

"La bella figura" means presenting the best face to the world. Mussolini wore tailored uniforms and was equally attentive to his cars

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By the early 1930s, Alfa Romeo was accumulating silverware and losing money in seemingly equal measure. It was rescued by the state-backed I.R.I. (Institute for Industrial Reconstruction). To attract new customers while maintaining the marque's sporting credentials, the 6C 2300 was launched at the 1934 Milan Motor Show. Successor to the iconic 6C 1750 and stopgap 6C 1900, it was powered by a clean-sheet 2,309-cc DOHC straight-6 engine available in three states of tune, the most powerful of which developed 95 hp at 4,500 rpm.

To celebrate its victory in Pescara's Targa Abruzzo and Coppa Acerbo, Alfa Romeo sanctioned the production of just 60 6C 2300 Pescara chassis, all of which shared the same 2,925-mm wheelbase and potent twin carburetor engine. Chassis 700635 was supplied new to Benito Mussolini on August 10, 1935. A long-term supporter of the Milanese marque, who once described it as a "national jewel," the fascist dictator owned twelve Alfa Romeos.

His chauffeur and confidante, Ercole Boratto, was an ex-Alfa Romeo test driver, who said that Mussolini "adored machines, especially motor cars and parading about in them. He loved to be recognized by the people and to be noticed principally by the female sex.... If by chance some young thing caught his eye, he was quite capable of taking the same street several times in succession so as to pass by the target woman."

The bodywork fitted to chassis 700635 did not have an easy genesis. Bereft of any bulletproof glass or armor plating, the Spyder was initially rejected by Mussolini, not because it lacked such protective measures but due to the absence of a rumble seat. Rarely without his chauffeur, Il Duce perhaps felt the need to accommodate any "target women" he might encounter. To raise the height of the car's rear deck to integrate the new due posti dietro seating, the spare was made almost flush with the bodywork, the fuel tank was repositioned, and the rear wings reshaped to fit a discreet fold-away step. The bonnet was altered so that cooling vents ran horizontally rather than vertically, giving the impression of greater length.

Mussolini was delighted with the result and duly paid 50,000 lira-something of a discount on its true cost. The only open 6C 2300 of a quartet entered for the 1936 Mille Miglia, chassis 700635 was piloted by Boratto and Guido Mancinelli. The duo finished a strong 3rd in the over 2-liter unsupercharged class and 13th overall.

Reconfigured as a road car, the Pescara remained in Il Duce's possession until November 1939. Bought back by Alfa, chassis 700635 then passed to a lesser Fascist Party official. Hidden away at the end of World War II, it was acquired from his relatives in 1972. Still highly

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original, it was treated to a mechanical overhaul and took part in the Mille Miglia retrospective before entering the current ownership during May 1995. After several years, it was restored by Dino Cognolato. As a just reward for the meticulous care and attention to detail that went into the rejuvenation, the Pescara placed second in class at the 2005 Pebble Beach concours.

As far as we are aware, this 6C 2300 Pescara Spyder is the only first-generation 6C 2300 Pescara to have been bodied as a Spyder by Touring.

{analysis}{auto}1119{/auto} This 1935 Alfa Romeo 6C 2300 Pescara Spyder sold for \$1,079,681, including premium, at the H&H Cheltenham Racecourse sale in England on February 27, 2008.

Royalty, dictators, and other absolute rulers are often connected with fancy cars. Whether the Shah of Iran, "Baby Doc" Duvalier, the Aga Khan, Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini, the automobiles associated with them are always the subject of interest, even if sometimes fairly morbid in nature. Like other "celebrity" motoring relationships, it does make a difference if the ruler in question was actually a "car guy."

Mussolini was by all accounts an enthusiast

A car known to have been owned and driven by Steve McQueen has usually brought a premium over a "civilian" car of the same make and model. Conversely, since Elvis Presley was known to have purchased many cars but to have driven relatively few, the value bump for an "Elvis car" is in some cases surprisingly modest. While Mussolini's partner in crime, Hitler, never possessed a driver's license, the Italian was by all accounts quite an enthusiast. As "Il Duce," he preferred to be driven rather than to drive, but he was quite particular about the cars he bought and followed contemporary motorsport quite closely. He was of course fortunate that his government, through the I.R.I., had taken over Alfa, as it provided him with a ready source of discounted sports cars.

The 6C 2300 is a very good car, too often overshadowed by the better-known 6C 1750 and the extraordinary 8C 2900. Although conceived as an effort by Alfa to increase sales as the Depression widened across the Atlantic and demand for the larger 8C 2300 had fallen, it still presented some important advances. Given a more modern, lighter chassis, and with hydraulic brakes and fully independent suspension in the 1935 6C 2300B, it proved a savior for the company. Alfa sales rose from 489 in 1933 to 689 in 1934, before armament manufacture largely took over in 1935, when sales totaled a mere 91 units.

The 6C 2300 was also adapted for racing. What would become the Pescara was based on the GT variant of the 6C 2300, with a shorter wheelbase and an uprated engine, which produced 76 hp vs. the standard 68 hp. When the Scuderia Ferrari team ran a tweaked version of the GT with 95-hp engines and made a 1-2-3 sweep of the Pescara races, it was natural for the street version to be put into production. Only 180 were built, available in the usual assortment of factory-made and coachbuilt sedans, as well as custom coupes, cabriolets, and roadsters. Of those, the cars created by Carrozzeria Touring stand out, with their typical clean styling and

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excellent detailing.

Mussolini's Pescara was the last built before the changeover to the "B" model, so it retained beam-axle suspension and mechanical brakes. Some say the balance achieved by Alfa designer Vittorio Jano with solid-axle cars was superior to most 1930s independent suspensions, especially in competition vehicles.

A stunning restoration

"La bella figura" is the uniquely Italian requirement to present the best face to the world. It's no surprise that Mussolini, who carefully chose his tailored uniforms, suits, and hats, was equally attentive in the style of his cars. The 6C 2300 Pescara Spyder is sleek and well balanced, a masterpiece of Italian design and the gifts of Touring. It's equally well suited for a run in the Mille Miglia or for-as the late, great, Henry Manney would put it-"crumpet catching." The restoration of this car was stunning, as I quite well recall spending an inordinate amount of time drooling over it at the 2005 Pebble Beach Concours.

H&H estimated this 6C 2300 to sell in the range of £ 600k to £ 800k (\$1.17m-\$1.5m), and it had failed to sell earlier in the month at a different auction venue at a high bid of £ 450,000. In the end, the just over \$1 million achieved was impressive enough and by far a world record for the model, clearly into 6C 1750 Zagato territory. This 6C 2300 Pescara Spyder has a blend of subtle elegance and sportiness not often encountered, and the bid reflected that.

A superbly executed restoration of a rare car with documented period Mille Miglia history almost guarantees value, and a spokesman for H&H didn't put too much of the result down to Mussolini's ownership. That's hard to say, as the car was relentlessly promoted as having been his. Nevertheless, even putting Il Duce aside, it's a great Alfa.{/analysis}