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Tycoon's Tourer: Packard Eight Sport Phaeton

Lead

The Great Gatsby ended tragically, and so did – much later – the automotive brand Packard. But both were key components in cultivating American style in the late 1920s, an era which retains its magical aura to this day...

Originally a car to appeal to corporate tycoons, heads of state, leaders of industry and movie stars, the Packard Eight was a prominent player in American inter-war culture. Even if the brand name is now long gone, in its day Packard dominated the American luxury segment, selling, in total, more cars than Lincoln, Cadillac or Pierce-Arrow. As we know, 1929 was to be a historic year: the year of the great stock market crash and the onset of brutal economic recession, but it was also the most productive year for Packard. Almost 50,000 vehicles were built by Packard before the sun set on 1929 – most were six-cylinder, but well over 8,500 eight-cylinder cars were created, representing the essence of the American pre-War days.

Early in 1929, Packard presented the models 640 and 645 'Deluxe Eight'. Thanks to their long wheelbases and quiet, powerful engines, they emerged as touring cars par excellence, and various improvements saw the so-called Sixth Series rise to the top of the desirability stakes. The model was full of innovation: ground-breaking suspension, a servo-hydraulic braking system on all four wheels, and automatic cylinder lubrication (which made the time-consuming process of dry starts unnecessary) brought second-to-none comfort.



The Sport Phaeton shown here was originally shipped to Los Angeles, where it received a number of cosmetic upgrades, from elaborate chrome hub-caps to dual driving lights. In the course of a subsequent restoration, the car was given tasteful two-tone paintwork, a red leather interior and beige soft-top. With the 120HP eight-cylinder engine and manual three-speed gearbox, the car today offers a formidable touring weapon; it's easy to imagine oneself sitting behind the huge, sculpted steering wheel, riding fast and high through the countryside.

As did, supposedly, the Great Gatsby, roaring along the roads of Long Island... but we also know that Gatsby died young. The Packard brand that had been founded in 1899 finally met a similar fate, disappearing entirely by the end of the 1950s. Today, this car fits perfectly with the breathtaking imagery of F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel: an extraordinary automobile that preserves countless glamorous and beautiful moments of that inter-war era – a piece of automotive history that is best seen cruising coastal roads. Long may it continue to do so.

Photos: RM Auctions

Gallery

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