



The 1955 DeSoto Adventurer II followed the unsuccessful 1954 Adventurer I concept car designed by Virgil Exner as an alternative to the Chevrolet Corvette. The Adventurer II was designed and built entirely by Ghia as a styling exercise and was never meant for production. Its two-seat configuration was inspired by the Giovanni Savonuzzi-designed Supersonic series of sports cars.



Carrozzeria Italiana



By Robert Cumberland

Throughout its now-ended history as an independent coachbuilder, Carrozzeria Ghia always stood for one thing above all else: elegant luxury bodywork made to order on an individual basis, as exemplified by some of the cars you see on the field today.

Unlike some of its contemporaries and competitors, Ghia never got deeply involved in production, yet its distinguished badge has probably appeared on more cars worldwide than that of any bespoke body builder thanks to its ongoing use by its present owner, Ford Motor Company.

Historically Ghia was among the French and Italian coachbuilders that essentially ruled the world of exceptional cars from 1919 to 1999 (Paris was of course the center of activity between the two World Wars, and northern Italy was the pole from 1946 until the era of private commissions slowly came to an end, the victim of too many rules, regulations and other constraints). In fact, the last production car initially created at Ghia was the first Ford Fiesta, designed by then-chief designer Tom Tjaarda in 1972.

Founded in 1915 by Giacinto Ghia, the firm really came into its own after World War II, when the imaginative toast of Torinese society, Count Mario Revelli de Beaumont, was replaced as chief designer by Mario Felice Boano, who had been the designated successor to Giacinto. Boano held that post from 1948 to 1953, when he clashed with Luigi Segre, the mercurial leader who took over majority ownership from

the Boano family that year. Boano's main contribution to Ghia's design history was the design of the Lancia Aurelia B20 GT coupe, subsequently built in series by Pinin Farina.

Although seldom recognized, Ghia also greatly influenced the design of the 1954 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint coupe that put Carrozzeria Bertone on the map as a production house. Working from the original design by Alfa's in-house stylist, Ferruccio Palamidessi, Boano helped to refine the shape into the resulting classic.

When Boano left Ghia, Segre quickly named the multitalented Mario Savonuzzi, an engineer by training and a designer by avocation, as technical director. Subsequent to Segre's early death from a botched gallbladder operation, Ghia underwent a complex chain of ownership changes, including periods of control by the family of Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo, American electrical equipment manufacturer Rowan Industries, and Argentinian racer and entrepreneur Alessandro de Tomaso, who finally sold the coachbuilder to Ford Motor Company in the early 1970s. Ford shuttered the Torino operation in 2001 but continues to affix the Ghia badge to some cars with fancy trim packages.



Left: Of all the cars that Ghia designed, the Dual-Ghia, which was based on a Chrysler Firearrow, was perhaps the most glamorous. A total of 117 Dual-Ghias were built by Ghia for the Dual Motors Corporation and examples were bought by Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Desi Arnaz.

Below: First shown in 1955, the Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia (more officially the Type 14) is perhaps Carrozzeria Ghia's most successful design, with over 450,000 cars sold over a period of nearly 20 years.

Immediately after the war and prior to his tenure at Ghia, Savonuzzi had created the shapes and characteristic oval grille with vertical bars on the iconic Cisitalia 202, which was subsequently built by Pinin Farina with restyled rear fenders. At Ghia, Savonuzzi continued his stylistic creativity with the dart-shaped Gilda show car and the hugely influential Supersonic series of bodies on Fiat 8V, Aston Martin and Jaguar chassis, details of which showed up on the Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia coupe and the Volvo P-1800 coupes. Its side surface treatment was repeated on the Volvo and even on 1958 Chevrolets, hard as that may be to imagine. General Motors Styling Vice President Harley Earl always made it a point to attend European motor shows, and when he saw something he liked, he returned home with the idea. In the case of the Supersonic, he returned with an actual Fiat 8V with Ghia bodywork and told his stylists to put the "boom" (the long tubular projection starting on the front fender) on the mass-market car.



Other Savonuzzi projects included a Cadillac coupe made for film star Rita Hayworth; an Alfa Romeo 1900 coupe; some 18 Chrysler show cars done with the collaboration of Chrysler stylist Virgil Exner (the

Volkswagen Karmann-Ghia coupe was done while Exner was in Torino on Chrysler business); the Ferrari 410 Superamerica on the show field today; and the Dual-Ghia—also present here—built on Chrysler mechanicals for American bus manufacturer Paul Farago. That's the Dual that became *the* car of choice for the Hollywood "Rat Pack," with Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. It is worth noting that the disposition of the frontal elements of the Dual derived from the Alfa Romeo 1900, with its vertical grille transmuted into the large, high rectangle of the 1953 Dodge Firebomb. It also clearly inspired the decade-later Ford Mustang.



Above: The streamlined 1955 Ghia Gilda Coupe concept was built for the Turin Motor Show in 1955. Designed by Giovanni Savonuzzi, Ghia's chief-stylist, for Virgil Exner at Chrysler, the car was an experiment in aerodynamics.

Newly graduated American architect Tom Tjaarda entered Ghia just as Savonuzzi was leaving for America, where he would create Chrysler's gas turbine car before becoming chief technologist for that entire corporation. Only Sergio Sartorelli remained as a Ghia designer, so Tjaarda was immediately given the job of creating the Innocenti 950 Spyder, a lovely little roadster based on the Austin-Healey Sprite package but sold only in Italy. Tjaarda also contributed some spectacular show cars, including the Selene van and the IXG Dragster.

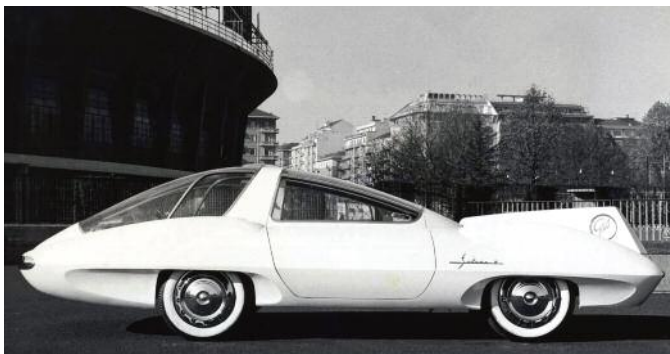
Other well-known and widely respected designers who worked at or with Ghia included Pietro Frua (when his shop was merged into Ghia), prolific freelancer Giovanni Michelotti, Fidele Bianco (who was recruited into GM Styling by Harley Earl), Giorgetto Giugiaro (who left Ghia to found Italdesign Giugiaro), Bruno Sacco (who went on to become design chief at Mercedes-Benz), and even Ercole Spada (whose best-known work was carried out later at Zagato).

Right: The 1956 Ferrari 410 Superamerica Ghia Coupe

Sergio Coggiola was the designer-engineer who made everything work for the others, and he eventually created his own prototype production facility. Filippo Sapino was the last Ghia design director when Ford shut it down at the beginning of this century, thus effectively closing the chapter on Ghia creativity and design after 86 years of exceptional activity.

One of the most spectacular Ghia designs was the DeSoto Adventurer II, a derivative of the Savonuzzi Supersonic series, somewhat reworked by Virgil Exner. Extremely long for a two-seater, its form is at once elegant and refined yet boldly spectacular. An innovative feature that seems never to have been replicated was the sliding-into-the-trunk backlight, opening up the roof behind the seats, giving a draft-free open area and many of the advantages of a convertible with none of the inconveniences. A close look at the DeSoto here at Pebble Beach will show just how fastidious and perfection-minded Ghia designers, managers and workmen were.

Chromium-plated decorative elements, including four elegant little stripes on the side of the front fenders, pieces on top of and on the end of the side rib just ahead of the rear bumper, Adventurer II lettering, parallel sill strips and the carefully tapered surround of the rear quarter window, were all precisely shaped by hand and fitted to the bodywork with watchmaking precision. Every detail of the interior was also precisely handmade and mounted in a way that no car company seems to be able to afford today, even on its most elaborate concept cars. The metalwork on the body, like the vestigial fins on the rear fenders, also points to a care—and a skill set—that has all but disappeared. Consider the intersection of the rib running from headlight to taillight and the up-curved line that parallels the



Above: The Ghia Selene II Dream Car is one of the most extreme designs to emerge from the Ghia studios. It's hard to tell, at first, which direction this two-door prototype is pointing. This Jetsons-style dream machine was designed by Virgil Exner Jr.



scoop above the headlights. The surface development is delicate but is perfectly executed in the metal, displaying extraordinary craft.

There is originality in the Adventurer II's design as well. The wheel openings below the long rib are squared off, the front opening leaning back, the rear one leaning forward. They have nothing to do with the roundness of wheels, yet they so suitably frame the period wire wheels and the wide-flank whitewall tires that the contrast of forms is not shocking but seems entirely appropriate. The car is huge by modern standards, but it in no way appears bloated despite the rounded cross section of the body sides. The whole profile is antithetical to modern ideas on body shapes, yet it comes across as inevitable, exactly right for its time and place.

Unfortunately, the time and place for the classical Italian *carrozzerie* has passed. One-off cars for private clients are still possible perhaps, at least in countries where there are not complex, almost insurmountable certification and registration regulations. Sadly, in developed countries with long automotive traditions one-offs are now scarcely imaginable. Major car manufacturers all have their own in-house design teams and do not think they need outside help, Bertone and Pininfarina have lost their production capacities, and the most successful remaining Italian design house, Italdesign Giugiaro, was purchased by Volkswagen just a few months ago.

So the demise of Ghia as a source of creation and inspiration is simply part of the natural evolution of the automotive industry. That it is gone is sad, that it produced so much of such high quality and importance allows us to revere it today as possibly the very best, the greatest, of *Carrozzerie Italiana Gloria*.

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