

BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 10: "The BMW Gallery: A Showcase for The Brand and Art"

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To outsiders, Manhattan might not seem like much of a car market. Its streets are often gridlocked, and even when traffic is moving a car's performance

can feel largely irrelevant. And yet, a Manhattan location has been essential to any car maker's success since the automobile was invented. It's long been the center of both culture and capital, and each of its millions of inhabitants is a potential customer for a premium brand like BMW.

Despite the island's importance, BMW of North America was underrepresented in Manhattan for the first decade after taking over sales and distribution from Max Hoffman in 1975. Hoffman's own Park Avenue showrooms were either long gone or not included in the deal, and BMW's sole dealer in Manhattan was a small and somewhat downscale operation that carried Volvo alongside BMW. BMW NA had been unsuccessful in its attempt to buy out the dealership, which was protected by franchise laws that also prevented BMW from opening an additional dealer in New York City.

Nothing could prevent BMW of North America from opening another kind of facility, however, one that wouldn't sell cars but would cultivate a customer base more obliquely. "We couldn't sell cars, but we wanted to have a nicer face in Manhattan," said Tom McGurn, then BMW NA's public relations manager. "Would we make that a typical showroom that wouldn't sell cars but would refer customers to the dealership? Or would we make it more of a corporate statement?"

Under the leadership of Dr. Günther Kramer, who'd taken over as CEO from John Cook in 1983, BMW of North America had become a sophisticated operation. In its first decade, sales had increased nearly fivefold, and BMW had acquired an upwardly mobile gloss among US customers.

BMW AG and NA recognized the need to cultivate the premium and cultural aspects of the brand, and the BMW Gallery was



the perfect solution. Three BMW Galleries were opened: one in Munich, another in Toronto, Canada, and one in New York City. The BMW Gallery would cater to BMW's potential customer base not only by presenting BMW's automobiles in an attractive and premium setting but by staging art exhibits like those its customers would seek out in galleries and museums throughout New York City. "Art was part of BMW's overall values, and the BMW Gallery was consistent with that," McGurn said.

Located at 320 Park Avenue, between 51st and 52nd Streets, the BMW Gallery opened in 1986 with a small exhibit followed by a major one. That November, the BMW Gallery presented “BMW & Five American Artists,” displaying five of the six BMW Art Cars created thus far. The BMW Art Car project had been initiated in 1975 by Parisian art dealer/racer Hervé Poulain, in cooperation with BMW Motorsport director Jochen Neerpasch, and had since become more of an Arts and Culture initiative by BMW AG. The BMW Art Car initiative had given prominent American artists (plus one Austrian, Ernst Fuchs) the opportunity to apply their work to a BMW race or road car.



The show at the BMW Gallery would feature the 3.0 CSL race cars painted by Alexander Calder and Frank Stella, the 320 Group 5 racer by Roy Lichtenstein, the M1 Procar by Andy Warhol, and a roadgoing 635CSi

by Robert Rauschenberg. Calder had died in 1976, but Stella and Lichtenstein were on hand for the opening, and so was Rauschenberg, whose Art Car was being shown to the public for the first time. “There was a rumor that people had seen Andy Warhol looking in through the windows, but not coming in,” McGurn said. “That may be a legend!”

The BMW Gallery hosted additional BMW Art Car exhibits over the years. In November 1990, the “BMW & Five Artists” exhibit was reprised, this time with a Group A E30 M3 race car painted by Australian artist Ken Done in place of the Rauschenberg 635CSi. The BMW Gallery also

staged photography, painting, and video art exhibits that were unrelated to the BMW Art Car project.

“We had a huge video wall when those were pretty new,” McGurn said. “The type of art varied. We collaborated with the Mystic Seaport



Museum on an exhibit of black and white photos of America’s Cup racing by the Rosenfeld brothers [Stanley, David, and William]. We also teamed up with the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. They did a national juried show of contemporary art, and we became a sponsor. We mounted their annual show at the Gallery.”

BMW had long been a patron of the arts, and the BMW Gallery made that commitment highly visible in a well-trafficked part of Manhattan.

“It was a lovely ground-floor space on the corner of the building, with windows on two sides,” McGurn said. “It was a very bold corporate statement, and I think it was very successful.”

In recent years, several upstart, and “re-boot” luxury vehicle brands have copied the BMW Gallery formula by setting up “brand houses” in Manhattan in an attempt raise brand awareness and reputation, but the BMW Gallery remains the original.

When the BMW Gallery's lease ran out in 1998, BMW of North America declined to renew it. The space had fulfilled its two-fold mission, elevating the BMW brand and turning many of its visitors into BMW owners even while the marque remained under-represented in New York City. By the time the BMW Gallery closed, that situation had been rectified. BMW of North America had opened BMW Manhattan at 555 West 57th Street. This gleaming new dealership was wholly owned and operated by the company, with 228,000 square feet of floor space in which it could not only show but sell and service BMW automobiles.

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