

# Iconic Small Cars with Character



**1998** and **1885** Smart and Benz-Patent Motor Car – the history of the automobile is also that of the small car

The history of the car started with the production of comparatively small vehicles. Although this situation changed very rapidly, small cars have remained popular with customers for almost 140 years. Many models even achieved cult status, while by contrast others sank into obscurity.

**T**he beginnings of all things are small, wrote Cicero. Even though the Roman philosopher was not, of course, referring to cars, this is an accurate description of their history. In this context, “small” can be taken quite literally. In the beginning, man created the small car. The world’s first vehicle powered by a combustion engine, the Patent Motor Car, model no. 1, built by Carl Benz in 1885, had dimensions that were as modest as its performance. At 2.70 m long, it was only 5 mm longer than the latest Smart model, around 20 cm narrower and, at 256 kg, weighed only one third of the Smart’s curb weight (880 kg). “An engine speed of 250 revolutions per minute seemed sufficient or even very high to me and I was able to determine that this engine had a power output of around two-thirds of one horsepower,” said Benz. Later measurements showed that the engine produced 551 W (0.75 hp). The Smart’s power output is more than 100 times this figure.

Despite all their differences, the Smart and the Patent Motor Car have one obvious thing in common. They are two-seaters. Until around 1920, the body design of open cars with one row of seats and space for two people was known as the “phaeton,” which comes from the name for small horse-drawn carriages. Volkswagen

will not be impressed by the fact that the first phaeton was a Benz! The Smart, which ATZ explained in 1999 in a special supplement had been developed on the basis of “observations of social change,” was based on a concept car known as the “Nafa,” short for “local transport vehicle,” and was produced in 1981 by Mercedes. The German news magazine “Der Spiegel” later described it as “perhaps the ugliest car in the world,” **FIGURE 1**.

One of the earliest car models to have what might be described as its own character was the Hanomag 2/10 PS from 1927, **FIGURE 2**, which was given the nickname the “army loaf” because its unusual shape was similar to the bread used by the German army at the time. The right-hand drive body with only one door on the left-hand side was often ridiculed, but it represented a genuine innovation. Because it dispensed with the running boards and protruding fenders that were normal at the time, it was the first car with pontoon or envelope styling. In 1927, ATZ wrote: “In order to fit two comfortable seats next to one another in this small car, the body has been made so wide that it sticks out over the wheels. (...) This design gives the car a smooth outer shell and its streamlined shape has resulted in a significant reduction in aerodynamic drag.” Streamlining and aerodynamic drag for a little car producing 10 bhp and a top speed of 60 km/h! Its conventionally designed competitors, such as the BMW Dixi and the Opel Laubfrosch, nevertheless had much greater sales success, which could have been due to the poorer quality of the Hanomag. As the saying went, a kilo of steel sheet and a kilo of paint was all that was needed to make a Hanomag.

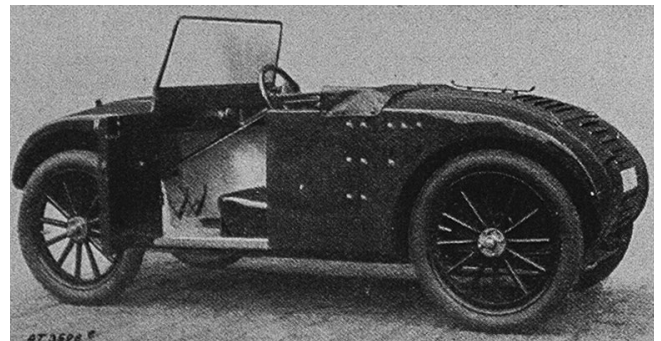
A car that anticipated the body design of the Smart 70 years before the Smart first saw the light was the American Dart from 1928, **FIGURE 3**. The little car, which cost only 200 dollars, was shipped in a weatherproof crate that subsequently also functioned as a garage. “As the crate only costs 10 dollars, it seems quite a good idea,” wrote ATZ in 1929. Otherwise the car, which was described as “28 centimeters narrower than normal” and “with a ridiculously short wheelbase,” did not receive a very positive review. “All four steel wheels slide in vertical guides and have rubber band suspension.” The report also expresses a certain amount of outrage: “Is this American people’s car likely to outsell the German models?”

It is noticeable that almost all the cars which have achieved what might be described as cult status are small models. Good examples include the Citroën 2CV, the Goggomobil, the Fiat 500, the Renault 4, the Isetta, the Mini, the Trabant and the Prinz, **FIGURE 4**. The fourth and final Prinz model range was presented at the Frankfurt Motor Show in 1961 by its manufacturer NSU, an abbreviation for the German town of Neckarsulm where the company was based. In its article, ATZ expressed its disappointment about the unchanged cylinder capacity compared with the Prinz 3 and the power output of only 30 hp: “It is clear that the description ‘much bigger car’ referred only to the body.”

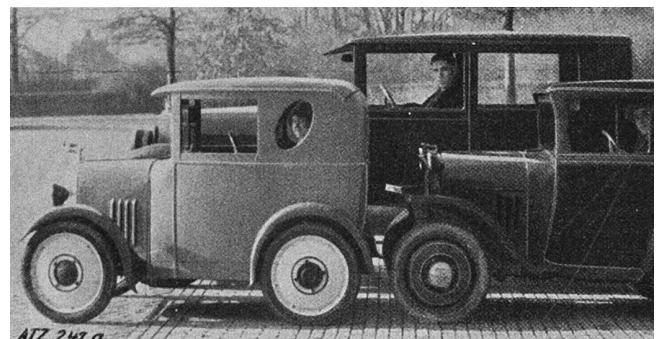
Frank Jung



**FIGURE 1** The “Nafa” – short for “Nahverkehrsfahrzeug” (local transport vehicle) – from Mercedes was not particularly attractive, but the 1981 concept was revived by the company at a later date (© Daimler)



**FIGURE 2** The Hanomag 2/10 from 1927 was given the nickname the “army loaf” (© Springer Vieweg)



**FIGURE 3** “A striking American small car” was the title of the ATZ article about the Dart in 1929 (© Springer Vieweg)



**FIGURE 4** In the article about the 1961 model of the NSU Prinz, ATZ felt it was worth mentioning that “the front seatbacks are adjustable” (© Audi)