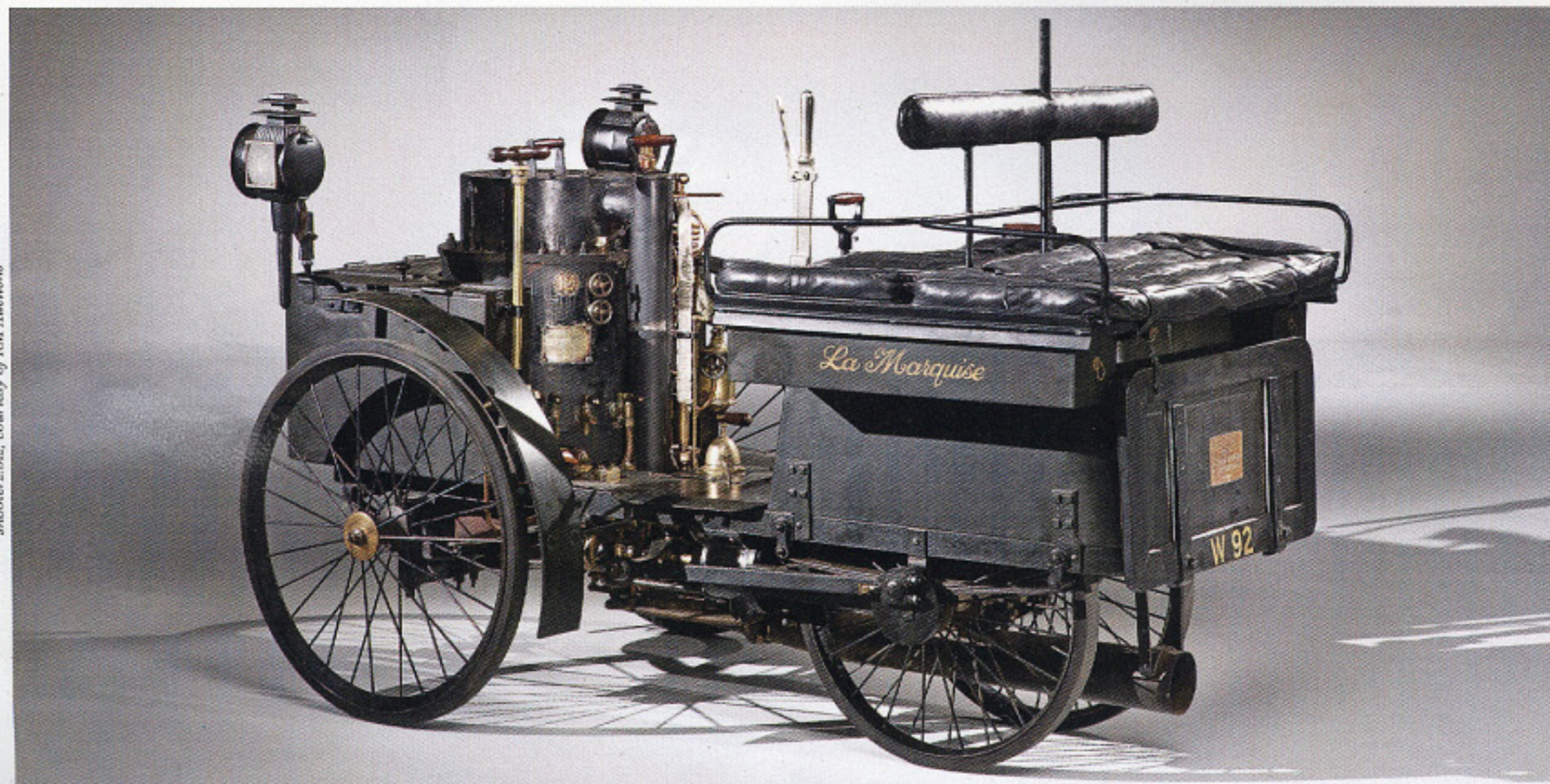


A Car From the Dawn of Cars

This \$4.2m steam-powered car is about as close to the beginning of things as we can get

by Miles Collier



That this machine still operates as its maker intended is a significant value enhancer

The 1884 De Dion-Bouton et Trepardoux Quadricycle, reputedly the “oldest functioning automobile in the world in private hands,” sold for \$4.2 million at the RM Auctions event in Hershey, PA, on October 7, 2011.

By all standards, this steam-powered quadricycle is an important piece of technological history. In a world of “firsts” and “onlys,” where the hyperbole machine is engaged 24/7, this early pioneer is the real deal. It stems from the advent of steam that ushered in the Industrial Revolution, and it is a clear descendant of the British road-going locomotives that were mercilessly stamped out by the railroads.

During the early 1830s, Goldsworthy Gurney showed the British public that road-going steam carriages could compete with the public horse-drawn coaches of the period. While the British railroad interests were able to destroy the new steam-powered “road locomotives” through predatory tariffs and tolls, the idea of practical self-propulsion over common roads had been well and truly demonstrated.

France takes the lead

Thanks to the network of “Routes Nationales” created by Napoleon at the beginning of the 19th century, over which he moved troops and supplies throughout France, the French were blessed with an incomparable asset that uniquely allowed the nascent motorcar to flourish as it did nowhere else.

In addition, the class prohibition to “being in trade” was less of an issue in France than Britain, though the eponymous Comte De Dion found himself the target of a conservatorship action brought against him by his family for wasting his substance on worthless and crazed hobbies, such as self-propelled road vehicles.

The visionary De Dion teamed with two talented mechanics, Georges Bouton and Charles-Armand Trepardoux. Before the advent of the Otto cycle gasoline engine, steam was the only game in town, and Trepardoux was one of its more creative minds. By inventing a compact and fast boiler — one that could produce usable steam pressure in minutes — the way was opened to practical application in a small, over-the-road package.

Our subject car is the third prototype of the trio’s steam quadricycles. It surpassed earlier versions by incorporating rear-wheel drive and front-axle steering.

The Comte named his new prototype after his mother, La Marquise, and proceeded to use it in arguably the world’s first automobile competition — and in subsequent competitions. Conveniently, the new technological marvel was well-documented in contemporary photographs, which allow us to verify that our subject car is the real “La Marquise” of history. Each car being a hand-built prototype allows historians the ability to identify extant idiosyncratic components and fabrications on the machine in period photographs.

The start of something big

Now let’s add all this up and see what it means. First, beginnings and ends of series are of more interest to historians and collectors than objects in the midstream of production.

Predating gasoline engines, and, moreover, lying at the beginning of D, B et T production, “La Marquise” has a colorable claim as “the first car in the world.” While perhaps mildly hyperbolic, this is about as close to the beginning of things as we can get. That the Comte himself was known for so stating only reinforces the assertion.

Second, “La Marquise” was well-documented photographically in period. That the

physical fabric of the car today can be validated by photographic evidence from the period is hugely important. In addition, the machine featured prominently and successfully in the early motor vehicle competitions of the time, another significant plus.

Third, our subject car has always been known. Unlike so many deteriorated barn finds that have to be excavated from under a collapsed roof and five tons of pigeon guano, La Marquise was retained in her first private ownership for 81 years.

It was this long-term, responsible ownership that kept this car safe and intact until she was sold to her first enthusiast owner, who did all the right things in the re-commissioning process.

Perfect preservation and provenance

Many exposures at veteran motoring events, including London-to-Brighton with its careful vetting for authenticity, have built her provenance. So here we have an object that has had no more done to it than necessary to prepare it for sympathetic use.

It has been regularly exposed to public view as an operating machine, and has consequently received extensive awards and accolades for its importance.

Make no mistake, the fact that this machine still operates as its maker intended is a major value enhancer as well. In our field, operation is taken to be, if not the *sine qua non* of old cars, at least the first among equals in desirable properties. In fact, it is common to see issues of authenticity and originality regularly subordinated to the directive of "operation at all costs." Luckily, in this case, that operating dictum has been achieved without doing significant violence to the machine's historic authenticity. In an artifact of this age and importance, that is extraordinary.

There also exists relatively extensive documentation of the machine's re-commissioning and use. The paper file on La Marquise is important in its ability to answer questions about what was performed on her in the past, and her degree of historical, from-the-period originality.

Driving and admiring

Finally, let's consider the buyer in this purchase. It is well known that automobile collectors can be sorted into two major categories: experiential versus contemplative users. While no collector is 100 percent one or the other, all collectors are biased towards one side of this dichotomy.

Experiential users collect cars for the sensory experience and the gratification that comes from using and experiencing the machine in operation. This isn't to say that the experiential user doesn't have an appreciation for the non-functional attributes of his car, its history or its aesthetics. The point is that the driving experience lies at the heart of the collection. Naturally, if using is central to a collector's motivation, such a goal sets certain limits on the kind of car the experiential owner will be drawn to. Generally, cars that confer a satisfying user experience through thrilling acceleration, crisp handling, reliability and user comfort become important determinants in the selection of cars for his collection.

By contrast, the contemplative collector is attracted to this field through a broader and even more personal set of values. In many ways, the contemplative collector looks and acts more like collectors in other fields, interested as he is in completing sets of objects or owning cars in certain chronologies and so on.

As with the experiential user, the contemplative collector no doubt enjoys experiencing his cars in operation. It is just that operation gives way to other goals, say, owning the oldest automobile in the world. And in this case, it is in this category that our new owner can be found. The driving characteristics of La Marquise, while of interest, are not such as to attract regular use. Rather, I would expect to see this machine being demonstrated to great acclaim at events throughout the old-car world.

In sum, when all the issues are favorable — rarity, importance, condition, history and provenance — we can expect an equally favorable price to the seller. As this is the only "earliest car," I'd have to call the sale fair to both parties. ♦