

Restoration 101

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Wide open, like your wallet

It's a common misconception that domestic cars are cheap and easy to restore. Unfortunately, many people have found out too late that this is not true.

Let's face facts: Most restorations are financial suicide. Unless you have an extremely rare and valuable car whose value will increase far more than the cost of its restoration, or a solid car now worth six figures that you inherited or bought so long ago your cost basis is near zero, restoring a car properly pretty much guarantees you are doing it to the next owner can enjoy it.

The worst risk? Doing a restoration multiple times or with multiple shops to get it right. Still willing to try? The following tips should help you avoid a restoration you would rather forget.

Is your restoration worth doing?

First, is the car you want to restore worth doing? This has nothing to do with value but everything to do with the foundation and the desired result. With enough time and money, anything can be restored, but if a car is very rusty or incomplete, you'll end up with a parts catalog replica that only shares the serial number of your donor car. Rule of thumb: Start with a good car, end up with a great car. Unless you have a significant car that needs to be saved at any cost, leave the basket-case restorations to somebody else. I also suggest only restoring a car you intend to keep forever—or at least until you are ready to take the financial bullet and sell it for less than you have invested.

Second, what is your intended use for the finished car? If you want a shiny driver that can win local shows and look perfect to 95% of the people out there, you can use readily available reproduction parts. You can also take shortcuts in the details, such as using undercoating rather than proper finishes and OE-spec overspray on the undercarriage, a muffler shop exhaust rather than

a correct reproduction, radial tires instead of expensive bias-ply tires, and other details that only matter in concours judging.

Raising the bar for national contests

If you want to show a car on a national level, the bar gets raised substantially. Proper finishes and correct parts are required, adding many hours and dollars. If you want the current state-of-the-art restoration, a car with as many New Old Stock parts as possible, buckle up. To compete at these top concours levels, where a car is not allowed any reproduction parts or variances from OE specs and finishes, open your wallet. I've seen \$2,500 spent for original air filters, \$35,000 for original exhausts, \$5,000 for spark plug wires, \$10,000 for batteries, and \$50,000 original tires purchased to compete at these levels.

Think of this level of car as Pebble Beach-quality with the added expense of using original parts that will be checked for age, authenticity, and correctness. That means 1965 Ford radiator hoses and fan belts on your '65 Shelby, not precise reproductions of the same, no matter how correct. Sadly, I know of many top-level N.O.S.-type restored cars with \$100,000 or more in original parts that owners will never put fluids in or ever attempt to start for fear of ruining them. While I can certainly appreciate this quest for assembly-line "new" cars, I sure as heck wouldn't want

a car I couldn't drive. Plus, I'm lazy, and pushing one in and out of trailers and around the garage gets old in a hurry.

So now you have a car you want to keep forever, are confident it won't disappear into the Redi-Strip tank when they dip it, and have decided your intended use. Who do you trust to restore it?

Check out "restoration specialists"

There are hundreds of so called "restoration specialists" in business, and I've never heard one proclaim that they overcharge customers, don't know how to paint, or don't finish cars on time. Weeding out the right one to use is tedious, but far better than later learning you picked the wrong one.

I often hear people rave about the same dozen or so well-known restorers and hear horror stories about others. This isn't to say a talented "no name" local shop willing to do the appropriate research won't turn out a national-level car. My advice? Join the appropriate owners club. Ask owners of similar cars that look great and have won high-level awards who restored them. Keep in mind good restorers are like good nannies; nobody wants to loan theirs out for the neighbors' kids for fear of losing them. Appropriately, concours judges, restoration parts houses, and magazine editors are sometimes a better source for leads on great shops than collectors—they see countless restored cars and will always remember who restored the ones that were done right.

Once you narrow it down to a few shops, pay them a visit. Look at their work and ask to see a portfolio; any shop that takes pride in its work will have one. Ask for references. Bring detailed pictures of your car and see if what they suggest for a restoration plan makes sense. Beware of any shop that offers a "not to exceed" estimate, as that is a guarantee that your car will end up with many shortcuts and be rushed to completion to meet the budget.

Fancy shop doesn't guarantee perfect restoration

Don't assume a fancy, well-equipped shop with high-dollar equipment will equal a perfect restoration. Bar none, the best restorers I have ever seen have modest shops, some even without paint booths, and turn out absolutely incredible restorations. There is no substitute for raw talent, patience, and pride.

When you do finally pick a shop, ask for a project plan with a timeline, including detailed accounting throughout the project. Request weekly updates with detailed photos via email. Expect to pay invoices on a set schedule and pay regular visits to confirm work is being done properly and on schedule. If you are unsure that you can

recognize proper workmanship, hire a knowledgeable expert to attend these visits with you.

Rough estimates on what it takes

Now, some rough estimates on what it takes to do a proper concours restoration on a reasonably rust- and damage-free, complete, running, and driving car:

- Body and paint: 600 hours minimum
- Chassis: 300 hours
- Interior, using ready-made reproduction upholstery kits: 80 hours
- Engine, transmission, and rear axle rebuilds to stock specs (usually sublet to outside firms): \$15,000 plus any sub-assembly rebuilding/refinishing
- Engine compartment assembly and detail: 40 hours
- Specialty finishes, including plating, chroming, polishing, and repair of hardware, trim, and components: \$10,000
- Reproduction (non-N.O.S.) soft trim and new parts such as exhaust, tires, wear items, wiring, etc.: \$10,000
- Paint and materials: \$5,000
- Transportation, shipping of parts, research hours, and surplus parts that didn't work and you'll end up selling on eBay: \$5,000
- Final assembly, sorting, tuning, and detailing: 100 hours



Getting to bare metal is just the start

Making a rough estimate, at \$75/hour, that's about \$130,000 for a car that needs no significant metal work and had no missing expensive or unobtainable parts, either of which could easily add tens of thousands of dollars to the total.

As you can see, restoration is a serious commitment. Your first and most important decision is figuring out to which level you want to take a car, and why. Then, picking the right car and doing your homework to find the right shop is paramount. But, and I speak from experience here, being involved with the process from start to finish, and knowing it was done right and that you didn't get burned makes the end result—and hopefully collecting all those concours awards—that much more rewarding. ♦

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