



Mercedes-Benz Museum

Press Information

30 January 2024

Super-Wings: Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Coupé

- The brand presented the super-sportscar in February 1954 – 70 years ago
- The upward-opening doors were a striking feature
- Spaceframe, outstanding suspension and six-cylinder engine with direct injection
- The silver “Gullwing” in the Mercedes-Benz Museum is a most popular photo motif

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 300 SL Coupé (W 198) in Legends room 4: Post-war miracle – form and diversity, 1945 to 1960.

No. 1/2024: Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Coupé (W 198)

Star: The silver “Gullwing” with red interior in the Mercedes-Benz Museum is a crowd-puller. Hardly any visitor leaves Legends room 4 without taking at least one picture of this vehicle. Many photograph it from all sides and with all the details. A 300 SL is used to this kind of attention – it has been a dream car since its premiere 70 years ago.

Sensation: New York on 6 February 1954. The International Motor Sports Show opens its doors – and Mercedes-Benz surprises the world public with a completely unexpected car. The brand presents a super-sportscar. Its name: 300 SL. One outstanding feature were the gullwing doors, which were unique in a production vehicle at the time and remain a fascinating detail to this day.

Première: Mercedes-Benz was aware of the significance of the 300 SL, and staged it appropriately. The star stood on a slightly elevated, round pedestal covered with carefully draped fabric. In comparison, the second new product right next to it played a subsidiary role. This was the 190 SL (W 121) – an elegant roadster. Both vehicles were emphatically aimed at the US market. New York was therefore the specifically chosen location for the world premiere.

Racing genes: The basic shape of the 300 SL corresponded to the racing sports car of the same name from 1952, with which Mercedes-Benz made a brilliant return to international motorsport. Mille Miglia, Le Mans 24-hour race, Carrera Panamericana – victories in the world’s most glamorous sports car races were inscribed in the genes of the 1954 production car. The upward-opening doors of the new 300 SL also originated from the racing sports car (W 194). The Coupé variant was given its own model series number, though – it was named the W 198.

Mercedes-Benz Heritage GmbH | Headquarters and Registry Court: Stuttgart, HRB No. 23165
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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.

Head-turner: The doors were neither a marketing gimmick nor a design fad, but an engineering necessity: like the racing sports car, the 300 SL had a lightweight yet very strong tubular spaceframe under the body. This was comparatively high at the sides, making side apertures with conventional door designs impossible. The upward-opening doors caused a sensation.

Nicknames: The public quickly gave the Coupé a suitable name. The Americans soon called it a “gullwing”, and the French “papillon” (butterfly). Immortal names to this day.

Characteristic feature: The gullwing doors required several detailed design measures. The top-mounted springs were inconspicuous yet essential. They made it easier to swing the doors open, and also held them in the open position – an important comfort feature of the production sports car. The springs were housed in elegant chrome tubes.

Windows: Wind-down windows could not be accommodated. The rectangular windows of the 300 SL were therefore removable and could be transported in the boot. A lever released the retaining mechanism. The fresh air supply was therefore “all or nothing”. There were also small rotating quarterlights to aid ventilation.

Easy access: Another consequence of the gullwing doors was the steering wheel design – it could be pivoted downwards to allow easier leg access to the footwell. A small lever on the boss unlocked and locked the steering wheel.

Evolution: Despite the pivoting steering wheel, getting into the Coupé was not exactly convenient. This changed when the succeeding model, the 300 SL Roadster, appeared in 1957. This open variant had front-hinged doors. To achieve this, the spaceframe was modified and lowered at the entry points. This frame version can be seen on the “workbench” in Legends room 4.

Clever innovation: The outer door handle was both an attractive and functional detail. Slight pressure on the small protruding part caused the handle to fold out – whereupon a pull made the door swing open. This was both elegant and aerodynamically effective. Today’s Mercedes-Benz models have revisited this principle: they have optional flush-fitting door handles. These extend automatically as soon as the vehicle key is in the immediate vicinity, and retract again as soon as the car is locked or drives off.

Technology: Naturally the W 198 had numerous other features. For example, the outstanding suspension, the almost ideal weight distribution and the innovative six-cylinder engine made it a super-sportscar. It was the world’s first production passenger car to feature a four-stroke injection engine with direct injection. This innovative mixture formation increased the engine output by around 25 per cent, from the **125 kW** (170 hp) of the racing sports car to **158 kW** (215 hp). This was good for a top speed of up to 250 km/h – absolutely extraordinary performance in the mid-1950s. Another new feature was the front design with a large centre star.

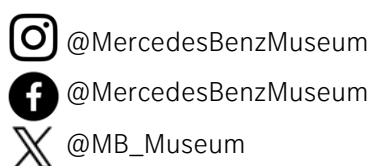
Enthusiastic reception: The coup succeeded. The “Gullwing” effortlessly attracted customers all over the world in the highly exclusive super-sportscar segment. 1,400 examples of the 300 SL Coupé were produced from 1954 to 1957, followed by the Roadster with a further 1,858 built. Every single 300 SL was already an icon back then – and continues to fascinate to this day.

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The Mercedes-Benz Museum is open daily from Tuesday to Sunday, 9 am to 6 pm
The ticket counter always closes at 5 pm
Registrations, reservations and the latest information: Monday to Saturday from 9 am until 6 pm 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

As an internationally active company, equal opportunities, diversity, openness and respect are some of the fundamental convictions of Mercedes-Benz. We show this in the way in which we think, act and communicate. In principle, all the terms selected of course include all genders and identities.



Photos and videos

24C0024_001

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war miracle – Form and Diversity, 1945 to 1960. Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Video: Drone flight through the open doors.

24C0024_002

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war miracle – Form and Diversity, 1945 to 1960. Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Video: ASMR, interior and bodywork.

24C0024_003

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war miracle – Form and Diversity, 1945 to 1960. Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). View from the left.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war miracle – Form and Diversity, 1945 to 1960. Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). View from the rear.

24C0024_005

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity, 1945 to 1960. Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). View from the front right.

24C0024_006

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Close-up of gullwing door.

24C0024_007

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). The Roadster’s tubular spaceframe on the “workbench”.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Close-up of gullwing door with retaining springs.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Interior from the passenger side.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Close-up of fold-out door handle.

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Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Close-up of quarterlight.

24C0024_012

Mercedes-Benz Museum, Legends room 4: Post-war Miracle – Form and Diversity (1945 to 1960). Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Gullwing (W 198). Close-up of locking lever for the side window, which was removable.

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International Motor Sports Show in New York, 6 to 14 February 1954. Presentation of the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL “Gullwing” (W 198, front) and the 190 SL (W 121, partly obscured directly behind). (Photo index number in the Mercedes-Benz Classic Archive: 61995)

24C0024_014

International Motor Sports Show in New York, 6 to 14 February 1954. Presentation of the Mercedes-Benz 300 SL “Gullwing” (W 198, centre) and the 190 SL (W 121, behind). (Photo index number in the Mercedes-Benz Classic Archive: 62043)