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## Pure elegance

Long overshadowed by its 507 stablemate, the 503 convertible found just 129 buyers from 1956 to 1959. As Don Dethlefsen's beautifully restored example reveals, this stately four-seater deserved a bigger audience.

By Jackie Jouret Photography by Klaus Schnitzer



**H**aving owned a high-tech color printing business before getting into restorations, Don Dethlefsen has a flair for color, and he'd rather make his cars "pop" than adhere to period-correct paint dogma. Hence his choice of Rosso Corsa—an especially vibrant shade of Italian racing red sourced from a Ferrari 360 Modena—for this stunningly restored 1956 503 cabriolet.

"The original red is ugly!" Dethlefsen laughs when I ask him to explain his selection. I don't know if I'd agree, but there's no denying that BMW's 1950s reds—whether the darker Cherry or the brighter Japan—lack vibrancy next to Rosso Corsa. Paint technology has come a long way over the last

60 years, and why not take advantage of that? BMW certainly would have offered a similar color had it been available.

The color palate of the 1950s was far more limited: Although BMW offered 18 different colors for its 503s and 507s, most were variations on white, beige and gray, with a few blues, reds and greens thrown in. Echoing today's preference for silver, white and black, the more interesting shades often went unchosen by BMW's customers. Not one of the 507s sold were ordered in Lime Green, Fern Green, Riviera Sand or Cherry Red, and paint orders for the 503 probably followed the same pattern, with most ordered in shades like Feather White and Silver Gray

that proved popular on the sportier 507s.

"These cars were all built to order, and they were all a bit different," Dethlefsen says. "You could have a two-tone exterior, but I don't think the 503 has the proportions to support that. The interior could be two-tone, as well, and piping was an option."

As he did on the exterior, Dethlefsen stuck with one color for the car's interior, a natural tan that looks great against the Ferrari-red paint. He'd originally intended to finish the entire interior in that shade, but his upholsterer suggested red piping to accent the seats and door panels. Since piping was an option when the cars were new, Dethlefsen went for it.

### An aristocratic machine

It's a striking statement from someone who's restored more than his share of beautiful BMWs over the years, and it's his last personal restoration. Now 71, Dethlefsen sold The Werk Shop he established near Chicago to his son-in-law, Mike Marijanovic, in 2008. Although he's still at the shop in Libertyville every day, he's there to mentor Mike and to perform quality inspections rather than to actively run the business or restore his own cars. The 503 is effectively his swan song, and the Rosso Corsa paint adds some much-needed visual pizzazz to a car that can slide from stately to sedate pretty easily.

The 503 was a luxury car, not a sportster, and its position at the high end of the market meant that most of its buyers wanted to display their discreet good taste rather than make a flamboyant display. This is an aristocratic piece of machinery, and appropriately enough it was designed by a German aristocrat, Count Albrecht von Goertz.

Goertz—who'd given up a career in banking in favor of car design when he came to the U.S. in 1936—was also responsible for the 507, having been commissioned to design both cars by Max Hoffman, BMW's U.S. importer. The Austrian-born Hoffman had his finger on the pulse of American tastes as well as the ear of BMW executives, and he would later order BMW to build the 2002 that became such a rousing success in this country. A decade ear-

lier, however, Hoffman was still focusing on larger cars with powerful V8 engines, cars that were sure to find a customer base among the well-heeled Americans snapping up Ferraris, Astons and Jaguars along with Cadillacs and Studebakers.

As it was for the 507, however, the business plan for the 503 was seriously flawed. The cars simply cost too much, retailing for nearly \$8,000—slightly higher than a Cadillac Biarritz, which came with not just larger tail fins but an engine that put out 335 horsepower where the 503 made just 140. For those who did the math, the 503 simply didn't add up.

Not everyone was simply looking for a good deal, of course, and BMW found 412 customers for its luxurious 503s between the car's debut at the Frankfurt auto show in September 1955—just nine months after Goertz had started sketching!—and the end of production in May 1960.

Most were coupes, but 129 were 503 convertibles like Dethlefsen's car. All were hand-built, with aluminum bodies hammered into shape the old-fashioned way, over a wooden form. No two were alike, but all were built with exemplary care by skilled craftsmen, and that's something you can still sense today when beholding a 503. The details are simply exquisite, and the longer you look the more you find to appreciate.

"The car is just loaded with neat stuff," Dethlefsen says.

Indeed it is. The door panels alone are marvels of complexity, consisting of a series of leather-covered recesses and boxes that form grab handles and storage pockets. In the trunk, the entire storage area is carpeted while every other surface, even the fuel filler neck, is covered in insulated vinyl.

The simple yet elegant dashboard's painted sheet metal is topped by leather that also encircles the gauges, whose increments are marked with stylishly modern numerals. The wing windows offer further cause for wonderment, opening with the twist of a knob that activates a tiny gearset for precise adjustment.

With details like that, the 503 looks and feels more like a prewar BMW than a post-war model, having little in common with the mass-produced vehicles that had come to dominate the market by the time this car was built. It's a throwback to an earlier era in terms of quality and craftsmanship, but with elegant styling that places it firmly in the then-modern world of the late 1950s.

So modern was it that the 503 wasn't redesigned completely when it was replaced by the 3200 CS in the next decade. Instead, Nuccio Bertone simply updated Goertz' design, retaining its basic proportions and overall shape while revising its nose and smoothing out its tail (eliminating Goertz' minimalist fins, which were no longer in vogue by 1962). Some of Bertone's decisions were no doubt rooted in practical limitations,



as the 3200 CS was nearly identical to a 503 beneath the skin, differing only by borrowing its rear axle from the 507. All of that speaks to BMW's scant resources, since the 503 wasn't an all-new model itself in 1956 but rode on the same chassis as the earlier 502 from which its engine was also adapted.

#### Old-style frame & aluminum V8

In the days before unit-body construction, that meant a pair of oval-shaped frame rails that widened from front to rear, held together by three tubular cross-beams. Essentially, it was the same arrangement used on BMW's pre-war cars, but far more robustly built. The 503's wheelbase measured 113 inches, some 14 inches longer than a 507's and roughly the same as BMW's pre-war 326 and 327. The front axle received independent suspension, with double wishbones and longitudinal torsion bars, while the solid rear axle was suspended with Panhard rods and torsion bars. Brakes on the 1956-'57 cars were drums all around, while those built in 1958 could be fitted at the front with optional 272 x 15mm discs clamped by single piston calipers. (Front disc brakes could be retrofitted to the earlier cars, as well, but Dethlefsen's car retains its original drums.)

That's not much brake to slow a 3,300-lb. car, so it's probably a good thing that the 503 only has 140 horsepower. Its 3.2-liter V8 engine, the M503/1, has its roots in BMW's first post-

war V8, the M502a designed by Leonard Ischinger upon his return to Germany from Canada. The M502a was inspired by American single overhead cam V8s but borrowed its valve arrangement from the Lancia Aurelia. The M502a became the M502/1 when it went into production in mid-1954, and it was cast in aluminum to keep its weight as close as possible to that of BMW's 374-lb. six-cylinder engine. With development budgets limited, BMW couldn't afford to re-engineer the 502's chassis to accommodate a heavier engine, and the 455-lb. V8 was close enough.

The 2.6-liter M502/1 put out 100 hp at 4,800 rpm, but such meager output wouldn't do for the Goertz-designed 503 and 507. Unlike the 501 and 502 "Baroque Angels," the 503 and 507 were aimed at the American market, and so the M502 evolved into the M503/1 after first passing through a series of experimental stages known internally as the M506a5 and a5S. These prototype V8s used new camshafts, larger valves, high-performance exhaust manifolds and twin dual-throat carburetors to achieve an output of as much as 140 hp, and that's exactly what the M503/1 put out when it was installed in the production 503 in 1956. Torque, meanwhile, measured a healthy 162 lb-ft.

Like the experimental M506 engines, the production M503/1 V8 used a pair of dual-throat Zenith 32 NDIX carbs, which forced BMW's engineers to relocate the oil filter

from the top of the engine to the car's body and connect it to the motor with hoses. They also fitted a larger oil pump driven by a chain on the crankshaft, and moved the generator and fan forward. Bore and stroke measured 82 x 75mm for a displacement of 3,168cc, and the compression ratio was 7.3:1, which required 1956's "Super" fuel.

All of that made the M503 a standout in 1950s Germany, but it wasn't enough to be competitive where it really counted: in the lucrative American market. Who, after all, would buy a large coupe or convertible with just 140 horsepower when they could have a Cadillac with more than twice that for roughly the same price, and with no loss of luxury in the bargain? For BMW, the 503 was going to be a tough sell in the States.

#### From the sheep ranch to Chicago

A few people bought one, of course, and 1956 503 cabriolet chassis number 69081 went to Emanuel Weisfeld, an architect living in Laurelton, New York. In May 1976, Weisfeld sold the car to Barry McMillan of Hilltown, Pennsylvania, possibly with an engine that had overheated. In any case, McMillan replaced the engine with another 3.2-liter BMW V8, and he also replaced the original ZF S 4-15 gearbox with a more robust S 4-17 sourced from the sportier 507 roadster, also switching the shifter position from the steering column to the floor.





In October 1979, McMillan sold the 503 to Dick Hamilton, a sheep rancher in Arvada, Colorado. By the time Hamilton got it, the car needed restoration, which he planned to complete in his retirement. By the time he actually retired, however, Hamilton had decided to restore John Deere tractors instead, and in 1996 he advertised the 503 cabriolet for sale along with a white and black 503 coupe in *Roundel*, the BMW CCA magazine, asking \$100,000 for both cars.

"I had finished restoring my 3200 CS, and I was looking for something on my list of dream cars when I saw the ad," Dethlefsen says. "It took me a year to convince him the cars weren't worth that much."

Arriving at a more reasonable price, Dethlefsen convinced Carl Nelson to buy the coupe while he took the cabriolet, and the 503 was sent from Colorado to The Werk Shop, then located in Lake Bluff, Illinois. The restoration took 12 years—"interrupted by work for paying customers," Dethlefsen chuckles—although the car was intact when it arrived.

Though the mechanicals obviously needed refurbishing after 40 years and much disuse, Dethlefsen's staff at The Werk Shop mainly had to concern themselves with the car's cos-

metics. All of the chrome pieces needed replating—a \$40,000 job that was farmed out to a shop in Chicago that specializes in show chrome—and the thin, rusted-out bumpers needed to be recreated from flat stock. Otherwise, however, this car's metal parts are all original, as are the Bakelite knobs and handles in its beautifully reupholstered interior.

The seats prove supremely comfortable when I plunk myself down in the driver's seat at the end of a long day's shooting. We're not going to be tackling any twisties here in Illinois, but it's nice to see that the seats are sufficiently bolstered should a turn or two come along.

This is no sports car, but it is a BMW, and its chassis feels relatively taut for the era, especially when you consider the 503 cabriolet's position as a luxury GT. (Think of it as the spiritual predecessor to the current 650i Convertible, if you will.) Its steering requires a lot of effort at low speeds, but the rack-and-gear arrangement delivers good feel in return and has a tighter ratio—likely 16.5:1—than I'd expected.

The car rides on 4.5 x 16-inch wheels mounted with 6.0 x 16-inch Firestone "Deluxe Champion" tires. The tall sidewalls make for a cushy ride that puts modern rubber to

shame, but naturally there's a price to be paid in the form of reduced cornering capacity. In this car, it hardly matters, since comfortable cruising is what it's all about.

### Just enough power, and a superb gearbox

For that, the V8 engine is ideally suited. Its power is fine, if not impressive, and there's enough torque to permit second-gear starts if needed. But shifting up or down is hardly a problem in the ZF S 4-17, a real sweetheart of a gearbox and an upgrade from the original that I can heartily endorse. Reverse is engaged by pulling up on the lever before moving it into the usual BMW position forward and to the right, and the four forward gears are arranged in an H-pattern. They all engage with a short throw of the lever that ends with a positive click, making this the best vintage gearbox I've ever experienced.

It's also one of the most sonorous, making a pleasant whirr that dominates the otherwise-silent cockpit. You can't hear the mechanical motion of the engine, which was rebuilt in-house by The Werk Shop's Tom Kelly, and even the exhaust is virtually silent. The car may have a V8, but it's no extroverted hot rod!

The clutch throw is precise yet easy, and so is the throttle, which delivers linear power on demand even though it's attached with a rod rather than a wire, which can often result in balky actuation. The carbs on this car have been set up perfectly, and the driving experience reflects the same attention to detail that's been paid to the car's appearance.

If it has a shortcoming, it's the period drum brakes, which don't have enough power for modern conditions, as few vintage brakes do. They require a lot of pedal pressure to slow the car, and stopping takes plenty of advance planning along with a downshift or two into second. (Dethlefsen says the same brakes on his 3200 CS were similarly underpowered, but after my visit The Werk Shop's technicians decided to re-inspect the 503 and found a crack in the brake booster. It's since been fixed, and Dethlefsen says the brakes are much stronger now.)

On the plus side, the timid brakes serve to enforce a relaxed pace to which this gorgeous car is ideally suited, one that lets you enjoy the scenery as you glide along in luxurious splendor. The sportier 507 may have stolen the show at Frankfurt back in 1955, but the 503 expresses an equally authentic strain of BMW-ness, one in which comfortable cruising takes precedence over sharp reflexes and race-ready performance. To experience it today is to be reminded of that quality all over again, and to recognize its origins in this stylish, stately machine, a Grand Touring convertible if ever there was one. 🍷