

Darrin of Paris
1937-1939 Los Angeles, California
by
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Two American designers, Thomas L. Hibbard (1898-1982) and Howard A. "Dutch" Darrin (1897-1982) served in France during World War I. Darrin, who was born in Cranford, New Jersey, and Hibbard, who was born in Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, were both later employed at Brewster's studios in Long Island City, New York. Hibbard, went on to be a co-founder of LeBaron, which sold designs but did not build car bodies.

Hibbard had left LeBaron by the time he travelled to Paris in 1923 with Darrin to explore business opportunities. Selling LeBaron designs was one possibility, but they decided to set up their own company and founded Hibbard & Darrin. They built innovatively styled bodies on many of Europe's most prestigious chassis. They became agents for Rolls-Royce and became known as the Company's official Parisian coach builder. Hibbard & Darrin bodied mostly Derby-built 40/50 hp Phantom Is. They also built a total of 35 bodies for Rolls-Royce at Springfield, Massachusetts. The bodies were shipped to Brewster in-the-white for use in Rolls-Royce's Custom Coach Work. However, the partnership ended in 1931 when Hibbard returned to America to take up a position in the design department of General Motors.

Hibbard's departure led Darrin to take on a new partner and become the creative force behind the new firm of Fernandez & Darrin, still based in Paris. Darrin met J. Fernandez, a wealthy Argentinian-born Parisian banker and furniture maker, at one of the many Concours d' Elegance held in and around Paris. Fernandez had a large shop in the Parisian suburb of Boulogne-sur-Seine near Long-champs where he manufactured custom built furniture and the occasional auto body for the local Isotta-Fraschini distributor and other Parisian distributors.

Although Fernandez & Darrin produced as many as 300 bodies during their seven-year life span, very few survive. Like their antecedent, Hibbard & Darrin, the majority of Fernandez & Darrin's clients commissioned chauffeur-driven town cars and limousines, bodies that were frequently



This fine model by Marqueart Scale Model Cars of 1933 Phantom II, 243AJS, by Darrin for Countess di Frasso is a fitting tribute to one of the world's finest automotive designers.

discarded in favour of open body styles when surviving chassis were restored in the second half of the twentieth century.

Darrin also returned to the United States in 1937 and set up his own coachworks, Darrin of Paris, on Sunset Boulevard, Hollywood. Darrin was not without friends in the movie making capital of the world, and chief among them was Hollywood mogul, Darryl F Zanuck. Darrin had met him on one of the film executive's trips to Paris, and the two avid polo players became good friends. By 1937, the former Warner Bros executive had become vice-president of Twentieth Century Fox Studios and was in a good position to introduce his old friend Dutch to Hollywood's celebrities.

Once he got to Hollywood, Darrin wasted no time, and started making the rounds of the Hollywood nightspots and restaurants, where he was introduced as Howard Darrin of Paris. He had the ability to turn off and on an authentic-sounding French accent if the situation warranted it. Consequently, many of his Hollywood customers were convinced he had spent his entire life on the Continent, unaware of the fact he had been born and raised in New Jersey. Darrin jokingly attributed a large part of his success on his suave 'Darrin of Paris' persona, rationalising that it was a more useful sales tool than portfolios of his previous work.

Whilst at a party hosted by Clark Gable, Darrin met the socialite, Countess Dorothy di Frasso, née Dorothy Taylor (1888-1954), born to a wealthy New York family, she inherited \$12 million. She engaged Darrin to come up with a new body for her 1933 Rolls-Royce Phantom II, 243AJS, that would attract more attention than the re-bodied Brewster Town Car on 1929 Phantom II, 69WJ, recently purchased by her good friend, movie star Constance Bennett. In 1938, Darrin delivered to the Countess one of the most striking Town Car designs ever built on a Rolls-Royce chassis, and he considered it one of his finest designs.

(Acknowledgements: <www.marqueart.com>; *Hemmings Classic Car*, July 1, 2006 article by Jim Donnelly; <www.coachbuilt.com> highly recommended; John de Campi, *Rolls-Royce in America*; Whitaker & Stuckey *The Rolls-Royce Phantom II & Phantom III*; and, Wikipedia)

