



Conservatoire Citroën

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Every Citroën enthusiast in the world has heard about this place. Some of us have been there and seen the collection of cars. Conservatoire Citroën, the Mecca for our passion, at the Aulnay-sous-Bois factory, just north of Paris. With this article, the intention is to show that the Conservatoire is not, as some rumours suggest, an impregnable fortress where the treasures are protected against the world outside - and the people inside are too busy with their internal affairs to care about you.

On the contrary: Conservatoire Citroën is the power center of everything connected to the history and heritage of Citroën, and every single member of the staff is deeply devoted to the marque, contributing and helping everybody however they can. Every day in dialogue and interaction with collectors and enthusiasts around the world, doing everything in their power to serve the world outside: enthusiasts, collectors, clubs...

Considering that there are only 5 members of the staff and a few helpers, it is absolutely unbelievable what they achieve!



Photo: Citroën

Top: In a remote corner of the gigantic factory area in Aulnay-sous-Bois, this somewhat discreet hall of 6.500 square meters houses the Conservatoire Citroën.

Left: Another (more flattering) photo, taken at the opening in 2001. Photo: Citroën.



Introduction

When the Conservatoire Citroën was opened back in 2001 it was more than pleasant news for many of us. This was a very solid proof that Citroën now showed more interest in their own fantastic heritage than ever before. Until then, the cars had been spread around in various locations - now they finally were stored in one place! A fine start. During the last 10 years, we have seen Citroën showing a constant increase of understanding of the value of their history, with this unique tradition of innovation. Today it plays a natural role in the identity of the brand and marketing.

Beside the huge collection of cars, Conservatoire Citroën also houses an enormous archive with all sorts of historical documents and other items related to the history of Citroën. But it is not there to collect dust! Both the car collection and the archives serves as basis of an impressive amount of external activities.

The car collection

Back in 2001 there were 300 cars - this number has increased to a good 400. The collection includes almost all the production models by Citroën from 1919 to the present. The early years are well represented with cars at a high level of restoration. Many of these cars have been purchased from collectors during the past years - so of course you can find details here and there, which are not strictly original. For example, some of the pre-war Tractions were restored during the eighties, when people were not quite as conscientious about all parts being correct for the year of the car. But this applies to only a very small number of cars - and it will be improved as time and resources allow. You will also find post-war Tractions, restored by the Conservatoire Citroën during the recent years, in absolutely perfect, original state - the same goes for the large collection of A-models and D-models and everything newer. Fine examples of almost any production model, sometimes supplemented with a car having a special history or with special accessories.

Another category is the amazing collection of prototypes and concept cars. Among the absolute jewels are the three TPVs, found in an attic at Ferté-Vidame in the early nineties and exhibited at the 1998 Retromobile. Or several versions of experimental cars like Lefèvre's "Coccinelle" from the late fifties: Aerodynamic cars with flat twin engines, hydropneumatic suspension and gull-wing doors. Other examples: The mini H-van, the

type G. Or the C60 dating from 1960 designed to fill the gap between the 2CV and the ID19. Project L which later evolved into the CX. And more recent cars like ECO2000, Eole, Karin, Xenia, Activa and later – cars that never went into production, but showed the way.

The collection also includes a large number of cars with motor sports history. From all kinds of rally and racing versions of DS and SM to later ZX-monsters and even later Saxo- and C4 rally cars.

The more spectacular things: A Wankel powered helicopter from 1970, peculiar fire-trucks, tractors, toy cars. Not to mention the ultra-historic Kégresse halftracks: The 1921 B2-based type K1, actual car from the Sahara Expedition (the first car ever to cross the Sahara) or the P17 rebuild as one of the cars from the Yellow Expedition through Central Asia in 1931-32.

New cars are constantly added to the collection. Some are donated from Citroën dealers, clubs and collectors – others are recent cars prepared for motor shows and exhibitions. They all end up in the Conservatoire.

If you haven't seen the collection recently, it might be a good idea to check out the internet - it is not difficult to find information and photos from the hallowed halls!



Photo: Citroën



Lending of cars

The cars in the big hall are not "rooted" to the concrete floor. As a matter of fact every year around 100 cars are loaned out for the press, movies, larger Citroën-events and exhibitions. In 2011 a Kégresse went all the way to Shanghai to an exhibition celebrating the 80 years of the Yellow Expedition. And when we later this year (2012) go to the ICCCR in Yorkshire, we will see cars from Conservatoire Citroën in the museum of the event.

It must be a tremendous job just to keep track of the logistics – and in many cases, it is necessary to prepare the cars for the different events; especially if they are to be driven during an event. That's why you also find a well equipped workshop in the Conservatoire! In the workshop there's lots of activity - not only the work on cars to be loaned out, but also renovation and improvements on cars in the collection. Even larger restoration projects are undertaken, though often with the aid of professionals elsewhere.



A view into the most sacred room where the protocols are stored. Invaluable source material!

The archives

No less important than the cars – and with just as much activity involved – are the archives! A wide variety of items are kept here, some of the most important being “the books”: The so-called “Mains Courantes” – production protocols with information concerning every single car ever produced by Citroën since 1919.

The archives also contain an invaluable treasure of drawings. Design sketches by Flaminio Bertoni and others, original hand-drawn pieces of art, showing cars or details – masterpieces of beauty. And not only cars: Architect drawings of Citroën buildings, many of them dating back to the twenties.

All kinds of technical material: A huge collection of owner’s manuals, workshop manuals, spare parts catalogues - and of course sales material for any Citroën, such as brochures, posters and books. And other kinds of documentation: Administrative documents, correspondence, press material etc. Even if Citroën has their “Phototèque” located in the headquarters in central Paris a lot of historic photographs are kept in the archives at the Conservatoire.

All together it is tremendous amounts of paper. On the shelves you will also find Citroën club magazines and a large library of books about the marque and cars.

Just like the car collection, there’s a constant flow of new items coming in. You really have to take your hat off to the incredible amount of work needed, just to keep track of everything. Even if lots of documents and objects are still not registered and filed - and many things are waiting in boxes which have not been opened for years - most things have a place and can be found if needed.

Citromobilia

There’s even more to the list of inventory. Numerous objects of various sorts are stored in Conservatoire Citroën. Engines (historic prototypes) and other car parts, objects from factories and stores and different curiosities related to the marque. A large number of miniature cars, not only “modern” scale models, but also original design models and mock-ups in different scales, coming from Citroën’s Bureau d’Etudes. Some are made of wood, clay and other plastic materials. Unique and invaluable! Speaking about miniature cars, you can find the rare and famous “Jouets Citroën” – exact scale models of cars from the twenties and thirties – made by Citroën for the children to play with.



Mechanic Yannick Billy servicing an SM to be driven at an event outside the Conservatoire.

Below: All kinds of technical literature, manuals and paper coming in a constant flow. But it is worth nothing if not properly filed. A big job!





Design study hand-made by Flaminio Bertoni: 2CV bonnet design.
Bertoni also made the bust of Pierre Boulanger, managing director of Citroën 1937-50.
Both objects were exhibited at Retromobile this year.

Activities

In addition to all the work associated with maintaining the car collection, time and effort is spent on external activities. Especially the archives contain incredible amounts of information which is happily shared with the world. Here are the most important activities of the Conservatoire:

Guided tours

Even if Conservatoire Citroën is not really a public museum, it is far from closed. Every other week guided tours for visitors are being arranged, always planned a long time in advance. Through the years there has been an increase in the number of visitors. Ca. 3500 guests in 2010 and almost 4000 in 2011. A few external helpers are involved to help the staff with this task.

Attestations

For several years Conservatoire Citroën has offered owners of classic Citroëns an attestation with information about their car including the exact date of production. Of course provided that the owner can present proof of ownership including identification numbers of the car - and that this information matches the production protocols. Today you can get such an attestation for 40 euros. In 2010 the Conservatoire introduced a very attractive "luxury version", the "Coffret Légende", a very exclusive box which beside the car attestation contains various descriptions and documentation related to the specific model - and an optional DVD about the history of Citroën. There's a big demand for these "products": Last year 150 coffrets were sold and 500 attestations made.





Dossiers Documentaires

In 2010 a new, very interesting product was launched: The “Dossiers Documentaires”. Not really books, but rather collections of scanned documents concerning specific models, factories or events, assembled in printed “paperbacks” in A4-format. But quite heavy with many pages and in fine quality. Priced between 35 and 55 euros these enjoyable dossiers are full of information; often of a kind which can’t be found elsewhere. More than 20 different titles have been published to the present date!

Shop

In the entrance hall a small shop has been established as a “local branch” of the C42 shop at Champs Élysées. Here you can buy different sorts of Citroën merchandise such as miniature cars etc. – and of course the Dossiers Documentaires. The shop is normally open whenever there are visitors at the Conservatoire.



On this picture you can almost feel the hectic activity, people in and out, telephones ringing etc. But every day at lunch-time, the front door is locked and everybody goes to the big canteen at the factory. It is necessary “de-stressing”, but also the time during the day for the staff to talk about whatever is going on...

Presence at events

You will find the Conservatoire present at all major Citroën events in France as well as other countries. Of course at the ICCCRs and other ACI events. Often cars from the Conservatoire are on show and Citroën Heritage is represented with a sales stand. For the people at Conservatoire Citroën, it is very important to be where things are going on - among collectors and enthusiasts! But also home in Aulnay, the Conservatoire itself is a natural setting for meetings and other special events, both within Citroën and with people from the outside. Several of the ACI annual general meetings have been held at the Conservatoire.

Information Center!

What really strikes you when visiting it, is the bustle in the office! It appears chaotic with busy people having a tough time putting up with constant interruptions from the noisy telephones - somebody wants to know something about the history of Citroën! Press, movie-people, private collectors asking for car attestations or perhaps a job! Not surprisingly it happens every week that someone offer their labour for free – who wouldn't like to be just there! For obvious reasons this is not possible. Questions to answer, things to organize, informations going out, documents to file, tasks everywhere.



Catherine Jeannin takes good care of the archives and thousands of documents, including the production protocols. She also ensures that all information is correct and numbers are matching, when the car certificates are to be issued. Here she is showing a binder with brochures of DS and Type H.

The staff

If you think about all the work being done, all the necessary communication, all the organizing, all the skills, all the tasks required to be dealt with mentioned in this article - it is really hard to believe that this is possible with only five (5) members of the staff! Even if they have associates and helpers in peak periods of activity. It's an enormous workload and it's increasing all the time.

Here's a short introduction to these heroic people:

Jean-Claude Lannes is the operational manager with a sense of overview and a mechanic as well.

Yannick Billy rules in the workshop, a skilled mechanic with great experience keeping the cars running.

Catherine Jeannin takes care of the archives and thousands of documents - including attestations.

Martine Darblade organises and coordinates visitor tours.

And, known to everyone in the ACI, Denis Huille, who is head of Citroën Héritage and the director of the Conservatoire.

All of them have the true spirit and the history of Citroën deep in their veins. And without their enthusiasm and their will to give a hand whenever it is needed Citroën would have to double the workforce at the Conservatoire!



Denis Huille



Jean-Claude Lannes



Martine Darblade

Now and the future

Here in 2012 Conservatoire Citroën has already been present at Retromobile and the Techno Classica show in Essen. By the way, at Retromobile we saw the result of five years restoration work on a beautiful U23 bus from 1947. As mentioned, the Conservatoire will be in England at the ICCCR in August - with cars and a shop.



The biggest project of this year has recently started: A complete inventory of every single item at the Conservatoire. Everything will be registered and classified. This is done by external people, but of course it can't be done without the aid of the staff. Another big task of the year is a re-valuation of the cars for updating the insurance.

To ease the inventory project of 2012, all items are supplied with bar-codes.

Predicting can be difficult - especially about the future! At a time there was some rumours about Citroën planning to build an entirely new museum (in Aulnay?), but this idea has probably been hit by the current world financial crisis. Somehow it would be a pity – it is not necessarily the most interesting cars that are fit as museum objects. And it would have to be a very big museum, if all the cars are to be exhibited. As it is, all the cars, archives and other objects are in one place, a truly unique situation. On the other hand – the world deserves a place where anyone can go in and see an amazing collection, the most innovative car brand ever.

In the meantime, let us enjoy the fact the Conservatoire Citroën is far from a closed unit, but a very active player in the world of our passion. Hopefully, the role of the ACI will grow and forces be joined in order to fulfill our common goal: Preserving the brand heritage of Citroën!



The U23 bus is now restored! During the last five years the car has been at Retromobile every year, showing the stages and progress during restoration. A TV-screen showed the bus as it was found!



Link to the products from Conservatoire Citroën:

http://www.citroen.fr/Resources/Content/FR/06_univers/06_histoire/catalogue_conservatoire_citroen.pdf

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