



DESIGN

After 53 Years of Beauty Sleep, the B.A.T. Is Back

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Winston Goodfellow

The 1953 Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica, or B.A.T. More Photos >

By PHIL PATTON

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THERE was disappointing news ahead of the Geneva motor show this month: for the first time in decades, Bertone, one of Italy's great coachbuilders, would not have its own display inside the exhibit halls.

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The B.A.T. Is Back

Bertone is being managed by bankruptcy commissioners after the founding family was pushed aside. Like Italy's other surviving carrozzeria — the design houses that produce concept cars and sometimes build small runs of vehicles under contract — Bertone is facing hard times.

But Bertone showed it still had life with a surprise unveiling at a nightclub, away from the Palexpo Geneva exhibition center, of a design study called the B.A.T. 11. The swoopy green-gray concept car was presented as a spiritual successor to the visionary B.A.T. cars, Nos. 5, 7, and 9, that the company created on Alfa Romeo mechanicals in the 1950s and displayed at auto shows in Turin.

The B.A.T. 11, whose creation was led by David Wilkie, design director at Bertone, has a helmet-like body comprising loosely joined planes, a central spine, taillights inset in its fins and black wheels shaped like a jet's turbine.

B.A.T. stands for Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica; berlinetta is an industry term for a sporty coupe, and the cars were exercises in the technology of aerodynamics. The cars combine aerodynamic principles — the chief designer of the original trio, Franco Scaglione, had studied the science — with sheer fantasy. The 1950s B.A.T.'s are viewed as



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milestones by design historians.

“The B.A.T. cars combined fantasy with extraordinary aerodynamic performance, extraordinary sculptural qualities, extraordinary beauty and timeless forms and organization,” said Geoff Wardle, director of advanced mobility research at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif. “They had a subliminal influence on future vehicle designs.”

The B.A.T. 11 evokes Bertone’s glorious past. It was commissioned by Gary Kaberle, an American collector. As a teenager he had fallen in love with the B.A.T. 9, which had fallen on hard times and was parked in front of a Dodge dealership in his Michigan hometown to draw customers. The young man, who is now a dentist, saved up his money and bought the car, according to an article in Classic & Sports Car Magazine in 1994, but sold it years later to pay medical bills.

The B.A.T. 9 joined its siblings when the cars were restored and brought together in 1989. In 2005, they were shown at the Concours d’Élégance at Pebble Beach, Calif., by their new owner, Cars International Kensington Ltd., a British dealer of expensive road and racing cars. They were valued by the company at \$8 million before being sold to a private collector.

Dr. Haberle went to Bertone a couple of years ago with the idea of a new B.A.T. The B.A.T. 11 is built on the chassis of the new Alfa Romeo 8C Competizione.

Bertone began literally as a builder of coaches, the horse-drawn sort, having been founded by Giovanni Bertone in 1912. After World War I, the company shifted to car bodies. Giovanni’s son Giuseppe, known as Nuccio, was born in 1914 and took over direction of the company in 1934.

Claudia Neumann, a design historian, calls Bertone “one of the greats of Italian design.” Among the great creations of Bertone are the Lamborghini Miura and Countach; the Ferrari Dino 308 GT4; and the Lancia Stratos. For [BMW](#), Bertone did the 3200 CS in 1961; in 1975 it shaped the Polo for VW. It also did work for Citroën and Volvo. The 1956 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint was planned as a limited edition of 500 cars, but instead sold 40,000 over 14 years.

The company is also distinguished for giving starts to design stars like Marcello Gandini and Giorgetto Giugiaro, who each followed Franco Scaglione, designer of the B.A.T.’s, as the top designers at Bertone.

Concepts from Italy’s carrozzeria are often the highlights of the Geneva auto show. Last year, Bertone showed a design study for Fiat called the Barchetta. This year, Zagato showed a concept called the Bentley GTZ, and Pininfarina offered one called the Sintesi.

But revered coachbuilders like Ghia and Touring are now gone, and survivors like Zagato, Pininfarina and Italdesign-Giugiaro are feeling extreme pressure. The carrozzeria declined as the number of aristocrats, plutocrats and movie stars willing to pay for bespoke or limited-production bodies declined. Most moved from operating as the automotive versions of skilled tailors to becoming consultants on engineering and production, and serving as small-volume manufacturerers. Bertone, for instance, produced 2,000 copies of the limited edition Mini GT through 2006.

Against a backdrop of court actions among Lilli Bertone, the widow of Nuccio Bertone, and their daughters, the new B.A.T. can be viewed as either a last gasp of the coachbuilders or a defiant assertion of their intent to survive.

Mr. Wardle of Art Center College points out that the coachbuilders have been lagging for years, as automakers turn inward for design. Over the years, coachbuilders have produced some of the most esteemed designs in the history of the automobile, but today they are being run by second- or third-generation members of their founder’s families or outsiders, “who do not have the same vision, talent or focus as their progenitors,” he said.

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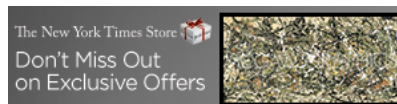
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