

What to Get the Car Enthusiast Who Has Everything

STEPHEN HILLMAN

David W. Miller II, president of Tulsa's Trinity Restoration Inc., has had the same conversation many times.

"I want to buy this car," a customer will say, eyeing Miller's restored 1969 Camaro Z28 sitting in the showroom of Trinity's shop at 8324 E. 97th St. South.

"When I tell them they don't want to buy that car, they ask, 'Why don't I?'"

"This is worth \$125,000. I can build you one from scratch for \$75,000," he says.

"Oh, how does that work?" they ask, opening the door for Miller to introduce the newest opportunity in the American muscle car investment boom – and a great gift for the auto enthusiast – the "car in a box."

Available from Dynacorn Classic Bodies Inc. of Oxnard, Calif., the complete kit bodies are stamped in overseas factories using the original dies licensed from General Motors and Ford and are available in a growing list of the most popular muscle car models – the 1967-68-69 Camaro convertible and hardtop, the 1957 convertible Bel Air and the 1967 fastback Mustang.

Yes, you can have your very own reproduction of Eleanor, the Shelby Mustang made uber-famous in the movie "Gone with the Wind," built from the ground up with newly pressed sheet metal, built to your specifications.

"Most people have no clue that you can do that," Miller said, explaining the boxed cars are brand-new on the market.

The bodies are available for about \$16,000, and a restoration shop like Miller's can build a basic stock muscle car for about \$75,000 using the kit.

"Then you get your choice of color, your choice of everything," Miller said, instead of buying a restored car like his.

Besides, "mine is not for sale," he said.

Part of the reason why classic muscle cars, including reproduction models, have experienced strong increases in value in recent years, is there are fewer originals available on the market, Miller said.

"What happens is, guys like me finally get theirs. I'm not selling. It's off the market. There is one less," he said. "Where are they going? Well, people are keeping them."

"You figure in the future, obviously there are fewer and fewer real ones. So, the price continues to go up," he said, which opens the market even more for the "car in a box" market.

Miller, who also appraises classic cars for insurance companies, has the inside track on the value of restorations and reproductions.

"The interesting thing is – take the '69 Camaro – you can build one for \$75,000, take it to auction and sell it for \$100,000," he said. "It is safe to say they (restorations) are worth \$125,000-150,000. When the real ones are worth \$150,000 and you can build one for \$75,000, you can make money."

"What's really bad is the Mustangs, especially the Shelybs," he said. "Even if

they are fakes, they are going for \$250,000 – that's a whole another \$100-grand. We can build them for all the same price. When you can build one for \$75,000-80,000, it's a real bargain."

Miller said the muscle car market, for both restorations and reproductions, is particularly hot.

"Definitely right now," he said. "This thing goes through phases just like anything else, but what has really been funny to watch are the fakes. I call them fakes, but 'tribute' cars is what they call them. At auction, there can be a '72 Chevelle, not an SS, just a Chevelle, but it is a tribute car. It still gets \$100,000."

"People don't care," Miller said. "They are going for the look – it's a lot more the look and the feel."

That has also led to strength in the restoration-modification market, he said.

"The resto-mod is where it looks like an old car but drives like a new car," he said. "Obviously, it's not an original, but people don't care. Sometimes those go for more. The resto-mods are getting really valuable because people want the comforts, they want it to behave."

The "car in a box" concept opens additional potential for the investor or gift giver who wants the prestige of a completely restored car with the original Vehicle Identification Number.

"What is interesting is, if you have a donor car, say a really bad one, or even if you just have a donor frame and therefore a VIN number, you can take that frame,

clean it up, build the whole rest of the car new, and title it as a '57 or whatever," Miller said.

For the Camaros and Mustangs, which were unibody models, all that is needed is the front part of the suspension, or the subframe, he said.

"If you have a subframe for a Camaro or a Mustang, in the state of Oklahoma, because you have that one piece, you can build it all new and title it as a rebuild," he said, as long as the state OKs the restoration.

"Now, if you don't care, which a lot of these guys don't, you can buy new frames, usually with a modern suspension," and title the car as a kit car with a new title, he said.

"You have some interesting options there," he said, noting that while \$75,000 "is a good starting point for your basic stock car, you start going up from there when you start adding things like disc brakes, fuel injection, TV screens, air conditioning."

Miller said he considered buying a kit car when he restored his Camaro, but "we decided, no, this is a restoration, not a kit car."

There will always be one big advantage to the kit car route over the original body restoration, he said.

"There is no rust."

"For \$15,995, you get the whole thing. I paid nearly that for my rusting, hulking pile." ◀



David W. Miller II, president of Trinity Restoration, with his restored 1969 Camaro in the Trinity showroom at 8324 E. 9th Street South.

SARAH NICODEMUS