

Rolling art has its own art gallery

BY JOE SAGE

From its birth as the successor to the Silver Ghost in 1925, Rolls-Royce Phantom—the world's longest-standing automotive nameplate (see sidebar)—has carried the world's most influential and powerful people—heads of state to generals, royalty to rock stars, stars of the silver screen to titans of industry—to history's most defining moments.

We spent a day with Elizabeth Williams of Rolls-Royce North America and Beli Merdovic of Rolls-Royce Motorcars Scottsdale, for some hands-on time with the latest iteration.

THE NEW CAR This is the eighth generation of Phantom, revealed last year. It has an all-new aluminum architecture (which other models will start to move to, as well). As always, says Merdovic, it has “surprise-and-delight features you may not see in ordinary vehicles. We still have our coach-style doors and the umbrellas in the doors. But once you sit in the back seat, you'll really get to see all the features, bits and elements that make a Rolls-Royce what it is.”

Williams says the Phantom is “the pinnacle product for Rolls-Royce. While developing the Phantom 8, they spent a lot of time putting extra layers of soundproofing in there and made sure every element was thought of,

whether it was road noise from tires, or organ pulls for opening and closing the vents, everything is just whisper quiet.”

A new computerized transmission is precognizant, knowing the approaching road to an extremely high degree of accuracy, via GPS. “I wanted to see how that works,” says Merdovic, so he went for a ride “thinking about one thing only, listening for how the transmission does it.” The lesson? “I have no idea! I was concentrating on the shifting, and it really works. It will downshift before a turn or grade, but the thing is, in this car I couldn't even hear or feel the transmission, it's so smooth. It's the closest to a magic carpet ride that any automobile has ever come to.”

The move to aluminum architecture took off significant weight, but was not designed for weight savings per se, as final weight is much the same as before, made up by new soundproofing and over 50 onboard computers.

Rolls-Royce consistently surprises us with very nimble handling for such large cars. In the new Phantom, this is aided by a new four-wheel steering setup.

THE GALLERY A Rolls-Royce is itself a piece of rolling art. Nonetheless, there are irresistible add-ons for even more expression—such as the \$12,000 starlight headliner seen before in the Wraith. The new Phantom takes artistic imagination to a new level with The Gallery—whereby you can have priceless original art built into the dashboard (for a price).

The face of the dash is an uninterrupted full width panel of glass—not only a clean presentation of instruments, but also a space to

showcase anything from exotic woods, metals or textiles, to one-of-a-kind sculptural artwork—or your own. The Bespoke division has had artists and master artisans from around the world interpret the space (see the process at greatphantoms.com; one example is shown below). Or “if you want to put your children's artwork in there, we can work with our Bespoke team to have that done,” says Williams.

THE BUYER AND PROCESS There is great variety among the buyers of Rolls-Royce, with a preponderance of athletes, successful young business people and wealthy recent retirees. Anyone thinking that this is an older person's car is easily enlightened by going for a spin in one, to feel this big, heavy car running through the turns—so smooth, so fast and feeling much smaller. They are hooked.

Many buyers at the Scottsdale dealership are from the Midwest, where such a car may be too showy, but they fly here in their private jet and, with some quick latitude and attitude adjustment, can happily move to the Rolls.

Personalization is inevitable—and significant. About 20 percent of customers here want a bespoke car, which takes months, but 80 percent want to impulse buy (which still almost always takes more than one visit). In the rest of the world, bespoke builds are by far the norm—“99 percent” in the UK, Merdovic says. “This puts a burden on some of us here,” he says, as they themselves design a number of cars to have in stock, with options, colors and details likely to please unknown buyers of off-the-lot cars (and young entrepreneurs' tastes do tend to run much wilder

than the typical Midwestern retiree's).

The dealership's work on this is reminiscent of the difference between buying land and hiring an architect to custom build a home versus buying a one-of-a-kind custom home already built on speculation.

The basis point for a Phantom is in the mid-\$400s, with the extended wheelbase closer to \$500,000. Options typically add about 10 percent, and going bespoke to a reasonable degree adds 10 more. The sky is the limit on bespoke, but most are simply seeking a color and overall look that's different from neighbors (many of Merdovic's customers share the same affluent neighborhoods). Each car is very different, but expect a standard to run about \$520,000 and an EWB in the low \$600s.

As an extreme example, Merdovic tells of a customer who wanted a carbon fiber body, which he first thought was likely impossible. But the factory said no problem—but it would take a long time and be quite expensive, as they would have to build ten, to satisfy crash

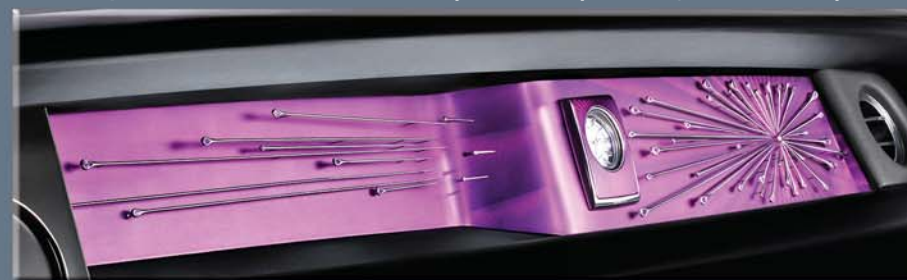
testing. That customer “changed his mind.”

Williams notes “there are customers who are willing to stick through the bespoke process, while for some it's just not worth it.”

OUR RIDE AND DRIVE We took both versions to Bartlett Lake, with the option of being chauffeured or driving ourselves, swapping cars and positions with both the chauffeurs and a few colleagues. Our default on anything is to get behind the wheel, but we figured the whole point of a Phantom EWB is life in the elegant rear seat expanses, so we opted for the chauffeur, outbound. For the return, we took the wheel of a standard wheelbase. Colleagues who rode in the back of the standard wheelbase noted that it was more conventional than the EWB, but “still all Rolls-Royce.”

The power, grace and presence of the Rolls-Royce Phantom are undeniably noteworthy, as are its road characteristics, experienced from front or back. Once again, they have proven that when your taste and desires are this exquisite, nothing else will do. ■

The Gallery's Astrum example evokes both natural and man-made starburst formations (as in sea urchins, plants, explosions and skies), emanating from a single brilliant cut diamond, encased in platinum. Solid silver spears (hand-filed, soldered, shaped and polished) bear pear-cut amethysts. The curved backing provides visual depth and is engraved with a guilloche effect, a technique found in the finest jewelry. A rich amethyst lacquer, Violet de Nuit, reflects and intensifies the color of the stones at the ends of the spears. The clock (for many customers the jewel of the interior) has its own guilloche design in sterling silver, also with amethyst tint. Fine wires laser-welded to the spears fix their positions against the backdrop.



PHANTOM HISTORY

The first Rolls-Royce Phantom was developed in great secrecy, code-named Eastern Armoured Car, suggesting an intent to build the kind of military vehicles used by Lawrence of Arabia in World War I (armor plates were left lying around the factory to confuse those trying to glean the projects secrets). Phantom I, with a 7,668-liter straight-six engine, was an instant success. ♦ When GM opened its proving ground in Michigan, none of their cars could run even two laps of the four-mile circuit at full throttle without damaging their engines. But Phantom I could do it at a steady 80 mph without failure. ♦ A Phantom II followed in 1929, then a third Phantom, a 12-cylinder, from 1936 until World War II. Its final chassis was built in 1941, but coachwork was held up until 1947. With no replacement known, it seemed the story was over. ♦ But in 1950, Phantom IV was built as a one-off for Prince Philip and then-Princess Elizabeth. Once seen, a further 17 were commissioned exclusively for other royal families and heads of state around the world. Fitted with a straight-eight and revolutionary new gearing, it performed superbly at low speeds, essential for ceremonial parades, and featured a kneeling version of the famous Spirit of Ecstasy hood ornament. ♦ The Phantom V was produced from 1959 to 1968, with a 516 (roughly one per week) built for everyone from the Queen Mother to governors of Hong Kong, King Olav of Norway, Elvis Presley and John Lennon. ♦ The long-running Phantom VI (1968-90) included a raised-roof Silver Jubilee Car for the 25th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, later used at the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, in 2011. ♦ From the last Phantom VI in 1990, it took another 13 years for the next to arrive. After corporate shakeups and mergers, a split-off of Rolls-Royce aircraft engines, and the acquisition of the car brand by BMW, a new factory and car were announced in 2003—the first Goodwood Phantom (or Phantom VII), built at a new facility in Goodwood, England. Highly contemporary yet timeless recognizable, it included every imaginable luxury and a few new ones, such as tefflon-coated umbrellas stashed in the doors and self-leveling wheel center badges. ■

GEN-8 PHANTOM SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE.....	48-valve dir injection V12
HP/TORQUE.....	563 hp / 664 lb-ft
TRANSMISSION.....	Satellite Aided Transmission (SAT) w/ ZF 8-Speed
DRIVETRAIN.....	RWD
0-TO-60 / TOP SPEED.....	5.1 sec / 155 mph
STEERING.....	four-wheel steering
SUSPENSION.....	double-wishbone front, 5-link rear, self-leveling air suspension
WHEELS / TIRES.....	22" / silent-seal-tech tires
LENGTH / WB.....	SWB 227.2 in / 139.8 in
.....	EWB 235.8 in / 148.5 in
TURNING CIRCLE.....	SWB 42.9 ft / EWB 45.2 ft
WEIGHT.....	SWB 5643.8 lb / EWB 5754.1 lb
CARGO VOLUME.....	19 cu.ft
FUEL / CAPACITY.....	premium unl / 23 gal
MPG.....	13.3 / 29.1 / 20.3 (urb/exurb/comb*)

*(manufacturer's tests; EPA t.b.d)