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DISCO VOLANTE

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DISCO

VOLANTE

By Ed McDonough



Turin is a great place to visit. Turin when it's warm and hosting a music week is even greater. Going to Turin's Biscaretti Museum and being allowed to play with a Disco Volante Spyder is nothing less than sensational. And when we finished doing it, and headed off for a sun-drenched lunch, we bumped into a display of classic cars, the central feature of which was no less than the Alfa Romeo Disco Volante coupe!

machines has often managed to evade even those who fancy themselves as Alfa Romeo experts.

It's over 50 years now since the cars first appeared at a press launch in October 1952. Relatively few of the cars which became known as "Discos" were ever built, and no one really knows exactly how many there were. Bodies went onto chassis and came off again, sometimes to be replaced with a different style of body, sometimes to be re-built, and some seemed to disappear altogether.

sports car drivers and was rummaging through their own "catalogue" for a likely model to develop which would also produce some good publicity for the company. Anderloni also contends that the "Disco" emerged from an internal conflict between some of the major players at Alfa at the time, including Satta, Colombo, and Chairman Gallo.

Colombo had been responsible for the successful 158 and 159 Grand Prix car, but Wifredo Ricart had pressed for the development of 2-liter six cylinder engines, and it was during Ricart's time that Orazio

It's over 50 years now since the Disco Volante first appeared at a press launch in October 1952.

For those of you who have never managed to visit this beautiful and sophisticated city—you simply should! Turin is Carsville, Italian style, home of the greats. The Biscaretti Museum, or to give it its proper title, *il Museo dell'Automobile di Torino Carlo Biscaretti Di Ruffia*—an impressive title and an impressive, though under-stated, institution, and a bit more about that later.

Alfa Owner was there to have a close look at one of the Italian car world's better-known icons, though the true history of this line of

The sleek form which caused the car to be dubbed the "Disco Volante" was seen at Monza for the first time being tested by the great Alfa test driver, the late Consalvo Sanesi. But where had the cars come from and what were they meant to do? Simon Moore, amongst others, saw the birth of the Disco Volante as a natural progression following Alfa Romeo's departure from the Grand Prix scene after winning its second consecutive World Championship in 1951. Carlo Bianchi Anderloni argues that Alfa wanted to start catering for the interests of amateur

Satta honed his own talents by working on the 6C 2500 Competition Coupe of 1948, the Freccia d'Oro, a 1948 6C 3000 prototype, and then the 1900 Berlina and Coupes which were Alfa's volume production units in the early 1950s. These numerous threads led to the use of a production-based vehicle as the start of a new sports car. While the shape of the design departed from production lines as the project grew, Satta's 1900 was clearly a big part of the Disco Volante. Budget restrictions meant a number of parts would come from

Photo: Dave Gooley





Rear view of chassis .00011 3-liter car at the Biscaretti Museum. Photo: Peter Collins

the 1900, though race engineers used the aluminum block and press fitted cylinders to boost the 1900s 100 bhp to 158 bhp.

As we have sometimes said in these pages, Alfa Romeo has created a lifetime's work in trying to figure out which car was built when, who raced what, when, and where. Tracing the production record of the first cars has always been something of a nightmare, and to make it worse, some of the cars popularly known as "Discos" are not really that at all!

After the first appearance of the 4-cylinder, 2-liter Spyder in Sanesi's hands, further Spyderys appeared at press launches and circuit test sessions, some of the models being clearly identified and some not. Thus, it was never entirely clear in what order the five so-called real Disco Volantes were built. Satta was keen to try the 3-liter engine he was developing. Testing at Monza proved how crude the wind tunnel work had been on the first cars, as, in spite of the futuristic and slippery

shape, the tail lifted on both the 2-liter and 3-liter cars at not very extreme speeds. This was embarrassing as the name Disco Volante—Flying Saucer—had grabbed worldwide headlines in those heady days of the early 1950s. The aerodynamic problems caused the racing department to do a total re-think about what kind of cars they wanted to bring into sports car racing, and subsequently, the cars which raced were not really Discos at all!

The cars are best distinguished by using a combination of type, series number, and chassis number. Thus the very first Disco Volante was DV 1900 C52 1359.000001. DV 1900 C52 was the type, 1900 specified the engine origins, "C" referred to competition, 52 to the year, and 1359 was an Alfa series number in this case used only on the 2-liter cars, with .00001 being the chassis number. So this car was the original, dramatic Spyder that lives in the Alfa Romeo Museum at Arese. This has been a very active car and done a number of Mille Miglia retros, Phil

Hill driving at least once.

One might expect the next car to be built to be .00002, but that would be wrong. A 3-liter Spyder was probably next out of the Touring workshops, while .00002 was a slightly shorter 2-liter car and became known as the "slab-sided" or "flat" Disco, reflecting the fact that early testing and driving led to experiments with far less dramatic body and wing bulges than the first car. This car had an active competition career, and despite long-term arguments about where it spent some of its time, it now resides in the French National Motor Museum, the Schlumpf Collection.

Chassis 1359.00003 is also a 2-liter car, but not a Spyder but the aforementioned coupe, a superb and beautiful machine which benefited from further aerodynamic tests, though it soon became clear it was not going to be a competitive race-car. This coupe is indeed the machine we stumbled across unattended sitting in a Turin square. Both .00001 and .00003 have had

substantial use as publicity vehicles by Alfa Romeo worldwide.

The car we went to have a close look at is the Biscaretti car, another well known Spyder, having been on long-term loan from Alfa Romeo. But this car is a 6-cylinder, 3-liter Spyder, and is the car that Sanesi tested hardest of all at Monza, and was the working basis for the racing coupes which followed. This car is 6C 3000CM 1361.00011. It is by appearance a Disco Volante but it is by series a 6C 3000CM, indicating the number of cylinders, the 3-liter engine and CM standing for Competizione Maggiore (or competition and enlarged). To add to the confusion, this should mean that .00011 has a 3.5-liter engine as that is what went into the racing cars for 1953, and some people have even ventured that it is a 3.5 but it isn't. It has the 3-liter 6-cylinder unit that Satta worked on from 1948 and reduced to 2-liters and 4-cylinders for .00001, .00002, and .00003.

The late Ben Hendricks, famed Alfa expert and serious Disco investigator, tried to spell out when a Disco is or isn't a Disco. He argues that the first specimen had a 4-cylinder engine and was a 1900C52. It received the series number 1359 and the chassis number .00001 as we have said. The two other "specimens" were however equipped with 6 cylinder units and received the series number 131 and chassis numbers .00011, the Biscaretti car, and .00012. The series number 1361 belongs to the 6C 3000CM. The 2-liter 4-cylinder is therefore a "real" Disco as well as a 1900 C52, while the 3-liter 6-cylinders are Discos but are 6C 3000CMs. The final car in the original Disco shape is listed in the existing records as .00012, but it is also listed as "unknown" or dismantled, or both. It may have been the car that some thought to be .00002, it may have been rebodied, or scrapped.

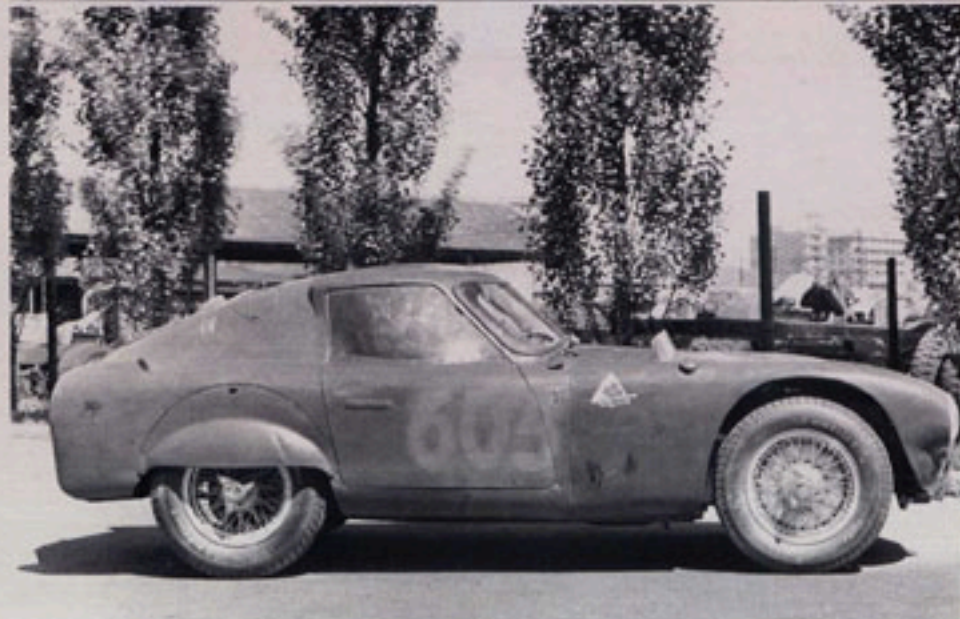
In 1953, Alfa launched the cars to contest the major sports car races of the year, four coupes and a Spyder and called them the 6C 3000CM, which was of course wrong because



Sanesi testing 6C 3000CM, chassis .00128 at Monza in 1953. Photo: Alfa Romeo



Another view of the 2-liter coupe in 1953. Photo: Alfa Romeo



This is the 1953 Mille Miglia car of Kling/Klenk, the 6C3000CM with chassis number .00125. Photo: Alfa Romeo



The 1987 Mille Miglia Retro, chassis .00127. Photo: Ed McDonough Collection



This is the 2-liter chassis .00002 known as the "slab-sided Disco" which resides in the French National Motor Museum. Photo: Ed McDonough



6C 3000CM Chassis .00127. Photo: Ed McDonough Collection

they had 3.5-liter engines, but there you are! These cars went on to fame though not success in the Mille Miglia and Le Mans and Fangio wrote himself further into history by running the last 200 miles of the Mille Miglia with a broken steering arm and only had steering on one front wheel, but he still finished second. Fangio scored the type's only victory with a win in the Spyder in late 1953. But these cars were not Disco Volantes by series, chassis, or intention, though in fact they remain indelibly in memory as exactly that! But we will perhaps come back to the competition cars in a later issue.

Here in Turin, we had the freedom of .00011, with its classic Disco styling and swooping lines, the big and potent six cylinder engine, capable of some of the most ear splitting yet lovely sounds. Thank you, Signor Biscaretti.

The Biscaretti Museum

Roberto Biscaretti di Ruffia was an early Italian motoring pioneer and proposed the idea of a full scale motor museum in 1932. Biscaretti's son Carlo started collecting for the museum which opened with a few rooms in 1939. After the war, during which much of the collection was damaged and records lost, the Italian motor industry supported the

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Photos: Dave Gooley





establishment of a permanent site which was opened in 1959, just after Carlo's death, and many of his illustrations of the history of Fiat line the walls.

One of the beauties of this museum is that it is one of the few that were actually designed to be a motor museum, and thus the 160-plus cars and innumerable other displays have plenty of space, and huge windows make it one of the lightest of all museums. It rarely feels crowded and the atmosphere is always cordial. Director Duilio Falcione is immensely welcoming and friendly, assisting with access to the archives on request, and generally creating a sense of the visitor being wanted, not always the feeling I get in muse-

ums! When I said I was doing a piece of research on the Alfa 158 and needed a close scrutiny, a book of tools arrived and I was left to get on with it!

The cars represent a wide range of European road and race vehicles, the oldest being the French Cugnot tractor from 1769, but there are great Fiats and Darracqs, Itals and Alfas, and many cars are partially dismantled to allow the visitor a look at the insides, a superb idea. My favorites include the modified Alfa P2, the Monaco-Trossi, the Ferrari 500 from 1952 in which Ascari won the World Championship, the Lancia D-24 and the fabulous and original Lancia D-50. ♣

Fangio wrote himself further into history by running the last 200 miles of the Mille Miglia with a broken steering arm and only had steering on one front wheel...but he still finished second.

