



Mercedes-Benz Museum
Press Information
31 August 2023

With modern “pontoon” body: The forefather of all “Erlkönig” prototype cars is 70 years old

- Prototypes in the automotive industry are commonly known by this name in German
- Mercedes-Benz 180: A departure from traditional construction methods, plus other innovations
- The spacious, clean-cut, comfortable and economical saloon made its debut in 1953
- Almost 450,000 vehicles of the W 120/121 model series were built

Stuttgart. “Close-up” – the name of this series from the Mercedes-Benz Museum says it all. Each instalment tells a surprising, exciting or behind-the-scenes story, shining a spotlight on details of a vehicle, an exhibit or an architectural or design feature. In the spotlight this time: the Mercedes-Benz 180 “Ponton” (W 120) from 1955.

No. 10/2023: Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955

Presence: The black Mercedes-Benz 180 looks quite unassuming amidst the other vehicles in Legend Room 4 of the Mercedes-Benz Museum. Directly behind it a “Kurzhauber” short-nosed truck. On the right an “Adenauer”, in front of it a 300 SL, a 300 SL Roadster (both W 198) and a 300 SLR (W 196 S), all cars that simply ooze charisma. But the Mercedes-Benz 180 stands absolutely confidently in the spotlight: the upper mid-range vehicle exudes the values of the brand and thus asserts itself effortlessly in this environment. It was no different at its premiere 70 years ago: anyone driving a 1950s Mercedes-Benz 180 was making a statement in terms of prestigious elegance, comfort, quality and durability.

All change: The Type 180 (W 120) with its body in a modern “pontoon” shape, along with the complexity of many of its technical details, marks a highpoint in what is known as the era of the economic miracle. The title “Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity” of Legend Room 4 reflects this. The room covers the period from 1945 to 1960.

Successful: The W 120/121 “Ponton” model series with four-cylinder engines were built from 1953 to 1962. With them, the company also entered a new realm in terms of volume, thanks to increased exports: around 443,000 customers from all over the world chose one of these vehicles. The most successful variant was the 180 D with diesel engine, of which almost 150,000 vehicles were produced. The Type 180 with petrol engine was produced from 1953 to 1962, of which 117,192 were built. By way of comparison, 91,048 vehicles of all variants of the 170 V (W 136), also in the upper mid-range, rolled off the production line before the Second World War.

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* Further information on the official fuel consumption and the official, specific CO₂ emissions of new passenger cars can be found in the publication entitled “Leitfaden über den Kraftstoffverbrauch, die CO₂-Emissionen und den Stromverbrauch neuer Personenkraftwagen” [“Guide on the fuel economy, CO₂ emissions and power consumption of all new passenger car models”], available free of charge from all sales outlets and from Deutsche Automobil Treuhand GmbH at www.dat.de.

What might perhaps seem curious today: The comfort features of the “Ponton” four-cylinder saloons include separately adjustable heating and ventilation for the driver and front passenger. The Mercedes-Benz 180 shown in the museum was built in 1955. Its special equipment includes the exterior mirror on the left, which is shown in the price list at DM 15 (“rear-view mirror on the outside of the box-section pillar”). In Germany, an additional mirror does not become compulsory until mid-1956. The front fog lamps, which are also fitted here, appear in the price list at DM 120.

The first “Erlkönig” spy photo: It is interesting to know that the premiere of the Mercedes-Benz 180 continues to shape reporting on new vehicle models in the German-speaking world to this day. In 1952, a first picture of a prototype of the new saloon appeared in the magazine “auto motor und sport” together with a parody of Goethe’s ballad, “Erlkönig” (Erl King). This led to the term “Erlkönig” being commonly used in German for a camouflaged prototype.

Appearance: For the “pontoon”, the stylists used design criteria that reflected the state of the art at the time. The design follows the “three box” principle with front section, passenger compartment and rear section. The elimination of running boards and free-standing headlamps, as well as integrated wings, reduce drag and fuel consumption. Further effect: the interior is significantly more spacious than was the case with older body forms. In addition, rounded shapes typical of the 1950s, including round front headlamps. It is the family face of Mercedes-Benz at the time. All vehicles in Legend Room 4 have this look – including the trucks.

Lighter and more stable: The change also takes place inside the vehicle. The body is firmly welded to the floor assembly and forms a static unit. With this vehicle, Mercedes-Benz says goodbye to the traditional construction comprising chassis and independent body. Compared to the previously common construction method, the torsional rigidity increases and the weight decreases.

Complexity: Added to this is a suspension with important safety and comfort features. The front wheels, which are guided by double wishbones, are no longer suspended directly from the frame, but from a so-called “suspension subframe”. This is a U-shaped axle carrier welded together from two pressed sheet metal parts, to which the engine, transmission and steering are also attached. It is mounted on the frame via three noise-reducing decoupling elements.

Powerful: Under the bonnet of the 180 is a four-cylinder unit. From a displacement of 1,767 cubic centimetres, it develops **38 kW** (52 hp) at 4,000 rpm. On the roads of that time, this was absolutely sufficient. Its maximum design speed was 126 km/h. Mercedes-Benz expanded its engine range with the 180 D diesel variant as early as 1954. The third model to enter the range was the significantly more powerful Mercedes-Benz 190 (W 121) with **55 kW** (75 hp) in 1956.

Evolution: Mercedes-Benz updated the 120 and 121 model series several times. Important steps included the single-joint swing axle at the rear with a low pivot point introduced in 1955, the facelift in August 1957, the début of the 190 D in 1958 and the design refresh in 1959. Also from 1959 onwards, the latest findings provided for a less sharp-edged interior and thus an improved level of safety. The dashboard was padded and featured retracting controls that in some cases were recessed. The steering wheel had a cushioned centre section. In the same year, the wedge-pin door lock with two safety catches was introduced. This prevents the doors from bursting open. This is because people were often thrown out of the car in an accident and suffered serious injuries – seat belts were not yet widespread.

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The Mercedes-Benz Museum is open daily from Tuesday to Sunday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The ticket desk always closes at 5 p.m.


Registrations, reservations and the latest information: Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. by telephone on +49 (0) 711 17-30 000, by email to classic@mercedes-benz.com or online at www.mercedes-benz.com/museum

Press photos and further press releases: media.mercedes-benz.com/content/classic

Further research and multimedia material: mercedes-benz-archive.com/museum

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Captions

23C0238_001

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Exterior view from the front left.

23C0238_002

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Detail: Mercedes star on the radiator grille.

23C0238_003

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Exterior view from the right.

23C0238_004

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Exterior view from the rear.

23C0238_005

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Exterior view from the right rear.

23C0238_006

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Detail: model designation and Mercedes star on the boot lid.

23C0238_007

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Interior view.

23C0238_008

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Interior view – steering wheel and instruments.

23C0238_009

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Interior detail: cooling water temperature gauge and oil pressure.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Exterior view with open boot. On the right, the spare wheel.

23C0238_011

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Exterior detail: indicators.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legend Room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity. Mercedes-Benz 180 (W 120) from 1955. Photo of the engine compartment.

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Best-seller: “Ponton” saloons stand ready for delivery at the Mercedes-Benz Sindelfingen plant in 1953. (Photo index number in the Mercedes-Benz Classic Archives: 72368)

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The upper mid-range model driving in the mountains: Mercedes-Benz “Ponton” of the W 120 model series against a mountain backdrop, early 1960s. (Photo index number in the Mercedes-Benz Classic Archives: 1998DIG50)