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The revolution started — and ended — with Helicron No. 1



THE LANE MOTOR MUSEUM

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

The invention of the internal combustion engine allowed mankind to finally achieve a cherished goal. That goal, of course, was to frighten the bejezus out of innocent pedestrians. Okay, so that wasn't the goal, but that might have been your guess if the only automobile you had ever seen was the Helicron.

You may be relieved to learn that the Helicron No. 1, shown here, was not followed by Helicron No. 2, or Helicron any other number. It's a one-off, built in 1932 using the chassis of a Rosengart, a French car manufacturer that started out building Austin 7s under license. Sadly, the inventor's name is not known.

The Helicron was neither the first nor the only propeller-powered car; Frenchman Marcel Leyat, probably the best-known proponent of the idea, built about 30 propeller-powered cars between 1913 and 1926, at least two of which still exist today. In fact, the Lane Motor Museum of Nashville, Tennessee, which owns the Helicron, has two other propeller cars: a 1929 Wind Wagon, powered by a Harley-Davidson engine, and something called L'Éclair, on loan from the

Musée Regional de l'Air in France.

Though it might seem like a Rube Goldbergian way of moving an automobile, propeller propulsion has its advantages. It requires no gearbox, for example, nor any kind of drivetrain nor differential. Traction is not an issue—the Helicron should accelerate as well on sheer ice as it would on a dry lake bed. (Stopping is another issue.) Simplicity contributes to light weight: The car weighs just 1,000 pounds.

Yet there are drawbacks, to be sure. Owner Jeff Lane reports that the car is very loud and windy, and takes a good deal of time to reach its cruising speed of 30-40 mph on level ground. It's not very good at climbing hills or starting up on steep grades, and it lacks reverse.

The car does display some interesting engineering ideas. The unknown builder turned the Rosengart chassis front-to-back, so that the rear wheels do the steering. The front axle is solid, with no suspension, though the rear wheels are sprung. Four-wheel mechanical brakes do an adequate job of stopping the car, thanks to its light weight. It's believed

that the car originally was powered by an ABC Scorpion engine, which has since been lost; currently, propulsion comes via a 1.3-liter, air-cooled Citroën GS boxer four, with the two four-foot wooden propellers connected directly to the crankshaft. Top speed is estimated to be 75 mph, without a tailwind.

The Helicron was discovered in 2000 in a barn in France, where it had been left by its creator. During its restoration, most of the original mechanical components were kept, including the wire wheels, dashboard, frame, snazzy aircraft-style steering wheel, steering gear, brake pedal, light switch, headlamps and nameplate. What do you suppose the Tennessee authorities did after taking a look at this 74-year-old part-aircraft, part-boat? They approved it for use on public roads, that's what. That's why we love Tennessee.

The Lane Motor Museum, which specializes in wonderfully offbeat vehicles from around the world, acquired the Helicron in 2004 and showed the car at the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance in 2006, where we discovered it. 🚗