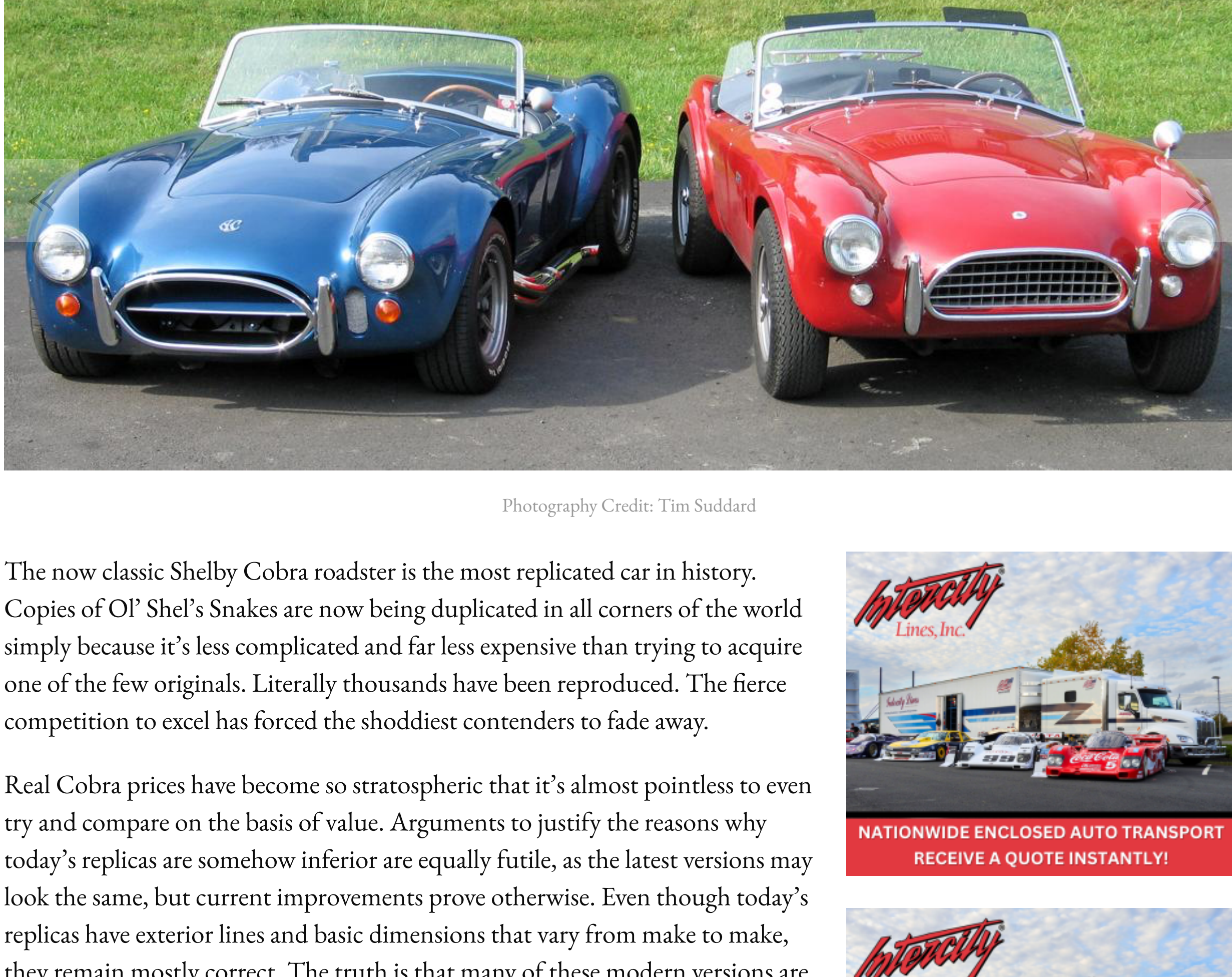


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Peter Brock defines what makes a "true" Shelby Cobra

By **Peter Brock**
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Photography Credit: Tim Suddard

The now classic Shelby Cobra roadster is the most replicated car in history. Copies of Ol' Shel's Snakes are now being duplicated in all corners of the world simply because it's less complicated and far less expensive than trying to acquire one of the few originals. Literally thousands have been reproduced. The fierce competition to excel has forced the shoddiest contenders to fade away.

Real Cobra prices have become so stratospheric that it's almost pointless to even try and compare on the basis of value. Arguments to justify the reasons why today's replicas are somehow inferior are equally futile, as the latest versions may look the same, but current improvements prove otherwise. Even though today's replicas have exterior lines and basic dimensions that vary from make to make, they remain mostly correct. The truth is that many of these modern versions are simply better automobiles.

After some 55 years of constant refinement, they should be. The use of lighter and stronger materials combined with improved redesigned chassis, better construction techniques and enhanced mechanical components leaves little question of superiority. Combine all this with far more powerful, clean-running engines mated to modern five- and six-speed transmissions, and you have to ask, what's not to like? Prices range from a few thousand for well re-engineered "build it yourself" kits to beautifully finished, turnkey, exact, alloy-bodied replicas in the hundreds of thousands. Take careful aim and choose exactly what you've always wanted.

If you still demand an original, you can be certain that they're still out there at the most prestigious auctions, but since it's hard to tell a real one from a well-finished copy—and these later replicas will often outperform the best originals—it's only a matter of personal choice.

Which brings up the question: If you could own something better than an original, would you object on principal that it's unethical to pretend? Would you feel that it's somehow morally wrong to own something beautiful simply because it isn't "real"?

I've found these questions seem to fade when you slide into a comfortable leather bucket, fire the engine, and merge onto some smooth, unobstructed blacktop. As much as I love fine design and revere classic lines, I've always preferred driving to simply acquiring and owning. The latter scenario works beautifully for something you hang on the wall, but not for something as alive and exciting as a powerful, classic lined sports car.

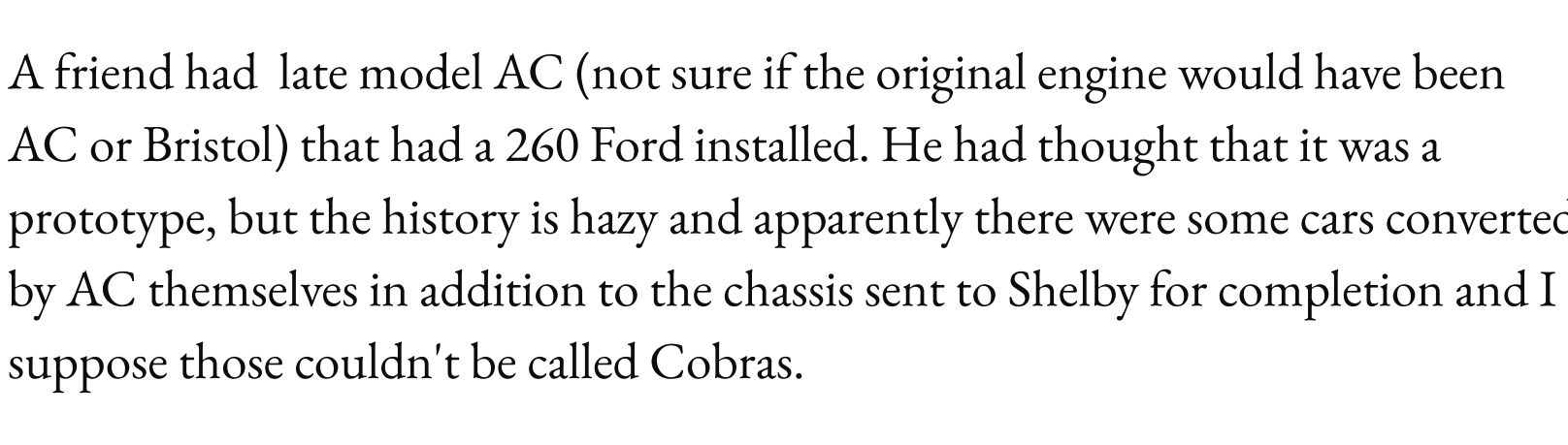
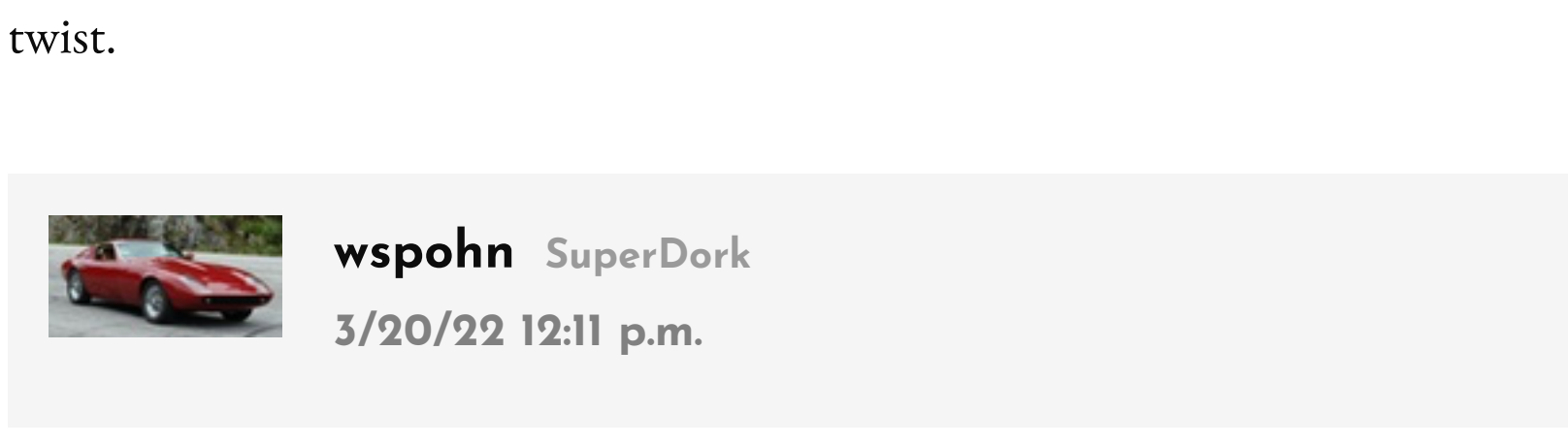
The legal questions regarding the replication of something of value are important when the design is, indeed, unique and its worth could be diminished by replication, but the fact is that Shelby never did own the original shape of AC's classic Bristol-engined roadsters, or any of the rights to Ford's V8 engines and running gear. He simply acquired those components at the time because he could see the immediate potential and it was the fastest and simplest way to enter the car business.

Shelby's timing was perfect. He was a visionary, but in hindsight he was also rather shortsighted in not realizing the long-term historical significance of what he was creating. At the time of the Cobra's greatest racing successes, the project was simply the Texan's personal stepping stone to a larger, far more exciting and profitable business venture with Ford. Once Shelby had been awarded the lucrative contract to develop and race Ford's mighty GT40s, the whole Cobra program was scrapped. Almost overnight Shelby's Snakes became old news.

Again, it seemed like perfect timing for Shelby, but history has a strange way of creating value you can't buy; it's called credibility. The thousands of fans who loved his fast, exciting cars and admired what the Texan had done for America wanted a piece of that history, and the replica business took off. Admirably, Shelby was at first both honored and pleased that clubs were formed in his name and that his old Cobras were revered as timeless pieces of rolling art that could be both owned and enjoyed for a reasonable amount.

Much later, though, Shelby looked around and realized the value of what he'd created. After leaving Ford he tried to go back and resurrect his Cobra program, but it was already too late. Too much time had passed; the fact that he'd already willingly endorsed a few of his early acolytes didn't help. The Cobra name and design had almost become public domain. Instead of embracing those who had improved upon what he'd started, he tried unsuccessfully to put them out of business!

Shelby spent millions on legal wrangling meant to protect what he believed was his, but a Federal judge informed him that all he really owned was the name. As for the diminished value of his originals? One has only to look at recent auction results to prove that replication has had exactly the opposite effect.



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Comments

bossrench New Reader
 3/19/22 2:49 p.m.

Most of the thousands of kit-Cobras used to stem from body-molds created around Mr Kunz's real 427 SC- the bulgy fender big-block variant, way back in the '60s. They are probably on the umpteenth iteration of copies. A very careful look will spot those cars, since Kuntz' car was crashed in competition, so the left and right sides are not perfectly aligned due to the repairs. The body molds reproduce the damage. Found this when an anal CA engineer dropped plumb-bobs from his suspended kit-body to the frame, and found the left-side body twist.

wspohn SuperDork
 3/20/22 12:11 p.m.

A friend had late model AC (not sure if the original engine would have been AC or Bristol) that had a 260 Ford installed. He had thought that it was a prototype, but the history is hazy and apparently there were some cars converted by AC themselves in addition to the chassis sent to Shelby for completion and I suppose those couldn't be called Cobras.

He said that the transverse leaf spring front suspension on the early cars could be a bit of a handful on the track.

Guess I should have bought another friend's early Cobra race car for \$30K (back in the 80s) when I had the chance, going by values now!

russelljones48 New Reader
 5/22/22 11:52 a.m.

Very well articulated, Peter. I have one of each of the affordable Cobras - a kit (in progress) and a reproduction. My answer when asked if it's "real" is YES, but it's not an original. That's presuming the inquisitor doesn't think it's a Corvette.. I often then explain that there's a relative lot of copies around but there were only a few hundred originals and that the originals are unobtainium for me.. I have to admit that I love to drive the replica and enjoy the conversation that often ensues.. BUT I am really enjoying building the kit.. hope to have it drivable this fall.. I'm also not sure that Carroll's "cease and desist" approach worked well for his legacy..

Carrera
 11/20/22 11:36 a.m.

If a REALLY talented artist, using REALLY great, modern, high-tech materials painted a great version of the Mona Lisa, would it be the REAL Mona Lisa?

No amount of craftsmanship, foolery or wishing it were so will make a current modern kit car a REAL Cobra- even if Ol' Shel hisself said so!

Don2001 New Reader
 1/6/24 11:04 a.m.

Carrera said:
 No amount of craftsmanship, foolery or wishing it were so will make a current modern kit car a REAL Cobra- even if Ol' Shel hisself said so!

Sorry, It would be a REAL new Cobra, just not an original Cobra :)

as explained in the article a Cobra was an AC chassis with a Ford engine, a parts bin car put together by a bunch of guys.

The Mona Lisa is an original unique work of one human being.

sfisher71 New Reader
 9/13/24 4:32 p.m.

In the late 1980s, I interviewed Chic and Chris Vandagriff, father/son owners of Hollywood Sports Cars.

At the time, they owned an original 427 Cobra and also what they felt at the time was the most accurate reproduction (Autocraft, I believe, but that was a long time ago...)

Chris, the son, opined that for street cred and the driving experience, the modern reproduction was every bit as thrilling as the original.

The one advantage it had? He could park it on the street without fear of losing half a million dollars (at the time) to an inattentive L.A. driver.

If^H^HWhen we win the lottery, I'd love to have a modern replica as well as an original. But for my tastes, the replica would come from Pur Sang. Now, whether they would be French blue or Italian red is another question entirely.

gsarahs New Reader
 9/13/24 8:53 p.m.

As a 10 year old, I was for the first time belted in to my uncle's AC Bristol Accca, and driven up to 115 mph (I watched the speedometer like a hawk). That along with the fact that my Dad restored 2 cars when I was a child, meant that I truly got the car bug.

The one I would go for if in the market would be an Aurora Cobra, since they were well built in a factory, and meet the criteria for collector plates in my province.

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