

# THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MAESTRO MICHELOTTI

ON MARCH 9, 2017

Historically speaking

*THE ITALIAN CONNECTION*



*Giovanni 'Micho' Michelotti*

Although the automobile industry has employed countless millions of people and thousands of car models have been made over the last century or so, it is interesting to contemplate that only a handful of people may have had a really significant influence on the fate of the business. The single most important attribute in the auto business is probably that of design and aesthetics. At the end of the day, perhaps only a few dozen individuals have actually shaped the destiny of car design. One such individual was Giovanni Michelotti.

In a December 1978 speech delivered in Rome at a conference organized by the Italian Order of Architects, Michelotti stated, providing my translation of the Italian is correct, that the "designer has a very delicate task which is to dress up a car and the car is always comprised of four wheels, a steering wheel and an engine. As a designer, you need to know how to move these components around to create a car which will be accepted by the public."

Michelotti's name is pretty much synonymous with the design of almost all of the post-World War II Triumph offerings. The Italian born Michelotti was unquestionably one of the most prolific sports car designers of the 20th century. Outside of the Triumph group, Michelotti was associated with other European marques such as BMW, Ferrari, Lancia, Maserati, Renault, DAF and Volvo. He was also associated with truck and bus designs for Leyland Motors and British Leyland. Although dominantly focussed on European marques, Michelotti was also a pioneer in design work for Japanese automakers as they geared up to attack European and North American markets in the early 1960s.



Born in Turin in 1921, the son of a coachbuilder, Michelotti is arguably one of the most important individuals in the history of Italian automobile coach building and yet is one of the least well known. He remained independent throughout a prolific career which took him from the role of apprentice with Carrozzeria Farina (now Pininfarina) in 1936, at the age of 15, to a partnership with Carrozzeria Alfredo Vignale, before opening his own design studio (Studio Technico e Carrozzeria G. Michelotti, Torino) and taking on work for other design houses such as Bertone and Ghia.

One year at the Turin Motor Show, more than thirty of the cars on display were of his design creation, spread over several marques. During his career he designed more than 1,200 cars. When asked whether he had ever designed anything other than cars, Michelotti admitted to having once designed a coffee making machine.

It was Harry Webster, then Director of Engineering, who through a chance meeting was introduced to the mercurial little Italian and signed him up as a consultant to Standard-Triumph in 1957 and thereby ensured that a new generation of Triumph cars would have significantly more flair than their predecessors. Michelotti had a reputation for working best under tight schedules and could come up with a sketch for a whole new car design in as little as half an hour, worked out on a table napkin or menu card over dinner with Webster, who would often drive from Coventry to Turin and back in a weekend to confer with the maestro.

From 1957, "Micho", as Webster affectionately called him, was responsible for all new models produced by Standard-Triumph, starting with a facelift of the Standard Vanguard and designing the Triumph Italia 2000 Coupé, the latter based on the TR3 chassis and mechanical components although the car was manufactured by Vignale in Italy. This was followed by several attempts to create a successor for the TR3 while at the same time rescuing Triumph's new saloon car – project Zobo or the Triumph Herald as it became known. These efforts included the famed TR3 Dream car prototype which was presented at the Geneva motor show in 1957. However, the concept car turned out to be more luxurious and consequently more expensive than Triumph was willing to consider for a new production model, but it did provide a platform for the TR's future.

The story of Michelotti's initial engagement as recounted by Webster is pretty impressive. He was asked to help correct and finalise the Zobo prototype developed by the team of Arthur Ballard for the new small, economical sedan (four seats, two doors) subsequently to become the Herald. Webster stopped off in Turin on the return journey from a holiday in Sorrento. As it happened, Michelotti had not come up with any inspiration, so Webster parked his car at Michelotti's studio at three in the afternoon, leaving his wife and daughter in the car and started to monitor progress. At some point Webster commented that they were wasting their time so why didn't Michelotti just start afresh with a clean sheet of paper. Michelotti apparently rose to the challenge and in three or four minutes had sketched the Herald coupé and they immediately set off transferring everything to scale. It was almost midnight when Webster finally left the studio and returned to his car where his wife Peggy and their daughter were huddled asleep. While Webster and his family searched for a hotel, Michelotti worked all night completing sketches of the Herald sedan, estate and convertible. Working together, the pair saved the Zobo project and assured Triumph's survival and credibility.

In due course, the TR4 emerged and although the chassis came from the TR3, handling for the new roadster was improved by a three-inch wider track and a switch from cam-and-lever to the more precise rack-and-pinion steering, but the pressed steel body used by Michelotti was the car's most important feature. It had a stylish full-width shape and broke new ground for a sports Triumph with wind-up door windows and a novel hardtop as well as an optional 'Surrey' or 'Targa' top, the latter often assumed as a Porsche invention from 1966, but in reality a Michelotti concept from five years earlier.

Almost all of Triumph's 1960s and 1970s offerings can be credited to Michelotti's designs, including the Herald introduced in 1959, the Vitesse, Spitfire, GT6, TR4, TR5/250, 2000, 2500, 1300, 1500, Stag, Toledo and Dolomite. The only Triumphs after 1960 that were not his work were the TR6 and the TR7/8 as well as the Honda-based Acclaim. At the time of the TR5 re-design requirement for the TR6, Michelotti was too involved in other projects to cope with the short time line required by Triumph, but in 1979 Micho was responsible for the re-design work on the TR7, removing the roof to create the more successful roadster model. Following the merger with British Leyland, Michelotti also undertook a facelift of the BMC 1100 and designed the Australian built Leyland P76, often referred to as Australia's Edsel, as well as the Leyland National single-deck bus. He also produced a proposal for the Triumph Puma-Rover P10 project which subsequently was renamed RT1 (denoting Rover-Triumph), to signify that this was a car that integrated both Triumph and Rover engineering and which eventually led to production of the Rover SD1 model.

Michelotti also created a number of Triumph prototypes which did not go into production, such as the Fury, the Lynx, the Zest and the Zoom, as well as the BLMC ADO70 and ADO74 prototypes, both Mini-based designs and the P82 intended to replace the Morris Marina for Leyland Australia. The Triumph Fury was a very interesting two-door roadster design exercise carried out in 1963. It was based on a monocoque body using components from the Triumph 2000 saloon including the 2.0L 6-cylinder engine, although the use of the 2.5L 6-cylinder was possibly intended, had the car gone into production. Unfortunately, the Fury lost out to the TR5/250 and TR6 series which continued with the separate body on chassis construction. It appears that the main consideration for Triumph in sticking with separate chassis construction was to facilitate the complete knockdown format (CKD) for assembly in overseas markets and the ability to quickly interchange body styles on the same rolling frame.

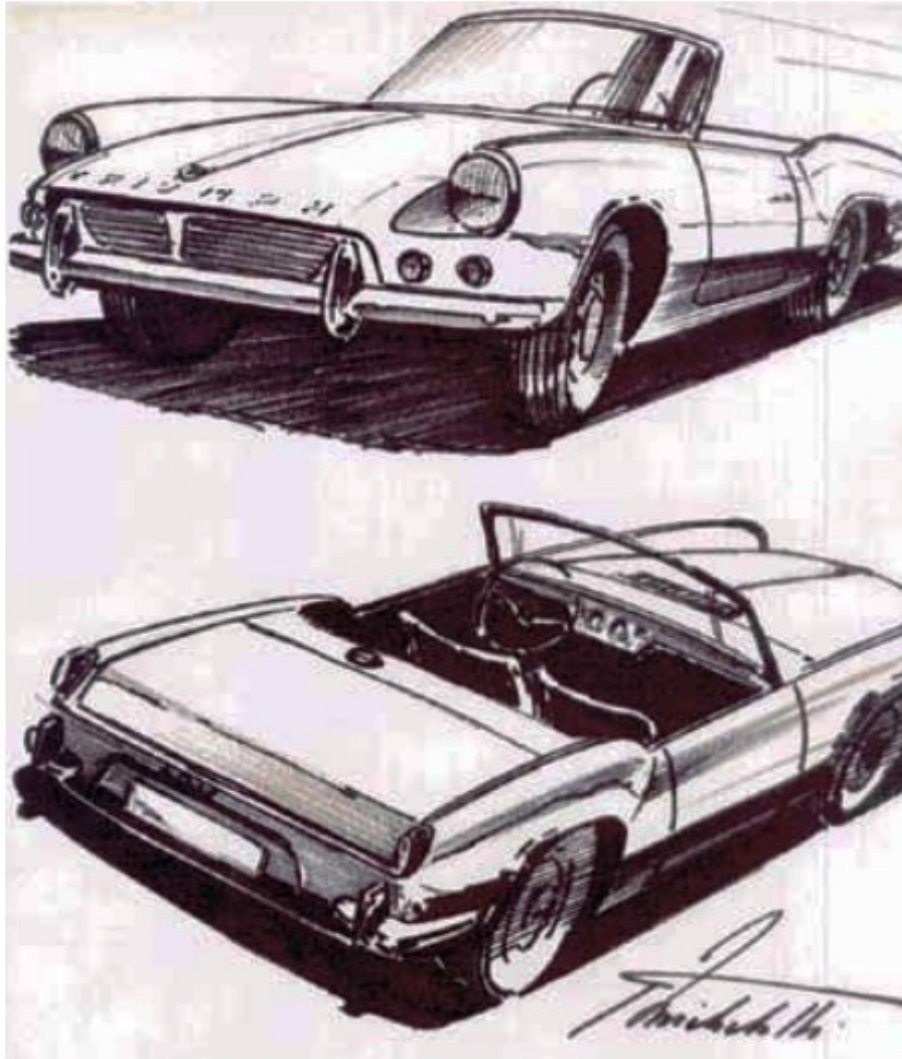
Not long afterwards, Michelotti went on to construct the Stag prototype following the same basic design inputs considered for the Fury. The Stag design was initially an independently conceived project which Michelotti hoped to exhibit as a concept car at the 1966 Turin Motor Show but Harry Webster, with a keen eye for expanding sales in the crucial North American market, officially adopted it for development by Triumph, although it took a further four years to complete.

During his career, Michelotti introduced a few cars under its own name, including the Fiat 127-based 'Every', a luxury version of the Daihatsu Taft and the 'PAC', a one-off city car prototype, based on the Daihatsu Cuore.

Michelotti's association with BMW started with the BMW 700 coupé in 1959. In 1961 he introduced the successful Neue Klasse or New Class series of designs of which the most notable was the BMW 2002. Michelotti also worked with the Dutch automaker DAF, starting in 1963, when he redesigned the Daffodil 31. The DAF 44, in 1966, was a completely new design from his drawing board and he also helped form its later derivatives, which following the 1975 takeover of DAF by Volvo, culminated in the Volvo 66. He was also responsible for the absolutely gorgeous DAF 55 Siluro coupé prototype revealed at the 1968 Geneva Motor Show.

He worked on designs for other European marques such as Ferrari, Fiat, Lancia, Maserati, Renault's Alpine, and even the occasional contract for Jaguar and Ford, as well as for Japanese manufacturers Nissan- Prince, Hino and Daihatsu. The Reliant Scimitar SS1 was his last design to reach production, although posthumously four years after his untimely death from cancer in 1980.

In a 1977 interview with Italian journalist Clelia d'Onofrio, Michelotti was asked which of his designs was his favourite. He immediately responded, "The [Triumph] Spitfire, as it has been in production for fifteen years, but I designed it in 1957." Actually, production of the Spitfire continued until 1980, a spectacular run of 18 years. Not only was the Spitfire one of the most popular cars by Giovanni Michelotti, it was clearly the car that gave him the most satisfaction, and perhaps it will be remembered as the maestro's masterpiece.



*Michelotti's favourite car design, the Triumph Spitfire.*

Micho's son, Edgardo, together with other enthusiasts in July 2001, on the eightieth anniversary of the birth of Giovanni Michelotti, founded L'Associazione Registro Storico Michelotti ([WWW.MICHELOTTI.COM](http://WWW.MICHELOTTI.COM)) with the goal of establishing a record of Michelotti designed cars still in existence around the world, as well as to organize cultural events around such cars. Membership of the Association is open to any owner of a Michelotti designed car.

Michelotti's twenty-odd year association with Triumph resulted in the creation of almost all of the models that we hold so dearly to this day. His sports car designs provided fun, exciting, affordable top-down motoring for the mass market and contributed greatly to the creation of the 'car enthusiast' hobby that we continue to enjoy forty to fifty years on. In a recent conversation with fellow TTC members on this subject, all agreed that, leaving aside engineering developments, the unique timelessness of Michelotti's styling designs can still hold their own against almost anything created subsequently.

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