The idea of the motorcycle may have begun (although there is disagreement among historians as to accuracy of the claim) with a 14th century sketch by a pupil of Leonardo da Vinci for a two-wheeled machine with pedals and a leather “chain”.

Much later, in 1817, Baron Karl von Drais built the first two-wheeled rider-propelled frame, the Laufmaschine (running machine), later also called the velocipede. Without pedals or steering, a person sat on it and pushed with their feet to glide along.

For the next fifty years and more, attempts were made to create a true motorcycle - but all such attempts are now considered merely curiosities because the only power plant available was a steam-generated engine.

The first true motorcycle is considered to be an experiment that Gottlieb Daimler and associate William Maybach devised in 1885 while building a version of the first high-speed, four-stroke internal combustion engine that had been invented by engineer Nicolaus Otto. Daimler constructed, purely as a test-bench, a crude, wooden-framed two-wheeler (with 2 additional outrigger wheels), powered by an air-cooled 267 cc motor,
developing 0.5 bhp. As a bicycle, it was 20 years out of date, and once it had served its purpose, Daimler discarded it to work on a horseless carriage.

What has been called “the perfect machine” has come to assume many forms and a fascinating range of variations.

The first successful production motorcycle was in Munich, Germany in 1894, the Hildegrand & Wolfmuller. It had a step-through frame with a fuel tank mounted on the downtube and a 2 cylinder engine that developed 2.5 bhp.

The first successful American motorcycle placed into production was the 1898 Orient-Aster, built by the Metz Company in Massachusetts. This was soon followed by the Indian (1901) and the Harley-Davidson (1902).

What was once a rich man’s folly has become the most popular mode of transportation in the world - millions of the Honda 90 have been sold worldwide, continuing to this day.

What was once the simplest form of transportation, with the most elementary design fabricated from basic materials, has become in current day a leading edge of technology in both design and materials – with innovations such as oval shaped pistons, carbon fiber frames, and titanium fasteners.

What was once used as a strategic machine in the World Wars is now a part of a modern war arsenal as well as law enforcement around the world - the same basic machine that is now favored by “outlaws” and the biker culture, formula racers, and day-to-day commuters.

Join us for a wonderful opportunity to view the fantastic and wonderful world of motorcycles as we celebrate the Art and Design of the Motorcycle.

Text by Randy Anderson, Class Chair, The Vintage Motorcycles