

A CENTURY OF THE EXTRAORDINARY: BUGATTI CELEBRATES 100 YEARS OF THE TYPE 41 ROYALE



A century ago, Ettore Bugatti set out to create an automobile without precedent — faster, more elegant and more luxurious than its contemporaries, conceived as an expression of what the automobile could become when engineering prowess, refinement and uncompromising craftsmanship came together as one. The result was the BUGATTI Type 41 ROYALE.

The legend of the ROYALE began before even its famous name was fully established. In June 1926, contemporary British reporting described the still-mysterious machine as already being known among those who had encountered it as 'The Golden BUGATTI' — a suitably evocative name for an automobile whose ambition and presence seemed almost beyond comparison. When presented in 1926, the ROYALE was the largest and most ambitious automobile BUGATTI had ever built. It measured more than six meters in length, with a wheelbase of approximately 4.3 meters and, in series form, was powered by a 12.8-liter straight-eight producing around 300 PS. It was intended for the most distinguished clientele imaginable — an automobile worthy of emperors, kings and queens.

Only six were ultimately built, each being completely unique, bearing its very own individual coachwork and character. A century later, they remain enduring expressions of Ettore Bugatti's determination to create an automobile that answered to no convention but his own vision.

The first ROYALE prototype went even further, exceeding the already monumental specifications of the cars that followed. Its straight-eight displaced approximately 14.7 liters, before the definitive ROYALE architecture settled at 12.8 liters. Beneath the immense hood lay the kind of engineering that reflected Ettore's incomparable ambition, with advanced valve gear and dry-sump lubrication among the features of an engine designed to move a car weighing around 3.5 tons with remarkable authority. BUGATTI records a maximum ceiling of up to 200 km/h — astonishing speed for an automobile of such scale in its era.

Its proportions offered a canvas for some of the finest coachbuilding of the period, with bodies from BUGATTI itself and celebrated houses including Weymann, Kellner, Weinberger, Binder and Park Ward. The mechanical concept was shared, but the way each ROYALE took shape was left to the interpretation of its coachbuilder and, in some cases, the individual who would own it.

Few ROYALEs embody that evolution more clearly than the automobile that became the Coupé Napoléon. During its life, that same prototype carried several different bodies. Among them was a graceful fixed-head coachwork by Weymann, which was destroyed in a serious accident in the early 1930s. What subsequently came to be was nothing short of a masterwork of automotive design, as Jean Bugatti stepped in to shape the car into the magnificent Coupé Napoléon — the form in which it is still known today.

Its imposing scale was counterbalanced by a purity and sophistication characteristic of Jean's emerging design philosophy. A glazed roof bathed the rear passenger compartment in light, while the chauffeur sat separately up front. The Coupé Napoléon became Ettore Bugatti's own automobile and now resides within Musée National de l'Automobile — Collection Schlumpf in Mulhouse. It also stands as an early expression of the extraordinary creative relationship between Ettore and Jean, a father of towering determination, and a son increasingly defining the aesthetic language behind some of the most admired BUGATTI creations of all time.

No two examples were alike, as the ROYALE owned by Armand Esders demonstrates. The Parisian textile industrialist became the first private customer for a ROYALE, commissioning chassis 41111 with an elegant roadster body designed by Jean Bugatti. Esders intended to use his automobile only during daylight hours, so headlights were deemed unnecessary and omitted altogether.

In quintessential BUGATTI style, the customer's functional request was transformed by the power of design to yield greater elegance. Almost a century before BUGATTI Sur Mesure

and Programme Solitaire, the ROYALE demonstrated the marque's instinct to tailor each commission to the tastes and personality of its custodians.

Even the smallest details reflected the magnitude of Ettore's vision. In 1932, he commissioned Breguet to create a series of nine mechanical chronographs intended for the center of ROYALE steering wheels. Engraved with the inscription 'Spécial pour BUGATTI', the instruments combined a chronograph, tachometer and eight-day power reserve — an exquisite meeting of automotive engineering and haute horlogerie long before such partnerships became part of the contemporary luxury world.

For all its magnificence, the ROYALE appeared at precisely the wrong economic moment. The global financial crisis curtailed demand for a model reserved for an almost impossibly exclusive clientele, and BUGATTI ultimately produced six examples rather than the larger series Ettore had envisioned. Yet what proved commercially challenging in period only heightened the ROYALE's later status as one of the rarest and most coveted automotive masterpieces ever created. This was demonstrated spectacularly in November 1987, when the Kellner-bodied ROYALE was offered by Christie's at London's Royal Albert Hall and sold for £5.5 million, establishing a world record for an automobile at auction at the time — more than half a century after Ettore first conceived the Type 41.

BUGATTI recently marked the centenary where the ROYALE's story began. During the Bugatti Festival in September 2026, three of the six ROYALEs were reunited at the home of the brand, for BUGATTI customers, collectors and enthusiasts from around the world to admire. Alongside the Coupé Napoléon, still affectionately known as the 'Coupé du Patron', stood two other ROYALEs, each with a story of its own.

The Binder-bodied ROYALE, from the Autostadt, began life as Armand Esders' roadster before Henri Binder reshaped it into an armor-plated Coupé de Ville, its silhouette a quiet echo of the Coupé Napoléon. The Park Ward limousine, by contrast, was delivered in 1933 to a British client. Beneath its enclosed coachwork lies the ROYALE's aviation-derived straight-eight. Yet from walnut steering wheel to whalebone knobs, all three share the same signature touches — and on each radiator stands the elephant sculpted by Ettore's brother, Rembrandt.

A century later, the principles that shaped the ROYALE still guide BUGATTI's approach to creating unparalleled automobiles. From VEYRON and CHIRON¹ to TOURBILLON², the pursuit of performance continues alongside an equally exacting attention to design and craftsmanship — celebrating the emotion an automobile can inspire.

“The ROYALE tells us perhaps more about Ettore Bugatti than almost any other automobile he created. There was real confidence behind it; the belief that size could still possess elegance, that immense power could be refined, and that engineering, art and a truly human touch should never be separated. Today, these stories allow us to see beyond the automobile itself and understand the people, imagination and uncompromising ambition that brought it to life. That is why the ROYALE remains such an important part of BUGATTI’s living heritage, and one that will be treasured for countless generations to come.”

LUIGI GALLI

HERITAGE & CERTIFICATION EXPERT AT BUGATTI

BUGATTI warmly thanks the Musée National de l’Automobile — Collection Schlumpf in Mulhouse and the Autostadt in Wolfsburg for their generous support in making this reunion possible.

Press Contact

Jan Schmid

Director of Brand, Marketing & Communications

communications@bugatti.com