

# A Rare Cunningham on the Rise

Short of another Cunningham Reunion, odds are that you won't see a car like this at the local show-and-shine

by Miles Collier



1952 Cunningham C-3 Coupe

Cunningham C-3s have picked up a bit of a tail wind recently, as seen during the Gooding sale at Pebble Beach in 2012, where a yellow coupe sold for \$341,000 with commissions.

Our subject car, a 1952 Cunningham C-3 Vignale coupe, s/n 5210, sold at Gooding & Company's Scottsdale auction on January 17, 2014, for \$550,000, including buyer's commission.

This tidy appreciation perhaps reflects the car's role as one alternative to increasingly unaffordable top line collectibles: Ferrari, Mercedes, Porsche and the like.

With the Cunningham C-3 Reunion held at Lime Rock last Labor Day weekend — and the simultaneous release of Richard Harman's monumental two-volume book, *Cunningham: The Passion, The Cars, The Legacy* — more attention has been brought to these unusual, and, given the Cunningham backstory, rather romantic machines.

## Cunningham history

All told, Cunningham produced 27 C-3s between 1952 and 1954. There were 20 Vignale-built coupes and five Vignale-built convertibles, two more of wholly domestic origin, and perhaps seven or eight unbodied chassis sold in 1956 during the winding up of operations in West Palm Beach, FL.

The C-3 reflected Briggs' recognition that his original design, the C-2, which was conceived as a dual-purpose sports car capable of winning Le Mans in racing trim, and slinky arrivals at Palm Beach's Everglades Club in street tune, was a non-starter given the rapid advance of long-distance racing car designs embodied in the C-type Jaguar and the 300SL Mercedes.

Cunningham therefore bifurcated his production into exotic, not-for-sale, pure racing C-4Rs ("R" for racing), and his road-going C-3 luxury GTs. No doubt his flutter in road-car manufacturing was further impelled by the vain hope, as it turned out, that road-car profits would offset some of the racing expenses. Furthermore, by building a road car for sale to the public, his manufacturer's status guaranteed race entries from Le Mans organizers.

After building the first C-3 wholly in West Palm Beach, Briggs recognized that he needed to outsource the expensive coachwork design and fabrication of his eponymous machine.

A \$9,000 selling price had to be achieved. By contracting the coachwork design and fabrication to Giovanni Michelotti for the former and Vignale for the latter, Cunningham ensured that his GT would be both on budget and sufficiently chic.

Conveniently, at the time of the deal with Vignale, Michelotti had a "ready-to-wear" design for a coupe that had already clothed at least one 212 Ferrari. As with Ghia's Supersonic design, the Michelotti number could be sized up or down, stretched or tweaked to fit a variety of chassis and wheelbases. Even so, the new C-3 would cost more than twice the price of a Cadillac.

Yet despite building a top-of-the-line GT that attracted acclaim for having "as much power as Niagara Falls," "European handling" and powerful drum brakes, business was slow, and the originally anticipated 50 units were never completed. With the liquidation of the Cunningham Motor Car Company at the end of 1955, Briggs moved on to campaigning Works Jaguars in America for the Coventry factory.

## Details

Years produced: 1952–54  
 Number produced: 27  
 Original list price: \$8,000–\$11,000,  
 depending on options and body style  
 Current SCM Valuation: \$350,000–  
 \$450,000  
 Alternatives: 1951–58 Pegaso Z-102,  
 1951–52 Ferrari 212, 1952 Ferrari  
 225 road, 1948 Kurtis Sport Car  
 SCM Investment Grade: A

## Comps



1952 Cunningham C-3  
 Lot 509, s/n IND201044  
 Condition 4  
 Sold at \$407,000  
 Auctions America, Burbank, CA, 8/3/13  
 SCM# 227048



1953 Cunningham C-3 Continental  
 Lot 119, s/n 5211  
 Condition 2+  
 Sold at \$341,000  
 Gooding & Co., Pebble Beach, CA, 8/18/12  
 SCM# 209479



1952 Cunningham C-3 West Palm Beach  
 Lot 240, s/n 5206X  
 Condition 2  
 Not sold at \$550,000  
 RM Auctions, Monterey, CA, 8/21/11  
 SCM# 183131



### Cunningham C-3 cars

Forward to the present, let's take a quick look at Cunningham C-3 ins and outs. The C-3 has the advantage of being an extremely exclusive collectible built by an American sporting icon, Briggs Cunningham.

Short of another Cunningham Reunion, odds are that you won't see another car like this at the local show-and-shine. Regrettably, since "exclusive" here also means "obscure," no one will know (or much care) what it is. That said, a German tourist in Ouray, CO, identified my C-3 as my wife and I parked it at a meter.

Aesthetically, the C-3 has every bit the style and panache of contemporary Michelotti-designed Ferraris for quite a bit less cash. Unremarkably, then, at least one C-3 was made over into a Ferrari 212 lookalike in the '70s by fitting it with an egg-crate grille and Prancing Horse emblems.

The performance of these cars is similarly a "good news, bad news" kind of thing. Expect lots of approbation for the 331-ci Hemi powerplant; something less than that when your audience finds that its 220 Cunningham-enhanced horsepower propels its 3,500 pounds to 60 mph in a leisurely nine-plus seconds. I know contemporary road tests state 0-60 mph in seven seconds, but do the math. They had speedy stopwatch watches in those days.

Forward progress is further not helped by the Chrysler Fluid Torque transmission that was fitted to most C-3s when built, and the La Salle 3-speed on-the-tree option wasn't all that much better. This is nothing that a Borg-Warner T-10 or Tremec 5 speed can't fix, but the integral bell housing cast as part of the block on early 331 Hemis makes the installation a project.

All this brings us to the topic of originality. The Cunningham car-collecting community seems to be fairly relaxed about the minutiae of originality. I think this is due to the lack of detailed documentation, as minor running changes in period appear to be legion. As for major changes, a quick look at photos of C-3s in period show a slew of differences: 105-inch wheelbases giving way to 107 inches, several types of bumpers and hubcaps, bright trim windshield moldings replaced by cheaper black rubber, and so on.

In addition, similar to many high-end

Italian cars of the period, C-3s are swathed and festooned in intricately engraved bright trim, decked out with elaborate leather interiors and have other labor-intensive features which make meticulous restoration very costly. Until recently, these cars have just been too cheap to justify a full-tilt restoration. Consequently, "good enough" has been good enough in Cunningham circles, although we can expect that relaxed standard to change.

### Judicious hot-rodding

The performance of the C-3 can be easily increased. A hundred extra horsepower or front-wheel disc brakes are simple improvements. The installation of a 4-speed, floor-shift transmission results in much improved drivability and performance. Consequently, the tendency to fettle and tune follows logically, and few C-3s have escaped some judicious hot-rodding. It's not that the C-3 experience isn't enjoyable, for the cars are every bit as capable as their contemporaries. It's that vehicle dynamics have come a long way since the early 1950s.

### A good buy

Our subject C-3, 5210, is a solid C-3 restored to the concours-winning end of the quality range of 10 years ago. Like so many of its fellows, it has been restored without its handsome bumpers.

The selling owner, who drives his cars vigorously, sold the car because he was disappointed in its cornering behavior on the Colorado Grand, a tour that places a premium on cornering grip and power. Happy with the car's grunt and braking, he felt the 800-pound engine atop the front axle combined with period-typical roll-induced toe steering made the car more a boulevardier than a mountain-pass assaulter. The new buyer may disagree. The car was fairly bought and sold in today's market. This will be a good buy in the future. ♦

