

Art and the French Grand Prix, 1921

by Gary D. Doyle



charcoal sketch. This particular scene was reproduced by Duesenberg and appeared in their first sales brochure for the Model "A" passenger car. It was described as "the first and only American car to win a European Classic."

The pencil sketches by Crosby were done to meet a publishing deadline. In the case of *The Autocar* it was at the newsstands on the Friday following race weekend. Because of a deadline the drawings had to be preplanned with the most likely corners sketched beforehand and the details of the car action filled in either by observation or descriptions from spectators. Because *The Autocar* had the most circulation of any of the motor magazines, Gordon Crosby was and is perhaps the best known motoring artist of his or any era.

The Baron

John D. Bryan worked on the staff of *The Motor*, which was the rival publication to *The Autocar*. As well known as Crosby, two contemporaries, he did not leave as many images behind and as a result is not as widely known today. Bryan was born in 1882 and died in 1957. *The Motor* published on Tuesday and he was even more rushed to get his drawings completed to meet this deadline. He would literally be sketching in the pits.

Bryan changed his name, at his wife's suggestion, to Bryan de Grineau in 1918 for professional reasons. His wife felt it sounded better. Because of a



Fig. 5

mix-up at a hotel registration desk when a clerk made a mistake and thought he was a royal, many of his travelling companions began calling him "Baron". De Grineau never published large collections of colored prints like Crosby so we are left with pencil drawings for the most part. He was as technically competent as Crosby and just as dramatic. The car looks correct, the roadway and trees are certainly as others depict them and there are people for scale and interest. Unfortunately this is all we have by de Grineau on the French Grand Prix. D. B. Tubbs in *Art and the Automobile* talks about de Grineau as very personable and in the motor scene for the companionship and travel as much as anything. Tubbs describes a couple of trips to the South of France where de Grineau was as much interested in the performing arts and peripheral events as the racing. Bryan had a vast network of acquaintances and friends that he apparently got around to on a regular basis. There are several other examples of his work in *Art and the Automobile*.

The British Master

Regarding paintings of the French Grand Prix, 1921, Roy Nockolds has been the most prolific of the professionals discussed here. He completed five that I can trace and there may be more. Four are included here.

Nockolds was born on London in 1911 and died at 68 years of age, after a short illness in 1979. He was self-taught as an artist, much like those that went before him. He was also an illustrator, which seems to be a common theme with the automotive artist's, then as well as now. He worked for a time with both *The Autocar* and *The Motor*. He is most known for his oil paintings though pencil sketches do exist. He was getting his pictures on motoring art published as early as 1926. Nockolds had a very productive career, was collected by corporations and individuals all over the world and was as well known for aeronautical paintings as for the cars.

During World War II he painted battle scenes for the military and the general information of the public. His most productive time for car painting was after the war. His special focus was on the movement of racing cars at speed. He never did much on the static views of cars in the pits, for example. He seldom dated his work so one is left to guess approximate times pieces were painted. He was influenced by Gordon Crosby, as many British automotive artists have been. As well as cars at speed he was particularly good with light. (See Fig.11). Fig.6 & 7 I believe were painted before the other work shown here. Roy Nockolds was meticulous with research on cars and races in order to get



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

details right. In Fig.7, for example, he paints the bodywork crack that developed on Murphy's car from all the pounding it took from the road surface. This is on the side of the car below the steering wheel. He renders the driving uniforms and helmets, livery of all the cars, the road surface, buildings and chassis configurations all correctly.

He is the first artist to use photographs for inspiration. He has to have seen the series of photographs done on the race by Agence De Reportage Photographique, "Meurisse". (Frederick Usher, a contemporary automotive historian talks about this collection in Griffith Borgeson's book *The Golden Age of the American Racing Car*, 2ed. in appendix VIII, though under the name of the Branger Collection.) The photo in Fig.8 or one like it has to have been the model for the painting at Pontlieue Corner (Fig.7). Nockolds adds other cars and places the people differently. Chassagne and Segrave once again trail. Andre Dubonnet, gentleman driver extraordinaire, resplendent in a blue silk uniform and cap, follows.



Fig. 8

Dubonnet had originally bought one of the STD rides (reportedly for 1000 pounds or about \$4100 in 1921 dollars.) but his car was not going to make the starting line. He then made a deal (more money, reportedly \$5,000) with Duesenberg to replace Louis Inghibert, gentleman driver, who had been hurt in practice. Inghibert had paid 50% of the entire Duesenberg entry fee to the Grand Prix for the privilege of being one of the *chauffeurs*. He wound up in a ditch with Murphy and his car on top of him. Jimmy was giving him a few on course pointers because in practice he had not been as fast as the professional drivers. Murphy was also hurt and started the race being taped from his armpits to his waist. Dubonnet finished fourth. Anyone for a "Dubonnet"? Fig. 9 shows another view of a corner with the same car lineup which shows action and

movement and the cars in close competition. Jean Chassagne and Henry Segrave must be getting tired of this. I believe Nockolds best painting of the 1921 race is Fig.11 of Murphy at *Maison Blanche*. It captures everything he was trying to execute with his later paintings. His representational style leaning towards soft impressionism captures the excitement of road racing. The light plays on the ground, the hood of the car and buildings. He highlights the motion and attitude of the car. He controls the focus of the foreground and background elements to emphasize the car's speed and motion. Altogether, a wonderful piece that in my mind is every bit as good as his acknowledged masterpiece, Richard Seaman in the Mercedes winning the 1938 German



Fig. 9

Grand Prix. (See *Art and the Automobile*, p.105) Chassagne trails again and I believe the painting is based on the photograph in Fig.10. The scene is rendered from a different angle but everything from the fence to the vine growing on the roof is the same. While interpreting the facts of this piece of roadway Roy Nockolds has not trashed the historical scene while giving us his impressions in an emotional way with artistic insight. There is no comparison between the photo and painting as to which makes you feel more a part of the action.



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Picture Credits

	<u>Figure</u>
<i>The Autocar</i>	2, 3, 4
The Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum	5
Charles R. J. Noble Collection	6,7
Photo-Meuisse	8,10,19,20
Thackwell Auto Art	9
Juratovic Collection	11
<i>Sports Car Illustrated</i>	12
<i>Automobile Quarterly</i>	13
Exxon Mobile Corporation	14
Detroit Public Library	15
Carlo Demand	16
Fred Stout	1, 17
Peter Hearsey	18
Barry Rowe	cover, 21