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Holy Roller

The Rolls-Royce Phantom is divine by design.

BY CHRISTIAN GULLIKSEN

ALTHOUGH HE WORKED on a number of projects for BMW, Mini, MG, and Land Rover during his 15-year tenure with the BMW Group, Marek Djordjevic is best known for designing the Rolls-Royce Phantom, the 100 EX showcar, and the forthcoming 2007 Rolls-Royce convertible, the cars he most recently shaped before leaving the

company last fall to start his own firm. The Rolls-Royce models' dramatic forms have been central to the marque's renaissance. Djordjevic, a 36-year-old alumni of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., discussed with *Robb Report* the development of the Phantom and its significance as the first all-new Rolls-Royce produced under BMW's aegis.

The last cars created under Henry Royce influenced Marek Djordjevic's design for the Phantom (above).

You started on the Phantom with a blank slate. What was your directive from BMW, your design brief?

MAREK DJORDJEVIC: The beauty of this project was that when the BMW Group got ownership of the marque in 1998 we were entrusted, along with engineering and marketing, to come up with the brief for the right car. We had a competition between three designers for the exterior and went to the studio early in 1999 to work on drawings. We started on the models around May and did two proposals each—six scale models in clay. Everything was completed by the end of summer, and by Christmas we had a winner.

Your winning design displays clear historical references. Were there particular cars you looked to for inspiration?

MD: Some of the most impressive cars to me were the Phantom IIs of the '30s. You have to go back as far as that, before they bought Bentley, for this pure Rolls design language. They were the cars that established the marque and its values, and also—very importantly—the last cars developed under Henry Royce. There is such a sense of presence, of occasion, and they were my greatest inspiration. The Silver Cloud is of course the most

iconic model. When you say Rolls-Royce, that's what people think of. And then there is the pragmatism of the Silver Shadow, which was one of the most popular models to date.

You took traditional elements, but put them together in a radical fashion.

MD: The overall design was classic modern. A Rolls-Royce could be dismissed as an old-time thing of the past, but nothing could be further from truth. Unfortunately, the company was unable to live up to its promises for the last 20-odd years because it lacked the resources. We saw this as an opportunity to bring about a renaissance of the marque, to respect it and reflect it in a modern way.

The design is more bold than it is pretty. Was that your intention?

MD: Absolutely. During the research phase, it became very clear to me that I was faced with a threefold challenge: This would be the first Rolls-Royce produced under new stewardship, the first Rolls-Royce of the new century, and the car that would be on the market for the marque's 100th anniversary. Luckily I find that kind of pressure very stimulating.

During one of my visits to the Nethercutt Collection [an automotive

museum and research library in Sylmar, Calif.], there was a Phantom II parked next to a Duesenberg. The Duesenberg was the prettier of the two—the poetry, the sweetness. But the Rolls-Royce next to it still somehow had a stronger presence, and that's what fascinated me. At that point I realized that no matter who the coachbuilder was, Rolls-Royce maintained a message. They were cars with intriguing contrasts reflected by a clientele that ranged from the conservative to the extroverted. But they all had a central story: grand, sheer surfaces balanced by details.

What was most important to you in the Phantom's design?

MD: The proportions were key. I can't stress that enough. No matter what else you do, you have to get the proportions right. I consider a car's function and the proportions associated with that. Say the function is driving. I think about a BMW M3. You see the nose down and the tail up, a wedge shape pointing forward and down. It's aggressive to the road and communicates its purpose. In the case of Rolls-Royce, the function is *wagability*—the idea of wafting through the countryside. Effortless motoring, to use the quintessential British expression. I saw present in most Rolls-Royces a high front with lines descending to a low back. The profile was forward and up. That was critical, because it allowed us to accomplish all the other things that were important. For instance, we had the real estate for the size of the grille, and I could achieve a little detail I wanted: to sit comfortably in the rear of the car and still be able to see the Flying Lady.

Going from the front to the back, you start at the face with a tremendous sense of strength, but things get calmer as you move along. By the time you get to the back, it's almost demure. I'm thinking specifically about the taillights. In my research I had a sense of what the front of a Rolls-Royce should look like. But with the taillights, I didn't. I realized





"Going from the front to the back, you start at the face with a tremendous sense of strength, but things get calmer as you move along."

—MAREK DJORDJEVIC, DESIGNER OF THE PHANTOM

it was because you hardly ever see them—they're so diminutive. So the rear of the Phantom is dominated by sheet metal. The taillights have a specific signature at night, but they are discreet.

Were suicide doors part of your design from the beginning? Was their inclusion more a historical reference or a practical consideration?

MD: They were part of the original objective, but I wasn't sure if we would be able to include them. They were part of the heritage, but they were also there for the same practical reason that they were used back then: ease of entry and exit.

Is there an element of the Phantom's design of which you are especially proud?

MD: If there is one thing that I'm proud of, it's overall proportion. But as for details, there is a line of brightwork that runs all the way from the grille, straight as an arrow, to the small window behind the rear door. You couldn't do this if you didn't have that proud front end. These lines work best if curved slightly. That type of line is dynamic and strong and usually looks good from any angle. I'm also pleased with the stance of the car. It's like a sports car's stance.



Marek Djordjevic

Did you encounter many challenges shepherding the Phantom from design to production?

MD: It was one of the most streamlined design programs I've ever experienced. There was a small team of dedicated people doing not *their* best but *the* best. There was a lot of responsibility knowing that it's not every day you get to design a new Rolls-Royce from scratch. It was a blessed situation.

Were you concerned about how the car's design would be received?

MD: What gave me confidence were presentations made to potential customers prior to launch. These were after the car already was finished, in discreet environments where dealers brought customers who might want a spot on the list. Security was so tight surrounding the car's production that

there hadn't even been spy photos, so these were virgin eyes. It was good for me as a designer to see how a customer reacts to viewing a car from out of the blue. One of the best compliments I've ever gotten was from a customer who said, "Thank you for bringing out a car that is once again proud of being a Rolls-Royce, instead of apologizing for it."

You have left Rolls-Royce to start your own firm, Marek Djordjevic Inc. What are your plans there?

MD: What I'm doing now is expanding beyond automobiles to premium land, sea, and air vehicles. The inspiration came from Rolls-Royce. It's a little-known fact that Rolls-Royce held speed records in all three arenas, and it just happens to be that all are of tremendous interest to me.

Was the nautically flavored 100 EX the result of these broader interests?

MD: The 100 EX naturally lent itself to that inspiration. Its use is very much like a pleasure boat or an aircraft. In other cars the pleasure is centered on the driver. This is a car where the pleasure is shared by all occupants.

Because of its waftability?

MD: Exactly. *




BAVARIAN RHAPSODY

BMW WON its well-documented struggle with Volkswagen for ownership of Rolls-Royce—sort of. A legal technicality gave BMW the rights to the coveted Rolls-Royce name, but nothing more. Volkswagen received everything else, including the factory. Thus, not only did the Bavarian automaker need to design a new Rolls-Royce from scratch, it had to find somewhere to build the car. BMW chose the Goodwood estate in West Sussex—which also hosts the Earl of March's Festival of Speed—and constructed an airy factory noted for its environmentally sensitive design.

The decision to keep production in England buoyed the integrity of Rolls-Royce, as did BMW's public affirmations that the cars built on its watch would not be remodeled 7 Series sedans. "A lot of people expected us to do a large, luxurious BMW," says Marek Djordjevic, the Phantom's designer. "That only made us work harder to prove otherwise."

The new Phantom might not share DNA with earlier Rolls-Royces, but the team did its homework, and any enthusiast will recognize the familiar touches. From its high seating position and quiet cabin to its distinctive ride

and steering feel, the Phantom is undeniably a Rolls-Royce—but it is better than its predecessors. Performance characteristics such as swift power delivery and strong cornering ability never were associated with Rolls-Royce, which traditionally declined even to state horsepower ratings, but they seem like a natural fit for the Phantom.

Now we have a convertible to look forward to in 2007, and judging by the success of the Phantom sedan, we can wait with anticipation rather than trepidation. —C.G. 

Rolls-Royce, www.rolls-roycemotors.com

The 100 EX experimental car (above) presents an early glimpse of the forthcoming Phantom convertible.