

# The Italian





# Job



**FAR LEFT Coming TOP Or going LEFT The Pininfarina 230SL is unique in all the world**

Thought lost for many years, this one-off was a collaboration between Mercedes-Benz, Pininfarina and a young American, Tom Tjaarda. It was brought back to life by a dedicated US collector and one of the world's foremost Mercedes-Benz restoration specialists. Words and images by **Richard Truesdell.**

**F**ive decades have been required to write this story. It involves one of the most iconic and best loved Mercedes-Benz models of the post-war era, a famous Italian design house, and one of the best known and most prolific automotive designers of our time.

The car, the 1964 Mercedes-Benz 230SL Pininfarina Coupe, has lived a checkered life, first as an attempt by Pininfarina to present a car to Mercedes-Benz for possible series production, then as a daily driver for West Germany's answer to Rupert Murdoch, Axel Springer, through a succession of owners – and paint schemes and configurations – and finally to its current keepers, the Hook family, who have owned it since 1997. Weston Hook worked with one of the world's foremost Mercedes-Benz restoration experts, Hjeltne Restoration in Southern California, to return it to its original splendor.

**F**or this story to make sense one needs to travel back in time to 1963, when at that year's Geneva motor show Mercedes-Benz introduced the W113 230SL, a replacement for both the 190SL and 300SL. It was an immediate hit and over the course of two increases in engine capacity, for the 250SL and 280SL, 49,912 W 113s were produced, of which 19,440 were sold in North America.

The new car caught the attention of the Italian Pininfarina design house, which with an eye on a possible production contract set about improving on what many saw as the perfection of the original



## Specifications 1964 Mercedes-Benz 230SL Pininfarina Coupe



**Engine** M127 2,306cc I-6  
**Power** 148hp@5,500rpm  
**Torque** 142lb-ft@4,500rpm  
**Transmission** 4-speed automatic RWD  
**Weight** 3,031 pounds  
**0-60** 10.5 seconds  
**Top speed** 124mph  
**Fuel consumption** 23.0mpg (US gallon)  
**Years produced** 1964  
**Number built** One



The car was signed by designer Tom Tjaarda at Pebble Beach in August 1997

Paul Bracq and Béla Barényi shape. Pininfarina assigned the design to a young American, Tom Tjaarda. The son of John Tjaarda, responsible for the design of the aerodynamic 1936 Lincoln Zephyr, he had worked for Ghia before moving to Pininfarina in 1962, where his first project was a coupe version of the rear-engined Chevrolet Corvair.

Looking back more than 50 years, here's what Tjaarda remembers about the development of the fixed-roof version of the 230SL. "The exact date of the Mercedes project I cannot recall, but I think it would be some time in 1963. I remember that it was going to be an attempt by Pininfarina to work together on an important project with Mercedes. The scope was to design a special version of the 230SL in such a way that it could be put into production at the Pininfarina factory. For that reason there were many carry-over components such as the interior, the front end, the headlights and other elements.

"When working on this design it never crossed my mind that I was putting my stamp on a breakthrough design, we were working on a special version of the 230SL, and so it had to be recognizable as such. I remember starting out from the headlight design and integrating the crease of the fender line so that it looked

different but at the same time nothing radical. The side view, and especially the rear, were the parts that set the design off from the production version. It was just enough to make the car look different, and perhaps more 'Italian' and more elegant."

When asked who made the decision to have a fixed roof coupe configuration, a departure from the removable hardtop of the production version, Tjaarda said those decisions were always made Sergio Pininfarina and the company's CEO, Renzo Carli. He said that the prototype was built in-house and constructed over a cut-up 230 SL. "The basic car was taken apart and the bodywork cut away where we would be doing the modifications," Tjaarda recalls. "Once I had done the drawings of the modifications, I was no longer involved with the project, and everything just went ahead in the workshop. I was put on another task, and really saw the car only a few times during its construction phase."

One thing he does remember clearly was that Pininfarina was keen to approach Mercedes-Benz regarding the possibility of production. "He worked hard to convince the Mercedes-Benz directors to establish a cooperation and set up a production program in the Pininfarina factory," Tjaarda reveals. "After numerous attempts, it became clear that this was not

going to happen, so the car remained a one off."

After the car was completed and it was obvious that there was no production potential, it was sold to West German publishing magnate Axel Springer. Photos from the period, after it was exhibited at the 1964 Paris Auto Salon, show the car in silver with a buff interior.

Over the years the car had a succession of owners, mostly in America, and during the 1980s it became known to Jerry Hjeltness of Hjeltness Restoration at an event in Palm Springs, California. At the time the car was painted black with modern Mercedes-Benz cast aluminum wheels and red interior trim. It was subsequently painted red by its next owner, and the interior was refinished with tan leather trim.

Then in the mid-1990s it caught the attention of Weston Hook, a noted American collector. In the years before buying it in 1997, Weston talked with Jerry several times about acquiring the car for his collection. Jerry had said to Weston, "In red it doesn't do anything for me."

A few weeks later Weston called again, telling Jerry he'd bought the car and that it was already accepted for Pebble Beach that year (12 weeks away), as there was a Tom Tjaarda Class, and could Jerry polish it and get it ready for this high-profile

## Tom Tjaarda's 1964 Paris Auto Show Masterpiece



American-born Tom Tjaarda has spent much of his career in Italy. He is best known as the designer of the De Tomaso Pantera, among his 80+ full-size automotive designs.





classic event? The red paint job was one you would find on a used car, and the Mercedes was, charitably, in less than concours condition, Jerry thought. When the car arrived at Hjeltness Restoration Jerry gave Weston an honest appraisal of the situation. "We could try to polish this out, but the paint was bubbling," he said. "The underside is painted black, and if the judges lean down and look at the underside they will laugh."

Initially Weston wanted the car repainted red, but after locating photos of it as exhibited in Paris in 1964, in silver, he decided to have it returned to its original 1964 configuration. And Jerry thought the car's lines worked exceptionally well in silver. So with Pebble Beach closing in, all other work at Hjeltness Restoration halted as the crew concentrated on the Pininfarina coupe. Jerry's son Eric, who works side by side with his father, recalls that the car was completed in just 11 weeks.

Eric explained that the car was not taken back to the original sheet metal, but was sanded down to almost that point. In the course of preparing the car, Eric discovered that when it first came to Pininfarina from the factory, it was finished in white. "There were several levels of paint, black and red, where we prepped the car," he says. "We also found filler in many places. Don't forget Michelangelo



**TOP** From the rear the thin pillars provide excellent visibility  
**CENTER** Can you imagine driving from Berlin to Rome from behind this wheel?  
**RIGHT** The classic Becker Mexico AM/FM/SW radio was the state-of-the-audio art in the 1960s





was a sculptor, also Italian, right? Pininfarina used filler, I am sure.”

Eric also observed that when the car was exhibited in Paris in 1964 it had side marker lights from a Ferrari from that period. “The holes were filled, but it was easy to see the original locations when the body was ‘taken down’ for its new silver paint.”

One of the first things Jerry noticed was that the Mercedes had a Plexiglas windshield, that had been installed before its previous Pebble Beach display. “The restorer at the time, who painted the car red, apparently had broken the windshield during the restoration,” he speculates. Jerry had a unique solution to the windshield problem. At the time Chrysler had an advanced design center in nearby Carlsbad, and Jerry had a friend there. “I had him come over and we pulled a

plaster of Paris mold off of the existing Plexiglas windshield – then I had a shop up in Long Beach make a glass windshield.”

Thankfully the interior was mostly correct but the aluminum kick panels, with their fine etchings, were in less than perfect shape. To recreate the kick panels Jerry made a tool properly to duplicate the originals.

When looking at the 1964 Paris photos Weston noted a unique license-plate frame, and insisted Jerry duplicate it, even though it was missing from the car. Jerry told Weston there wasn't enough time, but as the restoration had gone without major complications, he attempted to replicate the frame, using the 1964 pictures Weston had. With these pictures Jerry was able to get very accurate measurements.

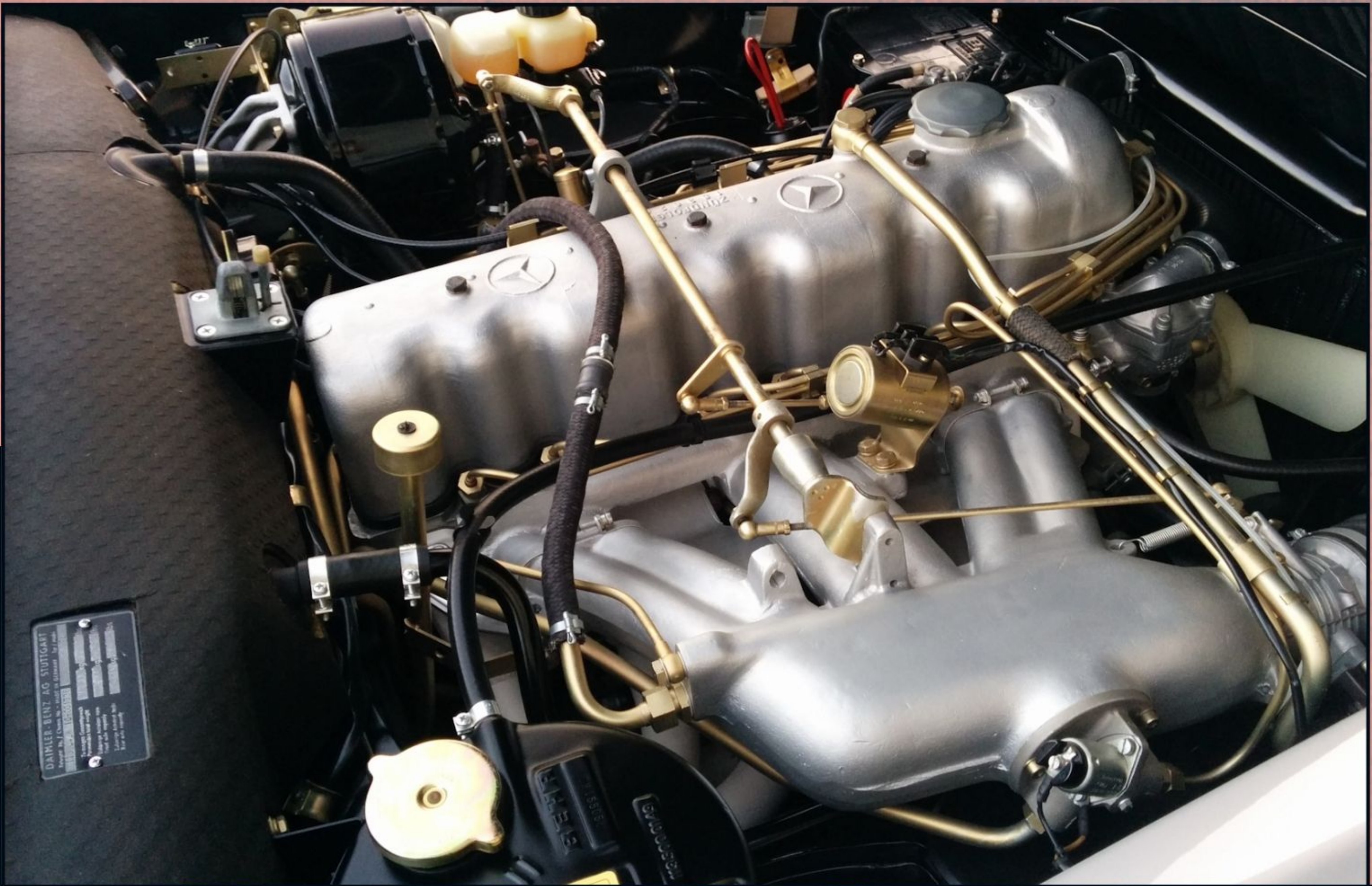
One particular memory from the car's 1997 Pebble Beach appearance is worth airing. Jerry recalls that someone with a German accent walked up to it and said, “Here's the car. We thought it was lost.” The German apparently worked for Axel Springer. A week after Pebble Beach, he made contact with Hjeltness Restoration and arranged to have the car photographed at a nearby equestrian center in Rancho Santa Fe, California, and it subsequently appeared in 1998 in *Auto Bild* magazine in Germany.

In the time since its 1997 appearance at Pebble Beach the car has been displayed at a number of events, and is a hit whenever it goes. It remains an enduring legacy to the preservation efforts of Weston Hook, who sadly died eight years ago, leaving his wife, Elona, and son, Russell, now its custodians. When asked





**LEFT** The engine is essentially stock, restored to today's highest concours standards **BELOW** The data plate shows that this 230SL was built in 1964 and was originally painted white according to factory records **BOTTOM** In this side-profile view, at speed, this looks unlike any other Pagoda.





about this honor, here's what Russell had to say.

"While it is certainly an honor to own a piece of automotive history in the Pininfarina 230SL, my mom and I know that this honor comes with much responsibility. Elona and I look and the 230SL and remember fondly my dad. I recall the first time I understood my dad's love of line and need for speed.

"It was a typical hot and humid summer

day in Hawaii. My dad piled my mom and the rest of us kids in a 1956 Corvette convertible for a drive. As we drove away, the neighborhood dog ran behind then along side, finally the dog jumped up and into the Corvette and off we went. I hear my dad's laughter and sheer joy of life as he drove around that day. We both miss him. His joy in discovery the long-lost Pininfarina 230SL, the frantic but loving restoration in time for the 1997 Pebble

Beach Concours, the renewal of old friendships and the new friendships that the 230SL has brought into our lives. We are the richer for owning it!"

The Pininfarina coupe is one of the cornerstones of a sizable collection of cars, and stands at an intersection of Mercedes-Benz, Pininfarina, and a young American designer, Tom Tjaarda, who would leave his mark on more than 80 additional vehicles. **ATCC**

**LEFT** The behind-the-seats storage compartment was designed with series production in mind **BELOW** The missing license plate frame was fabricated to replicate the etchings found on the original 1964 photos **BOTTOM** The headliner is an upholstered panel of hand-formed aluminum, typical of coachbuilt Italian cars of the era **RIGHT** The thin roof pillars add an element of elegance to the transformation from the original roadster with a removable hardtop to a fixed-roof coupe







Thanks to owners Elona and Russell Hook  
along with Jerry and Eric Hjeltness from  
Hjeltness Restoration