



[**The Collector**]

'I don't do fancy living, so my money goes into my cars'

In Ralph Marano's case, the vast majority of those cars are from Packard, the marque he fell in love with 40 years ago after a life-affirming incident.

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Most car collectors can remember roughly when their love affair with a certain brand or model began. But none as specific as the world's foremost Packard collector, American car dealer Ralph Marano. To call him the authority on all things Packard is no exaggeration. Owing 95 cars, 66 of them Packards, puts him in a special position, not only among Packard collectors. Nowhere are there more Packards in one place as in Ralph Marano's warehouse in Garwood, New Jersey.

While Marano didn't set out to be a Packard collector, he admits to always having been a shrewd buyer, 'I grew up on the street. I've always been a wheeler dealer, so I knew how to make trades - offer three cars and something else and get a car I wanted instead. That's how I traded up.'

Marano's pride and joy amid his world-class collection are the one-off Packard concept cars he owns. Much like GM's Motorama models, those were meant as dream cars, to show what could be and sometimes what would be. He houses them in a former car dealership not far from his used car place on Garwood's main road. Stepping inside is like diving into a bygone world. Murals 20 feet high decorate three walls, depicting Packard scenes that never were, artistically created following Marano's painstakingly instructions.

As Marano guides us through the room, it becomes evident that he is not a collector who amasses cars for the sheer need of having them. He loves sharing the stories behind the cars and the intricate details of every one of them. Surprisingly, Marano has none of the work done in-house at his two dealerships. He sells used cars in one and trucks in the other but work on his old cars is entirely farmed out. Aware of the costs, he points out the benefits, 'It's like eating out. You don't mind paying if the food's good. And I don't do fancy living, so my money goes into my cars,' he admits.

The car that started it all - the 1937 Packard 120 C Business Coupe

'It was the August 4, 1978 when I made the decision to buy my first Packard,' Marano recalls. He and his car dealer father had been to a local car show a few weeks earlier, where Ralph fell in love with a Packard for the first time. 'I was there with my Ford Model A and got parked next to a gleaming black 1937 Packard. Being a car guy all my life, I knew what Packards were, but this was something else. The guy was asking \$12,000 for it. That was three times what my price guide said what it was worth.' This particular car had undergone an intensive restoration, and the Maranos were sure to notice. By the end of the show, Ralph had decided to buy the car and gave the owner a deposit.

'It was a lot of money, but I figured my dad and I could sell a few cars from our small collection and instead of having four or five other cars we could have one outstanding Packard.' Back at home, reality kicked in, and Ralph felt buyer's remorse. 'I told the guy to keep the deposit, but it was just too much for me, we couldn't handle it.' A few days later Marano got hit head-on by a drunk driver while behind the wheel of his wife's Dodge Challenger

convertible. 'I shouldn't be here anytime past 11.10, Friday night, August 4, 1978. I don't know how I got out of the car, let alone lived. In hospital, I wrote my father a note that said "go buy that Packard." And that's what set me off with the marque. Go figure.'

Rare pairing - 1953 Packard Monte Carlos

'The Monte Carlo concept cars started life as regular Packard Mayfair two-door hardtops. We bought the first one in 2009, supposedly restored. I had been in contact with the owner in Georgia over many years. It had originally been found in a field rusted up to the doorhandles. When we bought it, it was supposedly restored but when we got it we opened the truck and closed the door again; we thought it was a different car. We had to do the whole thing over again. We needed to buy a really good standard sedan and take it apart as a parts car. The only thing that was really strong on this one was the roof.

'When these cars were new, they were structurally weak, because they had started life as two-door hardtops - the removable T-top roof panels were cut in afterwards. In those days, the convertibles would have had an X-frame to keep the body from flexing when the roof was gone. But when Packard cut the roofs on these, the bodies started to sag. If you looked at the top of the door, you had a ¼in gap and at the bottom a ⅜in gap. These cars were only ever supposed to be stationary on a turntable, so

we had to go through and reinforce everything to make it stronger than new. As well as the T-tops, the Monte Carlos had unique three-seat rear benches with double armrests.

'A year after I bought my first Monte Carlo, the second one found me, and I bought that one, too. The only time these two had ever been together was in Earle C Anthony's Packard showroom in California when they were new, and now they are back together in mine.'

'I wrote my father a note that said "go buy that Packard" - that's what set me off'



120 Coupe is Marano's pick of his Packards

Mr President - 1952 Macauley Coupe

'I found the Macauley Coupe around 2002, I think. It was made in 1952 for Alvan Macauley Jr, then president of styling at Packard. It was built in-house but heavily modified to suit Macauley's personal taste. It was the first car ever to be equipped with a rear wiper, there's a McCulloch supercharger and - despite its size - it is only a two-seater. It's kind of a

Fifties hot rod, if you will. The chrome strip all along the bottom is carried on into the inside, which is neat.

'Sometime in the late Fifties opera singer James Melton, who owned the car at the time, had pulled out the Packard driveline and replaced it with a Chrysler V8, a Chrysler dashboard and a push-button Torqueflite transmission. Can you believe it? I had to bring it all back. In order to do that, I found an ultra-low-mile Packard parts car with 10,000 miles, I think, to use for the frame, because Melton had cut it all to pieces to fit his Chrysler drivetrain. It was cheaper for me buy a car with perfect panels than try to make it from scratch. I managed to find the original engine and did the retrofit conversion. It's now got the matching-numbers engine, the only Packard motor ever painted red.'

Autorama special - 1952 Packard Pan-American

'My Packard Pan-American was another car made especially for the 1952 Autorama. It was bodied by Henney and also heavily customised. Only six examples were ever made of this predecessor



The collection also includes much Packard automobilia



Having so many Packards also means a big spares stock



Monte Carlos began life as standard Mayfair models



Marano chats Packards to writer Axel Catton



Customers asked for a revival of the pre-war grille style, and the Request is what they were given

of the Packard Caribbean. They cost Packard \$20,000 to make, so it lost money on them. The way the cars were made, how the body was cut with altered body sections, was extremely costly to do. There is a scoop in the hood and a great deal of leadwork went into the body.

'The colour is called Green Gold, because it has flakes of 24ct gold in it. I bought my in 2003 from the widow of the second owner. Among my collection it's the only one that hasn't undergone a full restoration. And while we had to retouch some of the paint, the outside is probably 80 per cent original. We overhauled the engine and gave it a new top - it's the only one of the six that had a top, all the other ones were open cars that wouldn't close.'

Half of all made - 1954 Packard Panthers

'In 1952 Packard originally made four Panthers, two of which are in my collection - and I know where the other two are. In 1954 Packard, having failed to merge with Frazer, Nash, Kaiser and some other small brands, was out on its own against the Big Three and needed to turn out some stunning concepts to attract attention to itself. So, it took two of the Panthers back - the ones I now own - and returned them for a restyling to the company that had originally built them, the Mitchell-Bentley Corporation in Owosso, Michigan.

'The two I have, one open and one closed one, basically had resided in Michigan most of their lives until I bought them in 2002 and 2007 respectively. The Panthers are the first cars ever to be made fully out of glassfibre, even before the Corvette.'

A return to pre-war looks - 1955 Packard Request

'The purchase of this car shows you how it sometimes happens with me and those cars. I was just flipping through a Packard magazine and saw an ad for a Packard Request. This car was built in 1955 because Packard owners were requesting for the vertical grille from pre-war times to be brought back. So I called the guy up who put in the ad, and it turns out it is the owner's widow. She told me that her husband had passed away a month previously.

'Now, when somebody passes away, you never know what the right timing is to be both respectful and timely. So, there I was, and she told me she'd just sold it and they were coming to pick the car up that day. I knew the guy who bought it and I called him the next day. His response was, "Ralph! You were going to be my next call. I wonder

Morano now knows Packards like the back of his own hand



if you're interested in buying this car?" So I gave him his profit and ended up with the car after all.

'It had been hit pretty hard in the back and the front. So again, we had to go out and buy a low-mile parts car to use the wings and frame. This was the first Packard to come with a V8 engine, all my other concepts have straight-eights. It's got a fibreglass hood, and I also found a pedal car that is identical to it. Which is neat.

Later, alligator - 1938 Packard 1605 Super Eight Convertible

'While not a concept car, this particular one-off became famous when it rolled into a pond right after I won Best in Class at the 2016 Hilton Head Concours. I had it pulled out of the water by experienced divers, because there were alligators, you know? So then we had to address surface rust on basically any piece of metal you can think of, right down to the ashtrays. We went back to Phoenix Rod & Custom in Central New Jersey who had restored it the first time round, and have already been out to a show with it this summer.

And if he could only ever keep one?

'Only one? Well, it would have to be my very first one, the 1937 Packard 120 C Business Coupe.'





Marano with just some of his packed-in Packards



Macauley Coupe features scarlet-painted engine



The Packards now reside in a former New Jersey dealership



The Packard enthusiasm isn't just for full-size vehicles



Pan-American paint has flakes of gold mixed in



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