

CLASSIC DRIVER

Classic Concepts: 1970 Porsche 914/6 Murène by Heuliez

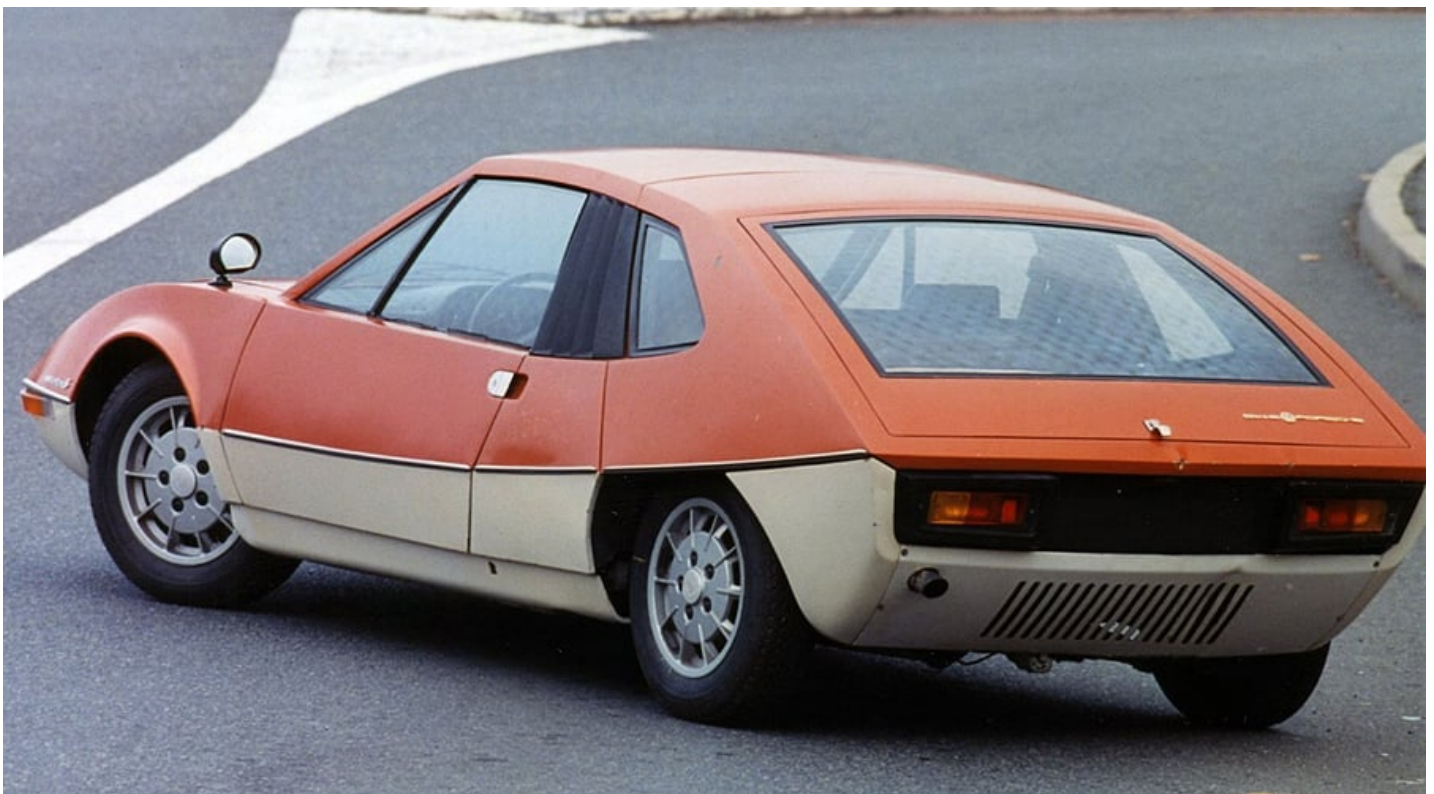
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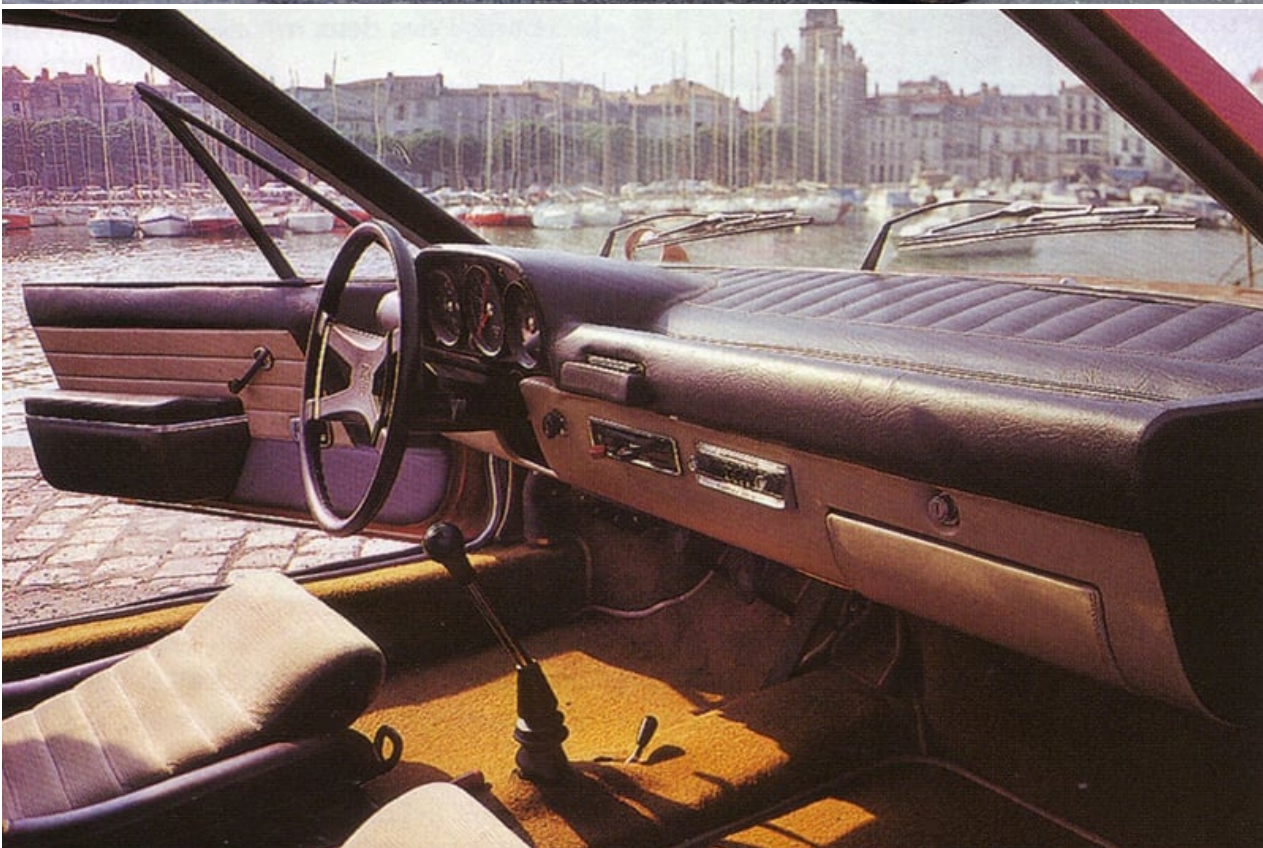
Coachbuilt Porsches are something of a rarity, given that the German manufacturer has almost always built its car bodies in-house. However, that didn't stop French coachbuilder Heuliez producing the 1970 Murène concept, based on a Porsche 914/6.

These days, Brissonneau & Lotz builds industrial crane parts, but in the late sixties the French company operated as an automotive coachbuilder and had what would turn out to be two of the 20th Century's most successful transport designers on its payroll.

One was Paul Bracq, who subsequently went on to become head of design at BMW and sire the legendary BMW Turbo concept of 1972. The other was Jacques Cooper, who not only collaborated with Bracq to create the first TGV turbotrain during their time together at B&L, but also penned a new shell for the VW-Porsche 914/6 during his stint there.

As many will know, the 914/6 was a joint collaboration intended to equip Volkswagen with a flagship sports car, and Porsche with an entry-level model to slot in beneath the 911. Although thousands were ultimately sold, the 914 venture wasn't without its problems: the death of VW Chairman Heinrich Nordhoff led to complications in the union of the two manufacturers, while the abrupt styling caused opinions to diverge. Enter Jacques Cooper, who sought to resolve the latter by penning a sleek alternative body on behalf of his employers.





On seeing Cooper's sketches, B&L management kick-started the project by acquiring a donor car furnished with the more desirable six-cylinder Porsche engine. But soon after settling down to work, Cooper's pet project ground to a halt as a result of financial difficulties at B&L's parent company Chausson – hence his take on the 914 seemed doomed before it had even turned a wheel. However, the resolute Frenchman took his design to Henry Heuliez, whose company had made a name for itself outfitting commercial vehicles, as well as the occasional Citroën motor car. Since much of the design work had been completed, Cooper's proposal proved enticing for Heuliez – it offered widespread exposure to the automotive giants it sought to provide services to, but at minimal cost. Cooper was given the go-ahead by his employers to co-operate with the Heuliez research department in order to complete the project. It made its debut at the 1970 Paris Motor Show, flaunting two-tone beige paintwork and the 'Murène' sobriquet – French for a particular species of eel. Public response

certainly proved electric; many felt the Murène offered a remedy to the 914's angular styling, which profoundly departed from the curvaceous 356s, 911s and 912s which had preceded it. Though the Murène wasn't devoid of straight lines, it displayed a more sweeping silhouette, enhanced by a steeper rake to the windscreen, uprising crease line and tapered rear. Another noteworthy feature was the rear hatch: it was not only hinged at the top of the rear window to provide access to storage, but also just above the rear lights so it could tip backwards to reveal the 1,991cc flat-six.

Despite its bold styling, the Murène failed to stimulate the affections of Porsche. As a result, once Heuliez had paid B&L for the donor car and conferred a final act of benevolence upon it in the form of new orange paintwork to the top section, the car was whisked away into storage - still unregistered. It remained there until recently, when it was given a full overhaul courtesy of the Heuliez Historic department before being sold at auction alongside several of its equally unique brethren.





Porsche might have overlooked the Murène, but it fulfilled its intended purpose – Heuliez subsequently gained traction in the automotive sector, plugging niche markets with small-series vehicles. And while it didn't spawn a limited series production run, the Murène certainly offered a captivating alternative to the familiar original produced by the German carmaker.

The Murène will be one of many Heuliez cars auctioned by Artcurial at the Le Mans Classic, 7 July 2012. See below for details.

Photos: Archives Heuliez

Gallery

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