

PCA Down East Region

Beutler-Porsches

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The concept of the coachbuilt car survived in Europe far longer than it did in the United States. The efficiencies of mass-production made the idea of hand-beaten body panels seem more and more arcane as each year passed. Germans, however, saw things differently, and the traditions of handcrafted skill and cottage industry were proving more resilient in the old country. Porsche itself was a cottage industry in the early days; their “manufacturing” consisted of assembling modified Volkswagen parts onto chassis supplied by several different coachbuilding firms. In the first three years of 356 production, Porsche received bodies from no less than six different coachbuilders!

One of those companies, Beutler (“Boyt-ler”) Carrosserie of Switzerland, actually went one step further and began assembling completed cars using bodies of their own design. They had done the same thing using the Volkswagen chassis, but the Porsche was a far better platform for their creations, suitable for those privileged few who could afford a custom, hand-made car built to their specifications. The Beutler brothers, Ernst and Fritz, did business with Porsche right from the beginning, and even built the first six Porsche 356 Cabriolets while the embryonic 356 Coupes were being assembled in Gmund, Austria.



Here's a rare one for you... a Swiss 356! A contemporary photo of one of Beutler's first series of coupes based on the Porsche 356A. Note the unusual bumpers, trim and wheel covers... not to mention the dummy "grille" on the front of the car!

Despite the early head-start, the orders for car bodies disappeared after Porsche returned to Stuttgart and moved into the space next to Reutter

Carrosserie, who naturally got the lion's share of body construction contracts. Some time passed before Beutler began purchasing complete 356A chassis with the goal of assembling finished cars of their own design. These cars bore little resemblance to regular 356's, being notchback 2-door sedans with a front "grille" and modest tailfins! One Beutler 356A cabriolet was completed for the Count of Wurtemberg replete with leopard-print upholstery! All other Beutler cars were 2+2 coupes, however. The motivation for construction of a four-seat 356 was factory sales data indicating the primary reason for a Porsche customer selling his or her car was that it was too small and impractical. The Beutler brothers predicted that a four-seat 356 would find a willing market, and it so happened that Ferry Porsche agreed with them. Dr. Porsche had seen the Beutler cars and was impressed with the quality of manufacture and certain elements of their design. He felt that there may be a future for a Porsche sedan, and encouraged the production of more Beutler-Porsches ...with one major stipulation. They had to look more like a Porsche product and less like garish custom one-offs. The Beutlers went to work at the drawing board, and the later 356B Beutler cars are much more refined in appearance than the earlier cars, with simpler front-ends and very subtle tailfin "bumps". These later cars impressed Dr. Porsche a great deal, and it is easy to spot elements of Beutler design in later Porsche cars, the most notable example being the 1963 Type-695, Porsche's first drivable prototype of a successor for the aging 356.

A stunning example of a Beutler-Porsche, this one from the "second series", which utilized more stock Porsche items such as bumpers, handles, and trim.



Such was the strength of these design elements that the much of the Type-695's appearance survived in the Type-911, whose success as a Porsche product needs no further explanation. Beutler metalworking, not just design, was remarkable too. Unlike the early 356's, the Beutler bodies were not formed by hammering metal over a wooden form or "buck". Their body panels were hand-formed using English wheels and leather panelbeater bags in the traditional fashion! This was true custom bodywork!

There was, however, trouble in paradise. Beutler was an independent coachbuilder who was purchasing subassemblies from Porsche, and they felt that the finished cars were theirs to sell as they wished. Porsche saw Beutler's role as that of a subcontractor, and insisted that the cars be sold through the Porsche dealer network. Both parties were inflexible on this point, and soon Porsche ceased shipment of 356 chassis to Beutler. Beutler never again made a complete Porsche body, and concentrated on repair work and other projects. The opportunity for a four-seat Porsche had been lost.



Although only a handful of cars were made, the Beutler influence on Porsche design was tangible. Porsche itself even dabbled with some notchback coupe designs, including the aforementioned **Type-695**. However, despite the survival of some Beutler design clues into the 911-era, the story of the Beutler-Porsches is largely forgotten. It remains as just another colorful footnote in the long history of the Porsche 356.

Glenn