

# Hot Rod Heritage Enlivens SEMA

Duane Carling

LAS VEGAS, NV—"Western art and hot rod art are pure Americana," said Bob Larivee, Sr., overlooking the 2,500-sq.-ft. Hot Rod Heritage exhibit at the SEMA/AI show November 4-8. I realized what Bob said was true. And hot-rodding—a unique part of America—has indeed come of age.

The entrance to the Specialty Equipment Market Association/Auto International trade show in Las Vegas (known everywhere as SEMA) is some of the most expensive square footage in the world. As industry conventions go, SEMA is one of the largest shows on the planet, second in U.S. shows only to the COMDEX computer show (also held in Las Vegas). That VIPs in the automotive world would donate such space is a tribute to the 30 featured artists, and to their subject matter. This year SEMA sold out all 4,083 booth spaces, with six miles of aisles, and almost 30,000 paying industry professionals (a new record) attending the show. Several football-field-size outdoor tents were filled with high-end feature and concept cars from suppliers and original equipment manufacturers. Not just anybody could walk in and request 2,500 sq. ft. of prime indoor space—for free, for an art show—and get it.

Back in the early Sixties, Bob Larivee started the International Championship Auto Shows, and the circuit grew to 200 shows a year, attracting over 4 million spectators. Bob has turned ISCA over to his son and others to run, and now produces six automotive art shows a year. "I had always been interested in Western art," said Bob. "Over the years I visited most of the galleries in Santa Fe. They said I should look at the Scottsdale galleries too, and there I met Joe Beeler, founder of the Western Art Association. That same year I was involved with the Meadowbrook Concours, and my friend Dick Teague, design V.P. of American Motors, suggested we have an art show as part of the concours. At that point I made the connection between the art of the horse, and its successor, the art of the car. The first meeting of the Automotive Fine Arts Society (AFAS) was held in my building in Detroit during Meadowbrook. I love automotive art, but hot rod art, like the cowboy, is uniquely American and found nowhere else in the world."

It all started when Larivee was visiting his friend Jim Davis, who was then Chairman of B&M Automotive Products and chairman of the board of SEMA. "He had automotive art prints hanging on all the walls of his office and I said, 'Why don't you get some original artwork in here?' After we



**The Hot Rod Heritage art show was abuzz with activity at the very entrance to the SEMA show. Right: Bob Larivee, Sr., the man behind the tradition of automotive art at SEMA.**

**Below: Vestaburg Buick, an evocative painting by Hot Rod Heritage feature artist Dan McCrary. Bottom right: Artist McCrary poses with some of his other work at the Hot Rod Heritage exhibit.**



talked for a while," Larivee recalls, "Jim offered to get us a free thirty-by-thirty booth at the next SEMA show—and the art side of SEMA has just grown from there."

"We are not doing car portraits," Bob asserted. "Rather, we are trying to preserve the culture, the history, and spirit of the early days. A good example is the picture of

the Kenz & Leslie garage in Denver. They built and ran a successful land-speed record car on the Bonneville Salt Flats in the Fifties and Sixties." Larivee also credited Ken Eberts and Stan Wanlass, who he said "lend credibility to our efforts by their world-class paintings and sculptures of hot rods."

The featured artist at SEMA's Hot Rod



Heritage art show was Dan McCrary. His unique perspective and trademark reflections of car-within-a-car have won him high praise wherever he exhibits, be it the Meadowbrook Concours, "The Car/The Art" show in Los Angeles, or other major events. (Dan knows the trials of old car ownership, too. Anyone who loves and drives a 1964 Alfa Romeo Giulia Sprint has got to know the joy of roadside repairs, and grease under the fingernails.)

Art by Tom Fritz, John Snowberger, Bernard Corman, and many others drew plenty of visitors to the exhibit throughout the SEMA show.

Charles Blum, current president of SEMA, said "Having an understanding of our roots yields a clearer picture of our industry. The enthusiasm and dedication of hot-rodders and other participants in motor sports resulted in what is today known as the specialty industry. That prompted the need for a trade association, so SEMA was formed. At SEMA, we are deeply respectful of those founding fathers whose sometimes awkward starts eventually resulted in prominent, successful corporations."

SEMA is currently sponsoring a large exhibit at the Peterson Museum of a full-scale 1954 speed shop. Most of the rare cars, parts, tools, photos, and automobilia are on loan from prominent members of SEMA. A few years ago many of these guys could be found hanging out at the local speed shop during the day, and the corner gas station or drive-in after sundown. A full-scale modern speed shop with 1996 cars and equipment is included in the exhibit, just to show how far things have come

Most of the world's new car manufacturers and suppliers were represented at SEMA, as were the collectible and automobilia manufacturers. To attract attention, some booths were even done up as old gas stations or garages. Ertl was there to show what they can do for manufacturers in the way of promotional models and toys. A large segment of the market for high-end models is the people who grew up with cars and are now in the industry. All those guys and gals were at SEMA, and many consider models to be representational art, and collectible as such.

Because SEMA is an industry-only trade show, the general public isn't allowed. But everyone connected with the industry is there, from drag racers to Indy racers, customizers to publishers. I saw Linda Vaughn (remember Miss Hearst?), John Force, and Don Garlits all walk through the show in the space of about an hour. Buddy Lazier, Carroll Shelby, and Leon Mandel, publisher of *AutoWeek*, were also making the rounds. Between the art show, the manufacturers' displays, and the celebrity-watching, I certainly didn't regret being there!

## Toy Lovers Sing "Viva, Las Vegas!"

Bob Hall

LAS VEGAS, NV—Never underestimate the power of toys and models. That easily could be the lesson brought home from the 1996 Automotive Aftermarket Industry Week (AAIW). Each year the number of models, and the way they're used within AAIW exhibits, multiplies. It's hard for this reporter to contemplate that only a decade ago one had to be extremely diligent to find *any* automotive collectibles at this event.

According to sales manager Suzi Lewis, "Fifty-five percent of Revell's diecast collectibles are NASCAR related, and we expect sales to double next year [1997]." Lewis also finds the SEMA buyers "much more intelligent than six or seven years ago." According to Lewis, Revell's presence at the show is "important for our West Coast audience." Other than NASCAR, Revell's 1/25-scale '57 Chevys and two-passenger Thunderbirds remain big sellers.



**Ken Dahlke and Terry Rubritz catch up with paperwork during one of the rare moments the Brookfield booth wasn't overrun with model car enthusiasts.**

"I've seen more and more booths where they use toys, models, or artwork as part of the display," notable artist Ken Eberts told us. "It's like they're using promos for the purpose they were intended." How true—yet some of the most striking displays were those of the model suppliers or distributors themselves. Ertl's three-space display showed 90 different models that can be custom-imprinted in lots of 504 and up.

Ertl obviously knows the collector's mentality. "Eventually [the models] all become collectible, and the smaller the run, the better for collectors," said Ertl sales manager Dan Matas. That's no secret to Revell, which established a separate diecast racing division in Mooresville, North Carolina—the heart of NASCAR country—to better design, license, and promote its Custom Imprint series of collectibles.

Thanks to some help from Chevrolet, Brookfield Collectors Guild expanded its exhibit to a whopping six spaces—at least one of which was filled by a full-size 1996 Chevy Express van. It wore the no. 3 livery of NASCAR champion Dale Earnhardt, and just happens to be Brookfield's latest offering. "It's the first van replica ever done," said marketing director Terry Rubritz.

He and the entire Brookfield staff were kept almost constantly busy with inquiries—to the point that their card reader, which records a buyer's interest in their products, was on the verge of overheating. That is quite an appropriate symbol of how feverishly the aftermarket has accepted toys and other collectibles into its industry. It's enough to make any fan of automobilia break into a rousing chorus of "Viva, Las Vegas!"