



JUST THE FACTS

Mercedes-Benz SSK
27/180/250hp (w/506)

Engine M06 7,065cc 6-cyl

Power 178bhp

Torque 414lb ft @ 1,900rpm

Transmission 4-speed manual, RWD

Weight 1,700kg

0-62mph N/A

Top speed 117mph

Fuel consumption 10.5mpg

OVERVIEW

This one off SSK and its history make it a notable example of the breed, even in rarefied SSK circles.

Now owned by the Mercedes-Benz Museum in Stuttgart, Germany. The car is a one-off model, built in 1927. It is the only SSK ever built with a 250hp engine. The car is a one-off model, built in 1927.

OUT FOR THE COUNT

The realisation of a wealthy Italian count's dream, but it is not just the outrageously opulent body that gives this Mercedes enduring appeal

WORDS & IMAGES CHRIS ECKERMANN



They were astounded to discover that it was actually Count Trossi himself who sketched the car's lines, and that it was sent to Britain to be built



Functional but still attractive dials give the driver a lot of information.



Polished and prepared inside and out to win concours competitions.



Despite the car's one off styling, underneath it is a standard SSK.



The distinctively shaped exhausts give voice to the six-cylinder engine.

THE MERCEDES SS/K/L CARS of the 1920s and 1930s still stand as some of the most successful and famous designs in the pre war history of Mercedes-Benz, winning plaudits both as road cars but also as race cars. The white paint and their sheer size meant they cut very distinctive figures in the era's automotive landscape – meaning this black car really stands out from the albeit small crowd.

This SSK, known as the Black Prince, or *Principe Nero* in its native Italian, is a true eye catcher thanks to its outlandish, Art Deco style design, and behind these voluptuous curves there lies an intriguing tale. The story of this one off Mercedes starts back in January 1930

with chassis number 36038 fitted with the six-cylinder engine number 77644, which was delivered to Tokyo. For reasons unknown, the chassis returned to Mercedes' Untertürkheim plant in September 1930. Some weeks later, it was sent to the Mercedes-Benz sales agent in Milan, Carlo Saporiti, where it stayed for over a year before it was bought by the Italian count Carlo Felice Trossi in 1932.

The car's full history only came to light when its current owner, the Ralph Lauren collection, did some research. It came to this collection in 1988, and between 1991 and 1993 it was restored by Paul Russell. Assuming that one of the era's many talented coachbuilders came up with this design, Lauren and Russell

were astounded to discover that it was actually Count Trossi himself who sketched the car's lines, after which it was sent to Britain where a builder by the name of Willie White produced the body you see here, interpreting the count's drawings as best he could. Little is known of White, but the count's history is somewhat more colourful.

Carlo Felice Trossi came from a wealthy Italian banking family and was a massive enthusiast of fast cars, aeroplanes and boats. Born in Biella on April 27 1908 (he died in Milan on May 5 1949 from cancer), he was the stereotypical gentleman racer, and one who found some success. He raced for Enzo Ferrari, was the second president of Scuderia Ferrari >

**CLASSIC CHOICE
COUNT TROSSI'S SSK**



Voluptuous arches dominate the car's very dramatic appearance.



Global life, styled by an Italian.



The three bold bulges at the rear give the Black Prince a rather futuristic look.



Some more typical 1930s elements remain.

and competed in many grands prix. However the fabric of his nation's motorsport was torn apart when in 1931 Rudolf Caracciola and Wilhelm Sebastian in a Mercedes-Benz SSK took that year's Mille Miglia victory, the first time a non Italian driver had won that famous and arduous race. It certainly brought the three-pointed star to the attention of the Italians. Indeed, a year after Caracciola's success, Count Trossi entered the Mille Miglia himself – and he also bought this SSK's chassis.

As well as racing, Count Trossi was also interested in the development of cars and had a number of projects, one of which was this Black Prince. Despite not being a designer by trade, Trossi's lines have a boldness and great stylishness to them, a huge departure from the more traditional form of the original Mercedes-Benz SSK. The black paint, quite apart from lending the car its name, gives it a very imposing appearance. The design flows so well that it is almost as if it floats or flies – it could be described as a moving sculpture.

With just two seats and no doors, the long bonnet has 41 engine vents on each side. The swooping teardrop shaped front wings curl round the 56-spoke wire wheels, whilst the rear wheels are hidden under spats that wear the three-pointed star. Viewing it from behind the pointed wings, like the tails of a dinner jacket give it an almost bat like look, slender fins



Stylish workings celebrate Mercedes' engineering.

“It won several prestigious awards, among them the concours d'elegance in Pebble Beach in 1993 and the concours d'elegance in Villa D'Este in 2007”

running along the tops of the rear wings adding definition. However, while outwardly all is outrageous, underneath it is a standard Mercedes-Benz SSK. The seven-litre, straight-six engine is fitted with higher compression pistons and with the so called 'elephant blower', a larger version of the supercharger.

NEVER ENDING STORY

The SSK was bought and sold several times by Trossi between 1932 and 1949. After his death, the car went to Argentina in 1950. Between 1952 and somewhere in the 70s it passed through four American owners, before it came to Britain and then returned to the USA again around 1980. Ralph Lauren bought it in 1988 and, after its restoration, it won several prestigious awards, among them the concours d'elegance in Pebble Beach in 1993 and the concours d'elegance in Villa D'Este in 2007.

The Black Prince is a masterpiece of design as well as an ongoing source of mystery. It is perhaps unusual that despite his Italian connections Count Trossi bought a Mercedes chassis, and then took it to the UK instead of letting one of the well known Italian styling houses like Zagato realise his dream. It is a story with questions that will probably never be answered, but for many these simply add to the fascination of this car, whose design and intrigue mean it will forever be remembered. ■