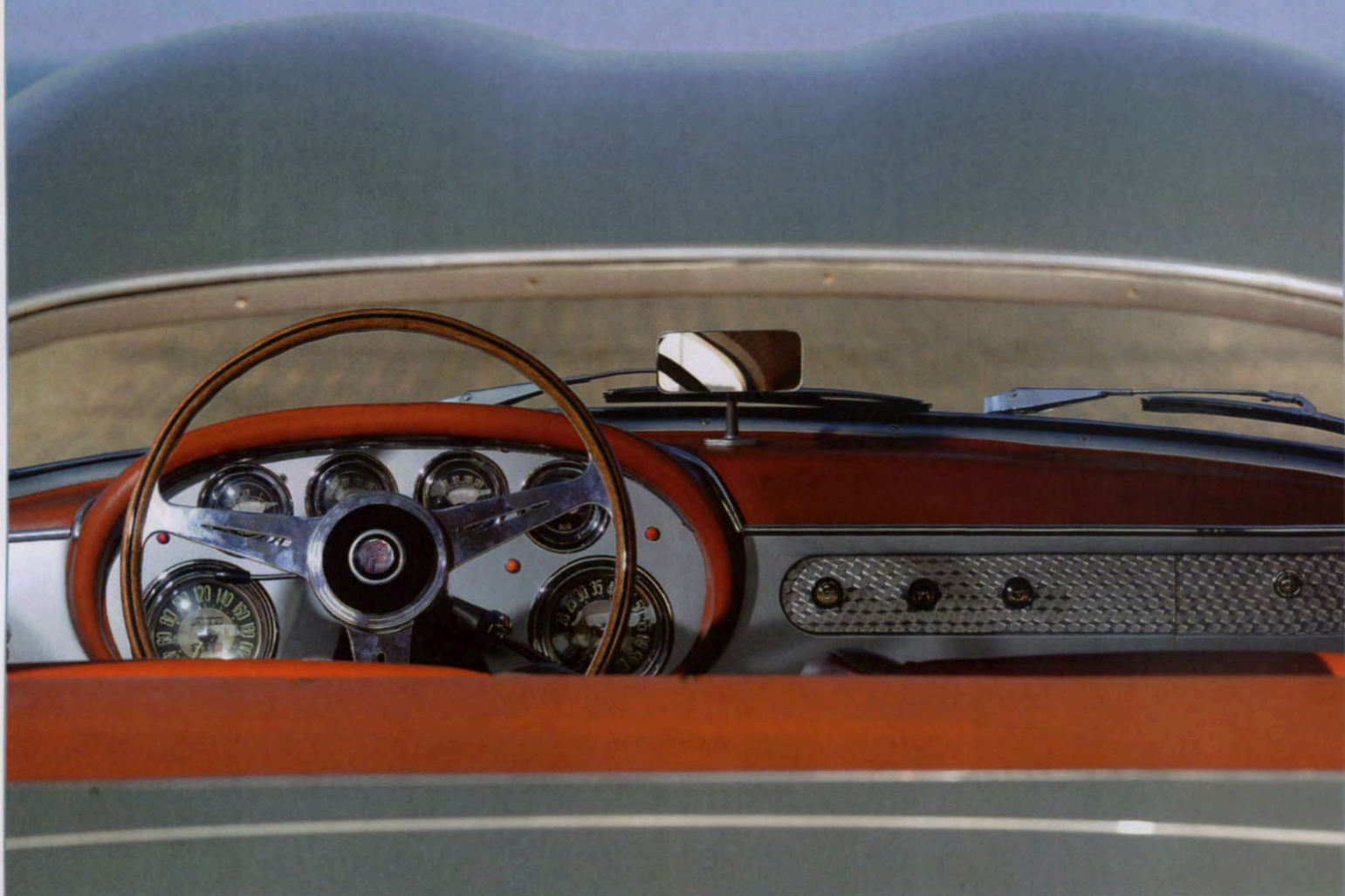


DOUBLE BUBBLE

The 1900 sparked a revolution for Alfa Romeo – especially the coachbuilt versions. We drive Zagato collector David Sydorick's 'double bubble' and find out exactly what the fuss is about

Words: Keith Adams Photography: Tim Scott

NO TROUBLE







Above
David Sydorick and wife
Jinny use the Zagato for
high-profile events. Here you
see them at Siena on the
2004 Mille Miglia.

The delicacy of the Zagato-styled – and built – 1900SSZ ‘double bubble’ hits you first. It’s small, there’s not a trace of fat on it, and its perfect proportions cause even the most casual observer to wonder why so many sports cars need to be as large as they are. And right now the rising Kuwaiti sunlight is dancing over its feminine curves, making sense of the more subtle feature lines as you walk around to take in the Alfa Romeo’s form.

The Zagato’s underpinnings are directly related to the 1900 Saloon, or *Millenove*, launched in 1950. Conceived as Alfa Romeo’s first important post-war saloon, replacing the heavy, obsolete 2500, its principal role was to expand Alfa Romeo’s position in the mid-market sector. With a car that appealed to a broader spectrum of buyers it could hire more workers, expand its factories, and change the focus of the company – from the fabulously expensive pre-war luxury and performance cars to post-war sensibility in a single, logical step.

That was the idea, but somewhere along the way the engineering team, led by Orazio Satta and Giuseppe Busso, put together a technically dense car, in tune with Alfa Romeo’s tradition for mechanical innovation. And that meant twin-cam engines, race-honed suspension, an all-new unitary body design, and a long-overdue switch to left-hand drive. Most importantly, the 1900 was a good car to drive, with its 85bhp twin-cam giving adequate performance (certainly compared with its rivals), all contained by excellent handling that set the precedent for generations of Alfa saloons to come.

And it was good. So good that it saved Alfa Romeo.

But although the 1900 was very much a middle-class saloon with ambitions of mass-production, it continued Alfa’s pre-war tradition for attracting the interpretations of Italy’s finest *carrozzerie*. Within two years of the saloon’s introduction, Bertone, Boneschi, Colli, Pinin Farina, Vercelli and Michelotti had produced bespoke 1900s. All sported coupé body styling that retained a strong Alfa Romeo identity from the front, but some were more successful than others.

There’s a coachbuilder missing from this line-up and it’s Zagato – which is slightly misleading, as the relationship between Zagato and Alfa Romeo was developing during this period. The omission of a 1900 Zagato before 1954 was because of production capacity. Or, more precisely, the lack of it at the Zagato workshops in Via Giorgini.

It was with the introduction of the 1900C Sprint – Tipo 1484 – in 1951 that the 1900’s story became interesting and saw the arrival of Zagato at the party.

To create a more sporting 1900, Alfa Romeo increased the power of its twin-cam to 100bhp and shortened the chassis by 13cm. The ‘C’ designation is generally regarded to stand for *corto* (Italian for ‘short’), although *Carrozzeria* would be equally apt considering what would happen to the 1900C Sprint once the coachbuilders got hold of it.

Pinin Farina and Touring favoured the traditional-looking coupé and convertible options and by 1954, with the launch of the 115bhp 1900C Super Sprint, their creations were admired across the world for their understated style. But the arrival of Franco Scaglione’s amazing BAT (*Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica*) 5 and 7 changed all that: Scaglione created an incredible-looking pair of concept cars out of the 1900. The following year heralded the arrival of Bertone’s riposte, the BAT 9, which previewed the later Giulietta Sprint Speciale. The theme was set, and increasingly beautiful – and wild – variations of the 1900 started rolling out of the coachbuilders’ workshops.

Elio Zagato (son of company founder, Ugo) already knew the 1900 had potential. He had been racing a 1900SS since 1952. His racing team, Scuderia Sant’Ambroeus, fielded Vladimiro Galluzzi in a Touring-bodied coupé with some success. But in 1954, in the pursuit of greater competitiveness, the team hastily built its own body. The 1900SSZ duly rolled out of the workshop on a spring morning, to the delight of those who were following the 1900’s competition career.

The first 1900SSZ was styled by Ugo Zagato, and crafted purely by hand and eye. The shape was created from a rough sketch by engineer Fabio Luigi Rapi, and particular attention was paid to the aerodynamic performance – power was relatively limited, so this was an effective way of eking out a higher top speed.

It wasn’t an easy car to package; the biggest problem was the height of the engine, which should have resulted in a bulky front end. But Zagato took the radical step of isolating the power unit and draping the bonnet over it, like a silk sheet. It worked well, providing a prominent shape in which to house the traditional Alfa Romeo grille, with the lower edges creating the perfect area for a pair of horizontal air intakes and driving lights. This car lacked the iconic double-bubble roof, but that would come with the last cars out of the Zagato factory.

Alfa Romeo was certainly impressed by the prototype 1900SSZ. Consalvo Sanesi and Ernesto Bonini ran the Torinese company’s experimental department, and were handed the Zagato for a shakedown, coming away from the first drive enthusing about what Zagato had achieved in its modest workshop. Alfa Romeo

concluded that Zagato had produced a potentially capable *gran turismo* – and also an aerodynamically efficient competition car.

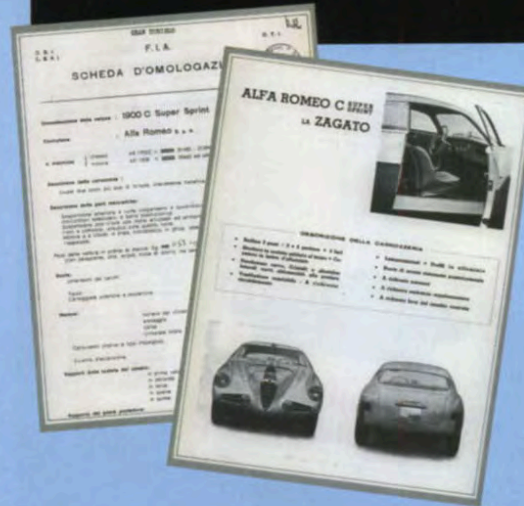
It was on the race track that the 1900SSZ made the biggest impact. According to Michele Marchiano's exhaustive history of the car, production was limited and focused on meeting demand from buyers who wanted to race it. Between 1954 and 1960, it proved more than capable of winning races, kicking off with an outright win on the Stella Alpina, driven by Crespi. A further three rallying class wins in 1954 were followed by six class wins and an outright victory in 1955, five class wins in 1956, three class wins in 1957, and a final class win in 1960 – not bad for a car considered hastily conceived back in 1954.

Development of a more luxurious road-oriented version ensued as Ugo Zagato's confidence as a businessman – as well as craftsman – increased, and in March 1957 he unveiled the 1900SSZ Spyder at the Geneva Auto Salon. The shift in emphasis to high-priced road cars was to attract customers after the car had crested its competitive peak, and the beautiful new convertible was the right car to tempt them in. Despite being closely based on the 1900SSZ, its bodywork was entirely new, with a softer overall appearance – and it was this car that led to the lower nose of the last 1900SSZ coupés.

It's believed that three or four of these revised coupés were produced by Zagato (from an entire run of 39). They're easily differentiated from the earlier car thanks to that lower, more rounded nose, similar to the Spyder's. The side windows were re-profiled, the roof was further re-shaped, the flush doorhandles were integrated into a chrome feature line, and the rear haunches were made even more shapely: an already pretty car suddenly became stunning.

It's one of these final 1900SSZs that noted Zagato collector David Sydorick has brought to the Kuwait Concours d'Elegance, and which seduces anyone who sets their eyes upon it. 'I've owned this car since 1994,' he smiles, clearly enjoying the attention from passers-by in one of the Middle East's most exclusive marina locations. 'This was the Geneva Auto Salon car, and was sold off the stand to remain in Switzerland for a very long time. It was passed around and ended up in the Hyoshi Collection in Japan, and in 1994 I bought it through Symbolic Motors in California. It was silver and still has the original headlining.'

Its originality is appealing, but it's the styling that really gets David's juices flowing. 'The coachwork is draped over the mechanics, and you can see the engine right in the midst of the nose there. The roof drapes each head, and each helmet of →



Left and above FIA homologation papers prove this double bubble's provenance; owner Sydorick's favourite restoration photo, which he likens to a human face.

'Three or four of these revised coupés were produced by Zagato: an already pretty car suddenly became stunning'





'Even before it's fired up, you know the 1900SSZ is going to be a great driver's car. It would be the perfect package for racing'



1956 ALFA ROMEO 1900SSZ

ENGINE
1975cc four-cylinder, DOHC, twin sidedraught Solex carburettors

POWER
115bhp @ 5500rpm

TORQUE
107lb ft @ 2000rpm

TRANSMISSION
Five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

STEERING
Worm and roller

SUSPENSION
Front: independent transverse arms, coil springs, hydraulic dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, coil springs, hydraulic dampers

BRAKES
Drums front and rear

WEIGHT
900kg

PERFORMANCE
Top speed 120mph. 0-60mph 9.0sec

the gentleman racer.' But it's the front end that really stops him in his tracks: 'There's a famous black-and-white photo of the car taken during the restoration, and I call it the "Phantom of the Alfa". And that's because it looks almost human.'

Andrea Michele Zagato is Ugo's grandson and CEO of Zagato. His take on the 1900SSZ styling is simple: 'It is a true example of what we call *bellezza necessaria*, or necessary beauty,' he says.

'It's derived from the functionalist approach to design that was a typical Bauhaus philosophy. Milan, differently from Turin, was very much influenced by this movement. In fact, Turin was under France and therefore influenced by Art Nouveau and Art Deco (think also of the tradition of *Barocco Piemontese*), while Milan was under Austria and therefore influenced by Functionalism and Rationalism. One approach is based on addition; the other is based on *sottrazione*.' The 1900SSZ, therefore, wears a figure-hugging and elegant set of clothes.

This car might be a work of automotive art, but that doesn't mean it's treated like a static museum exhibit. David drives the car a lot – not that you'd know it, looking at its concours-standard paintwork and interior. 'I've used it everywhere – and I'm taking part in the Tour Auto, which is featuring Zagato this year.'

David and his wife Jinny have displayed the Alfa at Concorso Villa d'Este twice, and they've driven it together in Italy's Mille Miglia. 'My wife and I were driving enthusiastically,' he says. 'I had a bunch of Ferrari 250s around. I was going full-out and they just could not get around me. On the twisty roads, it does quite a nice job with its 1900cc engine.'

As well as that, their 1900SSZ takes part in all of the important events in the USA, such as the Colorado Grand. Consequently, they have put a good number of miles on it. It's one of the star attractions at the 2011 Kuwait Concours d'Elegance, and we're keen to see how the 1900SSZ stacks up on the road.

Even before it's fired up, you know the 1900SSZ is going to be a great driver's car. The bucket seats, leather-clad and mounted low, place the driver in a great position. Forget any talk of it being an odd, Italianate set-up (that generally favours the long-armed, short-legged) because the large, slim-rimmed wheel is far from being a stretch, and positioned perfectly for fingertip steering. The floor-hinged pedals line

Above
Only a 2.0-litre four under the bonnet, but that iconic double-bubble roofline and exquisite interior make for an all-time great.

up directly ahead, while the five-speed column shift is directly linked to the all-synchromesh gearbox and is precise in action, contradicting any suggestion that these cars drive better with the popular retro-fit floor-mounted Nardi selector. The instrumentation is comprehensive and is stacked on a fascia that wraps sexily around the steering column, and visibility, too, is exceptional, with slim pillars and a near-panoramic windscreen. It would be the perfect package for racing.

The 1975cc twin-cam barks eagerly into life and sounds throaty at its even idle, promising excellent responsiveness, realised with the first throed of the throttle. It all feels and sounds delightfully mechanical, yet without the rough edges of so many of its competition rivals. That's down to the quality of the donor car, and a great judgement call from Zagato – he was right to chase down affluent road-car enthusiasts as well as racers. Considering it's a more highly strung car than the standard 1900 saloon, the SSZ proves tractable in traffic, pulling cleanly from low revs, but with a distinct increase in eagerness once past 4000rpm.

Steering response is instant and although the large, wood-rimmed wheel doesn't exactly promise quick turn-in, it proves perfect for this compact, sporting coupé. Even the briefest of drives instils great confidence: confidence in its cornering ability, and confidence in its keenness to track the rougher roads without you feeling the need to tip-toe around surface irregularities. It's that faithfulness that marks out the 1900SSZ as something special, especially in the hands of someone who is really prepared to go for it.

David's love of the marque is well-known and shines through in his choice of cars. As well as the 1900SSZ, he also has an Alfa 8C Zagato, a Ferrari Zagato, an Aston Martin DB4GT Zagato and an Alfa Romeo T22. Zagatos are clearly in his blood. And as we both stand in silence admiring the 1900SSZ under the clear blue sky, with only the sounds of the waves breaking behind us, it's clear just why the Zagato style has the ability to captivate and enchant the way it does.

We'll leave the final words to David: 'Every woman who hates cars manages to fall in love with this one. It's that double-bubble roof that gets them; it's a thing of beauty that adds so much to the car. And this is one of the great Zagato designs, possibly the greatest of them all.'