

Work of Artifact

Introducing Zagato's brand-new 1938 Lancia Aprilia Sport.

BY MARCO R. DELLA CAVA



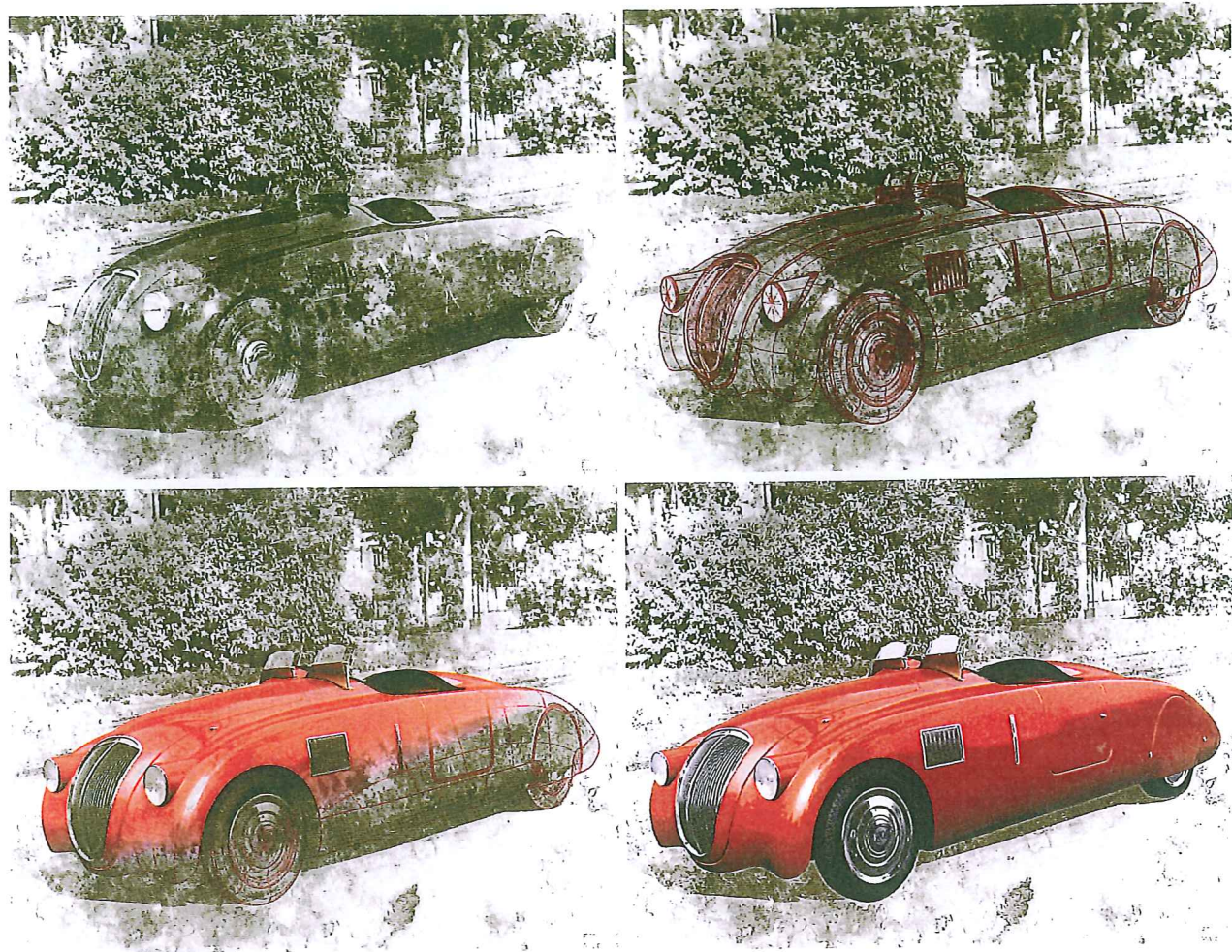
ZAGATO, THE 89-year-old Italian design and engineering firm, has materialized some of the world's most striking works of automotive art. Name the marque—from prewar Alfa Romeos to a bevy of modern Ferraris, with a few British (2003 Aston Martin DB7) and American (1967 Shelby GT 350) names thrown in for good measure—and the Milanese magic house

has likely worked its wizardry on it at one time or another.

But the Zagato Lancia Aprilia Sport is a trick of an altogether different nature. Born in 1938 as a one-off, hand-built touring spyder for racer Eugenio Minetti, the car was a rakish bolt out of the aerodynamic future. With its sloped nose, elongated tail, and angled windcreens, this Aprilia Sport was no

mere boulevardier, with Minetti enlisting its impressive services in grueling hill climbs. (No pretender, Minetti would go on to place fourth, with Piero Facetti, driving a Cisitalia 202 SMM in the 1947 Mille Miglia). The distinctive Aprilia Sport fast became Minetti's calling card.

Then it vanished, most likely a victim of Allied bombs during World War



Zagato recreated the car's shape—including the rounded front and aerodynamically tapered rear—from two monochromatic photos.

II. "All that was left were two faded monochromatic photographs," says Paolo Di Taranto, Zagato's communications chief. "But from just [these photos], we rebuilt the car."

This Zagato-bodied Lancia is available with a word placed in the right circles and €150,000 (about \$235,000) at hand. The company aims to produce perhaps as many as nine vehicles, with the first example already sold to an Italian enthusiast, while fans in California and Japan await their turns.

But acquiring the car is, relatively speaking, the easy part. The story of this Zagato's return, however, is a mite more complex and intriguing. The notion emerged more than two years ago, as Zagato executives discussed the best way to commemorate in sheet metal the 100th year of Lancia—today an Italian everyman's car that in the past had its own slice of road racing glory.

"There have been many Lancia

Zagatos in the modern era," says Di Taranto. One of the better known in the U.S. was the underpowered, but dashing, targa-topped wedge of the 1970s. "But this was the very first one. So [we thought] remaking this particular car might be the best way to honor our long association with Lancia," he explains.

The Aprilia Sport was a sage choice. Consider that company founder Ugo Zagato came from an aeronautical background and was among automotive pioneers when it came to applying curved, wind-cheating designs to ground-based transportation. His techniques—many present in Minetti's special Aprilia Sport—included reducing the wind resistance from headlights as well as incorporating perforations on wheels for better brake cooling. In fact, if his 1937 masterpiece could sprout wings, it looks like it might take flight.

It wasn't long before Andrea Zagato, the firm's CEO, seized on the notion of recreating a piece of lore—the brainchild of his visionary grandfather. Realizing this dream would require taking the state of the visual arts of the period—photography—and applying to those two-dimensional images the pinnacle of third millennium technology, including advanced digitalization techniques, computer-assisted design software, and CNC machine hardware.

"Fortunately, the photos we had showed the car from both front and back, so all the key visual elements were there," says Di Taranto. "The first step was to turn those images into three-dimensional design plans. Then we got our hands on a standard Lancia Aprilia from that era, and went to work."

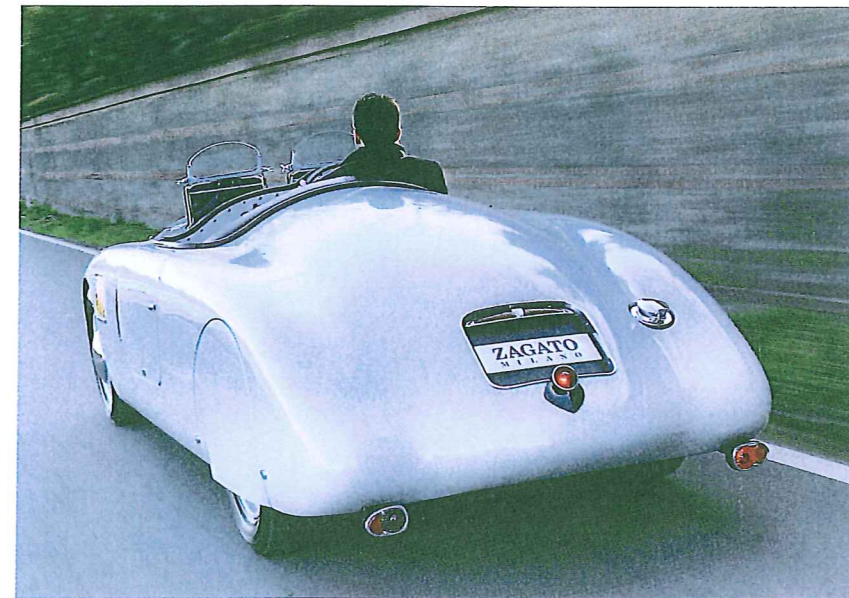
Once the body designs were in hand, Zagato let loose some of its finest artisans on the project, all veterans of Zagato Atelier (the custom coachwork

arm of the design house that specializes in runs from nine to 99 examples). Some of their recent creations—cars that carry the distinctive, Zorro-like "Z" on their flanks—include the Ferrari 575 GTZ, Spyker C-12 Zagato, and Bentley GTZ, each swooping reimaginings of stock supercars that are no slouches in the style department.

Tools in hand, Zagato artisans spent month after month on the Aprilia

pared with today, were limited at best," says Di Taranto. "If you look at the car in profile, it really seems like the cross section of a large airplane wing—one massive, fluid piece undisturbed by external fenders."

As the years ticked by and the Zagato Aprilia Sport's body took form, attention was paid to the machine's running gear and powerplant. Fortunately, those pieces of the retro



To commemorate Lancia's 100th anniversary, Zagato will produce nine factory replicas of the 1938 Lancia Aprilia Sport, at about \$235,000.

Sport, hand-beating thin aluminum panels on solid, machined bucks, putting on a ballet of Old World craftsmanship that is largely a thing of the past in today's automated industry.

Slowly the magnitude of the car's groundbreaking design started to emerge, especially in the nose (the grille looks like a wonderfully wilted Rolls-Royce number) and tail (the rear fenders are only slightly defined and form part of a sleek caboose that recalls the front hood of the Alfa Romeo's iconic Disco Volante—which notably debuted some 15 years later).

"These taut lines and seamless highlights are true examples of the height of automotive art created in a prewar age, when construction techniques, com-

puzzle were easily acquired by securing period-correct versions of both, with the former anchored by an all-independent suspension and the latter composed of a 1,351 cc, 4-cylinder block that could top out at around 125 kilometers per hour (78 mph). Total weight is 880 kilos, or 1,940 pounds—about 220 pounds lighter than the more common coupe version.

"We did not want to invent or create anything new for this car, it all had to be either original or a recreation of something we knew was real back in the day," explains Di Taranto. "We have about 50 people working for us, and many had a role in the creation of the Aprilia Sport. It took us nearly three years to finish the first one. We

look at ourselves like tailors of cars, we take our time."

The end result is an inspiring homage to the forward-looking past. So many of Ugo Zagato's streamlined touches project out into the latter half of the 20th century. There's the car's utterly bumperless body, which makes the spyder look impossibly ovoid and slippery. Emphasizing that look are the rear wheels, which are almost completely hidden by aluminum panels. There are the headlamps, two discreet eyes set comfortably into the nose. The cockpit is elegantly minimalist, a wooden steering wheel giving way to a few gauges and switches trimmed with dark wood, all set in a polished metal dash.

Zagato employees who have taken this reincarnation to the road report that while performance is limited, due to the fairly modest engine of the era, the drive itself is worth the multi-year wait. "The sound the car makes is just fantastic," says Zagato's Adele Salviati. "And because the driver of this car is not hidden from the sound the way the driver of the original Aprilia, with its greenhouse top, was, the experience is like driving a dream."

For Di Taranto, the Aprilia Sport's mere existence is a form of sweet revenge on the misfortunes of the past. Bombing runs over Milan in the mid '40s wiped out a good number of Zagato's prized creations, many of which don't even live on in photo form.

"It was really nice to be able to bring back one of our greatest cars" he says. "None of this could even have been imagined a few decades ago. But thanks to the technology that exists today—which allows you to create a three-dimensional object from a two-dimensional memory—cars like this, cars that really made an impact on automotive design, are allowed to live again. Besides, this car is not only a part of Zagato's story, it's a part of automotive history." □

Lancia, www.lancia.com
Zagato, www.zagato.it