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**Frank Stella-Liveried BMW M1 Fetches \$770,000**

Bonhams

BMW M1 with Frank Stella paint scheme.

During Monterey's Concours d'Elegance lollapalooza going on this weekend, you'll hear lots of people refer to this car or that as a "work of art." Generally, this is just high-flalutin' flattery, but in the case of Peter Gregg's BMW M1 race car, with a livery designed by the American master Frank Stella, it's close to the truth.

Indeed, the situation in the Bonham's tent yesterday, where the car was auctioned off, amounted to a referendum on the artistic status of BMW's so-called "art cars." A typical race-prepared BMW M1 – a spectacular tube-frame-and-fiberglass sports racer designed by Giugiaro – might

go for about \$500,000. The Stella M1, which is a little tired and in need of some serious cash to make race-ready, had an estimate of between \$450,000-\$600,000 <http://www.bonhams.com/usa/auction/19363/lot/15/>.

If the car went for much more than the estimate, it could be reasonably argued the extra value was the Stella effect – the car as a piece of Stella's highly collectible oeuvre. If it went for less? Well, it's just a car with an interesting paint job.

On Thursday afternoon, the car sold to an anonymous bidder for \$854,000, including buyer's premium. Given the strangely ratifying power of cold hard cash, that makes it art, doesn't it?

The car's history, in brief: The M1 was BMW Motorsports division's first car, a sleek, mid-engine sports car intended for endurance road racing. The cars were used in the so-called Procar series, support races on Formula 1 weekends in the late 1970s featuring F1 drivers in evenly matched cars. In 1978, the American driving ace Peter Gregg ordered an M1 from the factory.

By this time, Gregg had become friends with Stella, who had painted the second of BMW's "Art Cars." Begun in 1975, the Art Car program recruited prominent artists to decorate some of BMW's works racecars (hyperlink [http://www.bmw-artcartour.com/galerie\\_e.html](http://www.bmw-artcartour.com/galerie_e.html)). Alexander Calder designed the first Art Car, a 3.0 CSL "Batmobile" that debuted at Le Mans in 1976. Stella had also painted a racing CSL that was driven by the Swedish driver Ronnie Peterson, who was also friends with Gregg.

After Peterson was killed racing at Monza in Italy in 1979, Stella drew up another version of the "polar

coordinates" design – first seen on Peterson's car – to go on Gregg's M1, as something of a tribute to Peterson.

Among the weird footnotes to this story is the fact that Gregg and Stella were together when their car crashed en route to Le Mans in 1980. The accident apparently affected Gregg's vision and, despondent, Gregg committed suicide in December 1980.

After passing from Gregg's widow through the hands of a private owner, the car ended up in the Guggenheim Museum's collection in the late 1990s.

To further skew the car-as-art issue, the Gregg M1 was being put up for auction by the Guggenheim, where it has resided for over a decade, in order to fund other acquisitions. "That is so incredibly insulting!" Stella quipped during an interview last week. But Ari Wiseman, the Guggenheim's deputy director, said the choice to sell isn't about artistic merit so much as practicality.

"This is a work we have not exhibited and it has significant maintenance and storage requirements," said Wiseman. And, indeed, cars do leak oil and give off fuel fumes and the tires go flat when they are held in storage. "We're not well equipped to manage these sorts of objects."

Gregg's Stella-liveried car is the only BMW Art Car in the hands of private owners. The 17 official Art Cars – representing the work of luminaries such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jenny Holzer and Jeff Koons – reside in BMW's permanent collection. The outlier status of Gregg's car made its value at auction something of a mystery. "I think because it isn't a factory car it isn't as valuable," said Sam Posey, the writer and teammate of Gregg's. "I think those other cars have been sort of knighted by the factory."

So the debate about the art status of the BMW Art Cars goes on. The money put down on the Stella M1 yesterday suggests it is a proper work of art – a Stella that happens to exist on a BMW-shaped canvas – and should be valued as such. Stella himself is not so sure. "I think these cars have to be regarded as a piece of design done by artists, not art."

One thing is sure: BMW loves the program and a new Art Car is due in a couple of years. "BMW was really enlightened at the beginning of the Art Car project," said Posey. "It was quite different for them to see their product through the eyes of an artist. For BMW, so Germanic a company, to see their car tricked out as a toy, it was a shock. They kind of grew as a group from that."

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