

ALFA ROMEO 1900 SUPER SPRINT ZAGATO

by Genevieve Obert

PHOTOS BY DAVID GOOLEY



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The Alfa Romeo 1900 debuted at the 1950 Paris Motor Show, the first all-new automobile from the Milanese manufacturer in five years. Why so long to produce something new? While all of Europe suffered from the war, Allied bombers particularly relished targeting Alfa's Portello Works: The first bombs fell on 8,500 people in February 1943; in August that year, another round (though Mussolini's fascists had fallen in July, the Germans had taken over); in October 1944, the last remnants were demolished, leaving over 16,000 cubic meters of ruins.

Personnel losses continued after the war. Ugo Gobbato, Alfa's general director, was arrested as a collaborator. Though he was absolved at trial, the morning after the decree four men machine-gunned him on his way home. Technical director Bruno Trevisan died

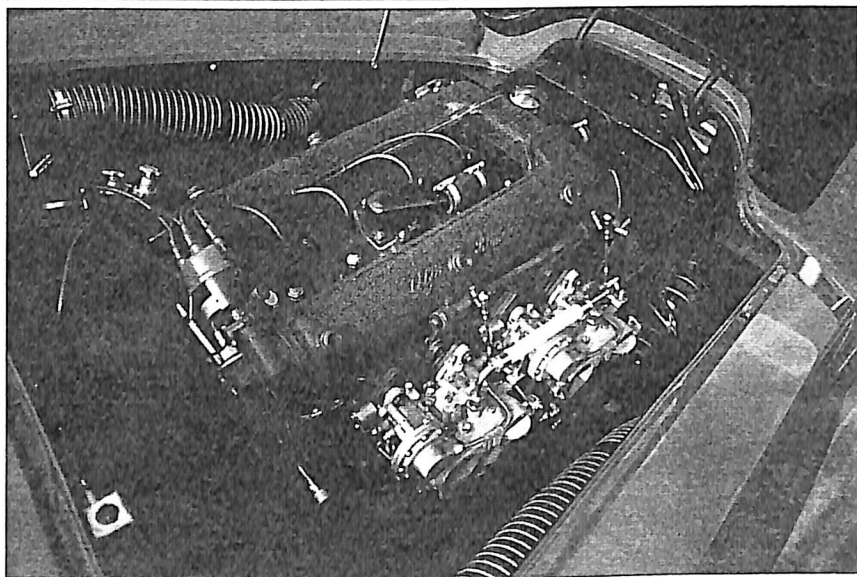
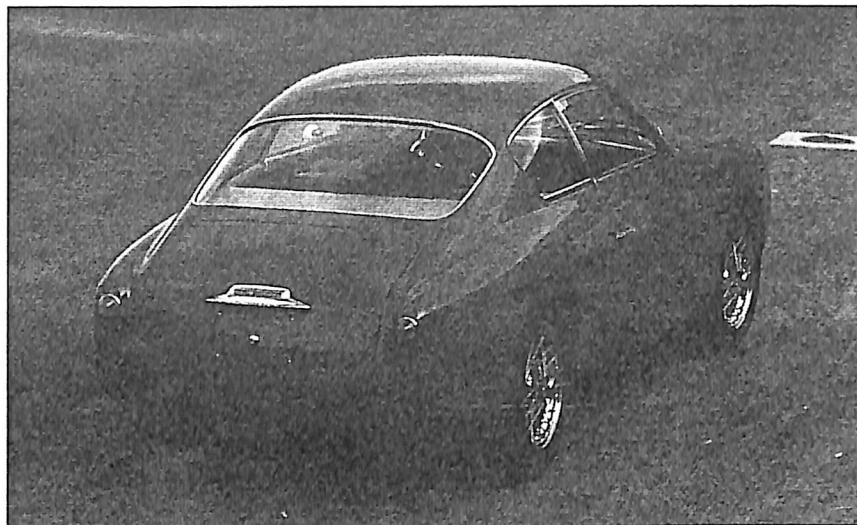
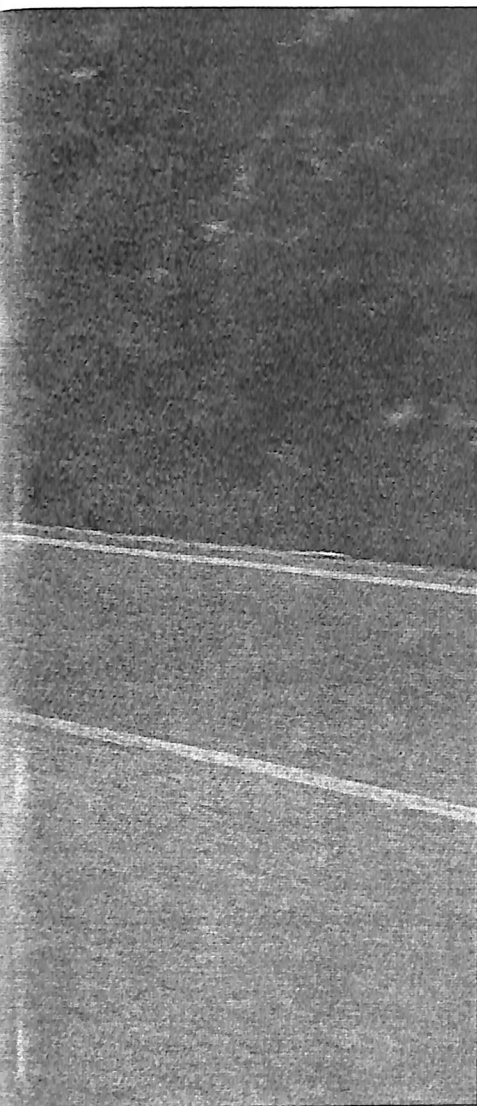
soon after in a mysterious car accident.

The new president, Pasquale Gallo, began the rebuilding process in 1946, and succeeded in producing several new bodies for the 6C 2500s, followed by the *Freccia d'Oro* or Golden Arrow in 1947, all atop essentially the same innards as the 1939 models. By 1948, plans were underway to replace these expensive, hand-built automobiles with something more modern and affordable. Under the direction of the new Chief Engineer Orazio Satta-Puliga and his assistant Giuseppe Busso, the 1900 was born.

Much had changed in five years, and the new car took advantage of these changes. Alfa Romeo's brand-new production line (its first) and its own in-house coachworks built the 1900 as Alfa's first unibody automobile. The new 1884cc four-cylinder motor avoided Italian tax penalties (on

over 2000cc engines) while still offering 80 horses, though it still carried the old-style adjustable valves characteristic of Alfas since 1926 (the 1900s were the last to have them, in fact). A single Solex carburetor was standard on the earliest cars, but within the year, double-barrel Solexes increased horsepower from the 80 bhp of the original to 90 (at 5500 rpm). These hotter 1900s received the added initials T.I.—for *Turismo Internazionale*—in recognition of the fact that these cars were already racing in that category. While Alfa's official race activities focused on the 159 (with drivers like Fangio and Farina), individual owners were entering their 1900s and winning their class in races all over Italy. By 1951, these successes led to the slogan "The family sedan that wins races."

The slogan became even more apt two years later, when the motor's displacement



was increased to 1975cc, pushing horsepower up to 115 (at 5400 rpm) on the new 1900 T.I. Super. By the end of the 1900's successful run, a wide array of powerplants had become available: The standard 1884cc motor (renamed 1900 Sprint in 1953), the 1900 Super Sprint (with the 1975cc motor) from 1954-56 and the 1900 C Super Sprint from 1956-58. These last featured two down-draft double-barrel Solex carburetors. Alfa tuner Conrero got ahold of a few Super Sprints, and by switching to Weber side-drafts and fancy cams, he coaxed out an extra 30 to 45 horses. The 1900s, in their various forms, dominated the under-2000cc "Touring" categories until the Giulietta began its successful racing career in 1956.

Bodies, too, evolved over the years. While most of the early 1900 four-door

sedans were built in-house, every year a few hundred were sent to independent *carrozzeria* in the longstanding Italian tradition. Touring designed the bulk of the series (over 1400 altogether), including the famous *Disco Volante* or Flying Saucer, a space-age version that caused quite a stir in the design world but ruffled few feathers on the racetracks. Nuccio Bertone caused another commotion when he put a fantastic B.A.T body on the 1900 platform. Four-door sedans, two-door coupes, a few spiders, *Lungo* (long) or *Corto* (short), even police cars—over 20,000 examples of the 1900 appeared between 1950 and 1959, all but 4,000 with factory coachwork. On those 4,000 chassis, everyone from Boano to Zagato tried their hand.

The example shown here is one of 39 1900s bodied by Zagato. Ugo Zagato's

family firm was pleased to take delivery of these Alfa Romeo chassis. The Milan-based coachworks' famous collaboration with Alfa Romeo had faltered after the war. The 1900 contract brought the two firms back together, and they've continued to work together, on and off, ever since.

Compared to the Touring and factory bodies, the Zagatos appear sleeker and shorter. All were built on the Corto chassis, but every 1900 Zagato is a little different. Unlike Alfa, Zagato still produced everything by hand. The differences may not be obvious—all share the distinctive three-part front grille, for example—but park two examples side by side and you'll see a higher fender or rear-end here, an extra bit of chrome trim there. Each car's unique character is cherished by modern owners who realize that these differences increase the car's value over the more stan-

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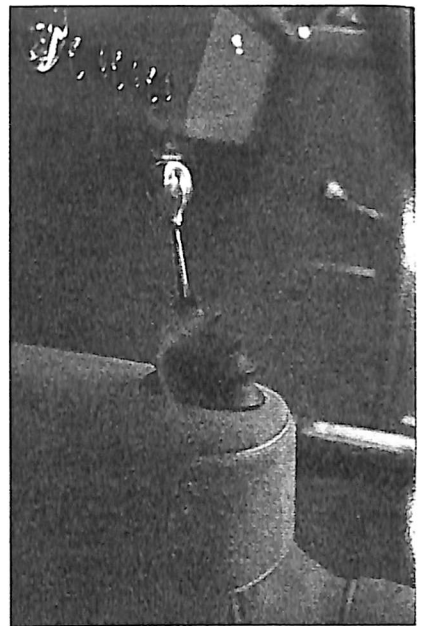
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Since the Zagatos were all built for racing, they don't sport bumpers, but they do carry dual hood vents. Sometimes trimmed in chrome and sometimes not, these raised air intakes give the car a ferocious look, like they're ready for serious speed. Unfortunately, the coupes didn't fare as well in racing as the sedans, due to the more serious competition in the GT and Sports Car classes (like Fiat 8Vs, Ferraris and Maseratis). Still, the 1900 S.S. Zagatos appeared on the starting lines of almost every Mille Miglia, Giro d'Italia and Coppa Intereuropa (at Monza) between 1953 and 1958.

The S.S. motors survived these rigorous events well, and many survive to this day. The car shown here, for example, ran not only in the '55, '56 and '57 Mille Miglia, it also ran in the '88, '89, '95, '96 Mille Miglia Storico (and may run again in '97) as well as the historic Tour de France, the Colorado Grande, and the California Mille. If you live in southern California, you may even see it on the freeway. If you're lucky. ☘