



PHANTOM CORSAIR

This otherworldly specter was one of the wildest designs of its time, or any time.

It may be the most accurately named vehicle in history. The 1938 Phantom Corsair is unnervingly smooth, low, and beetle-like, devoid of any visual cues that might anchor it to familiarity. Its low cabin is dwarfed by the rising shape of its hood; its windows appear like gun slits in a pillbox. It exudes menace. All light seems to disappear into its flanks.

If the front ends of automobiles are suggested to resemble faces—a common phenomenon known as “pareidolia”—then its unusual vertical headlights appear more insectoid than human. Even its louvers resemble shark gills. Perhaps the Corsair is a chimera at heart, a hybrid amalgamation of the animal kingdom.

The Corsair was the brainchild of Rust Heinz, a scion of the H. J. Heinz family, who had made their fortune in ketchup and condiments. Heinz was just 24 when he designed the Corsair himself. He had studied yacht design and had some speedboats to his name—which proved to be sleek, water-formed influences on the Corsair’s slippery shape.

Eschewing the family business, Rust Heinz moved to California to establish himself as an automotive designer for hire, riding the wave of Hollywood elites who wanted distinctive coachwork to go with their dreamboats. Bohman & Schwartz of Pasadena handcrafted the body from aluminum, mounting it to what Heinz deemed to be the most innovative chassis of the time: the Cord 810, the first American car with front-wheel drive. The coffin-shaped 810 was itself distinctive, but the Corsair

did away with its exaggerated fenders and excess chrome, its white-walled wheels hidden and barely peeking below flush bodywork.

The inside was just as distinctive. Four people could sit in the front and two in back, with one of the four to the right of the driver’s seat. (Beverage cabinets took up most of the room in the rear.) That driver would have gazed at 12 gauges, including a compass and an altimeter, just in case the Corsair lifted off back to its home planet.

The Corsair debuted at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, and *Popular Science* featured the Corsair on the cover, asking in the era’s typical hyperbole, “Is This the Motor Car of Tomorrow?” It very well could have been: Heinz had dreams of building the Corsair in limited production, each selling for \$15,000, or over \$300,000 today.

Tragically, Heinz died in 1939 in a car crash, and the Corsair passed through the hands of family and friends, suffering various injustices such as being painted gold and receiving a targa-style roof. After casino mogul and car collector Bill Harrah bought it, the Corsair received a thorough restoration to its original, darker, sinister specifications.

Instead of a film noir, the Corsair’s only media appearance was in the 1938 comedy *The Young in Heart*, starring Douglas Fairbanks Jr.; in the film, the Phantom Corsair receives the unflattering name of the “Flying Wombat.” However, if Batman—who debuted the same year as the Corsair—had needed a Batmobile, it would have been a perfect match.