

Keith Martin's Sports Car Market

The Insider's Guide to Collecting, Investing, Values, and Trends

FIRING UP THE IMAGINATION

Simon Kidston
on the \$15m
BAT Alfa Trio Sale

January 2021
\$9.99US \$10.99CAN



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INSIDE: Readers Pick the Ideal Four-Car Collection

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Artistic Drive

They may not be the Eiffel Tower of automotive design, but they certainly pack a cartoon-like punch in the metal

by Simon Kidston



Picture the scene: a quaint cobbled London mews that once housed the horse stables of the Kensington aristocracy but had since become a mecca for classic-car collectors, the global center in the trade for million-dollar carriages of the horseless variety. There's a small pub opposite, frequented by students from the local university, hanging around outside most afternoons for a pint and a chat. A lumbering covered truck hisses as it eases to a stop at the entrance to the mews and the parking brake is applied. The driver gets out and disappears around the back for a few minutes to unload his mysterious cargo.

The drinkers are immune to most sights, and many profess to regard cars as a symbol of decadent capitalism, best scorned rather than admired. But nothing prepares them for what emerges from the truck that crisp spring day. Gradually something is lowered from the ramp at the rear into the sunlight which glances off its bizarre surfaces. Is it a car? A plane? A spaceship? The wild curves of dazzling metallic paint and swooping glass don't fit with any convention of elegance or automotive form. And hang on, are there two of them? Or even a third? Jaws drop in silence and pint glasses are put aside as the crowd approaches for a closer look. The BAT Alfas have landed in 1990s London.



Here today, gone tomorrow

Little did the Kensington students know that they were witnessing another unlikely chapter in the life story of three unique cars created in Italy 40 years earlier as a collaboration between one of history's great sports-car makers, Alfa Romeo, and an ambitious coachbuilder seeking to woo it: Bertone.

In a 1950s Italy obsessed with space travel, speed, American popular culture and glitz, eager carrozzerie vied to outshine each other with ever-more-daring show cars whose real purpose was to create a buzz and perhaps generate other, more commercial commissions, either from manufacturers or the few remaining private buyers who could afford "bespoke." The BATs — that's Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica, *grazie* — were claimed to illustrate how modern aerodynamics could improve performance without the need to resort to tuning or displacement. If contemporary press claims are to be believed, drag was up to 38% less than the modest Alfa Romeo 1900 saloon with the same underpinnings. The third of the trio, BAT 9 (the missing numbers never made it past the drawing board), did actually influence the design of the Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint Speciale, a quirky-yet-effective weekend racer model, but otherwise the BATs disappeared into obscurity as emphatically as they had appeared on the motoring stage.

When I sold the BATs by Bill Noon

I remember being at Pebble Beach for the first time in 1990 and seeing photos and posters of the Alfa Romeo BAT cars, which had been gathered together the previous year for a special showing. This was the first time I was aware of them, but it would hardly be the last.

These exotic machines were futuristic beyond anything I had seen before. So I had images of incredible performance and handling, which, of course, shows you how little I actually knew about them. Their underpinnings were nothing more than regular Alfa 1900 production pieces.

It turned out that after the show in 1989, one of the owners of one of the cars was able to purchase the other two, and they were soon added to the hundreds of other cars in his collection in Japan. Yoshiyuki Hayashi, the new owner, had reached his collecting pinnacle, with multiples of every exotic Alfa one could imagine. As far as I am aware, no comprehensive list was ever put together of everything he had acquired. I only know that boatloads of them started arriving not long after we opened our doors in La Jolla, CA, taking over the old Ferrari showroom there and keeping the name, Symbolic Motor Car Company, as we were too cheap to change the sign.

The BAT cars arrived separately, two at once (I don't recall which two) and then the third, along with some 25 other collectible Alfas. To say I was disappointed would be an understatement. Not a single one of them ran. They appeared beautiful on the outside and inside but mechanically were far from sorted. Brakes were locked up, shocks frozen and motors would turn over but not fire off. Pushing them around our parking lot and getting them photographed was a daunting task.

Initially they were on consignment, and then my principals negotiated a purchase option that led to our eventual ownership. After many months of advertising them (this was before the age of email and digital photography), interest finally started trickling in. Every morning, I would eagerly check voice messages and our ever-busy fax machine. A few

interested buyers came or representatives to inspect cars and try to strike a deal. The simple fact was the market had turned, the cars had never been shown at the best cost in the world, and they certainly needed complete and total mechanical restorations.

None of the known collectors here in the U.S. expressed interest, and the sale of the stalled until one day when I came with just a short message carefully typed out. It was from a Belgian attorney in the U.K. who would like to discuss a potential purchase. Nothing more, or than his phone number.

It was one of the strangest sales I participated in. The purchase was completely anonymous. The buyer was never identified and negotiations more than a month. The buyer's interest in these rare concourse cars was carefully filtered through the attorney. They knew nothing about the condition of the cars, only about the price. When it was finally lowered to \$1 million for the trio, the deal was closed and payment completed. The cars were packaged up and shipped off to the U.K. I did not see them again until they were reunited and shown once again after being completely and fully restored, mechanically as well as cosmetically.

To me, RM Sotheby's sale was only remarkable because it actually happened. I think I achieved a successful result where others had tried and failed because they really knew how to promote and market such vehicles. Keep in mind, it was probably the collector-car community's worst-kept secret that these machines had been sold for the past five years.

When the auction was announced, my gut feeling that the \$15 million would be the likely bid. I was a bit optimistic but looking back now nearly 30 years since my own involvement, maybe I was hoping for a sale to make up for the less-than-stellar effort I had ac-

BILL NOON started buying, and racing classic cars 30 years ago for Symbolic in San Diego, and remains with them to this day.



Ran Kimbell, ©2020 RM Sotheby's

"A roaring motor car ... is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace."

— Filippo Marinetti, a founder of the Futurist art movement

Colorful Chicago entrepreneur Stanley "Wacky" Arnolt, one of Bertone's biggest customers (literally and financially) bought BAT 5 after its show tour ended and would occasionally commute with it. The next owner left it in storage for 29 years. BAT 7 made an appearance at Pebble Beach, was raced at Palm Springs (unremarkably for the winners but memorably for the public), shorn of its wild fins and forgotten until sold to Mexican collector Lorenzo Zambrano in 1987. The final BAT 9 ended up enticing buyers into a Dodge-Plymouth dealership in Michigan. A local 16-year-old was entranced by its "eerie" looks, and despite being dismissed with "it's not for sale," earned enough money from a popcorn stand outside his parents' gift shop to be able one day to walk into the showroom with a bag of cash, supplemented by a parental loan on condition he parked BAT 9 in front of their store. He kept it for decades and its sale later helped extend his wife's life by funding cancer treatment.

Reunited after three decades

How did the BATs end up together? Well, credit goes to Pebble Beach, which managed to secure all three for display in 1989, where a Japanese investor (remember them?) walking the field was stopped in

his tracks by the sight of the trio. The first purchase was expensive. The second, when the owner discovered the man had already bought one BAT, was eye-watering. And the third BAT owner was able to name his price. But the full set was complete after over three decades.

Fast forward to that day in London, after the market had crashed and the Japanese were shedding boom-era assets as fast as they could. I was working at that mews emporium, responsible for auctions and the occasional private sale, and had earned the Japanese owner's trust by selling his Ferrari 250 LM. The BATs were to be offered as a single package, priced at \$5 million, if my memory is correct.

They created a huge stir on a bespoke stage at the Birmingham Classic Car Show, but we found ourselves one car space short on the return truck, at which point I would have driven BAT 9 back to London if the rear lights had worked. Next stop: Chris Evans' live breakfast TV show, which must have amused early-morning viewers but didn't unearth the next millionaire BAT buyer. We were on standby to truck them to a private airport so that the Sultan of Brunei could glance at them before boarding his 747, but he must have changed his mind and they didn't leave the showroom.

Together with Mick Walsh of Classic & Sports Car, we took them



to a wet and rainy Ministry of Defence test track for a pre-arranged photo shoot, where I learned how my clothes must feel in the washing machine as I lumbered around in one of the BATs, its lumpy 4-cylinder vibrating through the claustrophobic cabin and water pouring in from every opening. They did, however, stop traffic when we drove them in convoy through London to the Louis Vuitton Concours, including a detour along the famed Kings Road, using the only set of trade plates we could find: one for the nose of the lead car, the other to stick on the back of the rear car, and BAT 7 sandwiched in the middle.

Bargain or batty?

We never did manage to sell them, but I've followed their progress keenly ever since. First to a discreet Dutch Alfa collector, who I doubt ever drove them, and then to a reclusive collector in Asia who has tested the market quietly several times over the years, including a showing at Phillips auction house in London last November, where I was invited to speak about them. Seeing the BATs in the metal again after 25 years didn't diminish their impact. These are truly automotive sculpture, and I struggle to name any car — much less a triptych — with the same visual impact at any price level.

When they sold last week in a New York art auction for \$14.8m, I felt a pang of regret at not being able to buy them myself. Yes, they're next to useless as cars (lack of power, visibility, turning circle, handling or basically anything except a concours stage) but does that matter in the context of history and design? Cars haven't yet transitioned to art, but as we are gradually legislated off the roads, they might do so, and in that context — and for less than the price of a single McLaren F1 or maybe the same as an Alfa 33 Stradale, BAT designer Franco Scaglione's other masterpiece — I'd say that for the right person, the BATs were, if not a bargain, at least an enlightened long-term purchase. ♦

Holy Trinity of Car Design, BATman!

A religious and artistic veil descended over the three BAT cars auctioned on October 28 at RM Sotheby's in New York City. They are called a holy trinity of car design, one especially deserving of rapturous contemplation and compared to the seminal works of Picasso, Magritte and Duchamp. The catalog's enthusiasm for the three cars would even elbow aside the Eiffel Tower and the Guggenheim Museum as further examples that "fundamentally transform our notion of art."

This same catalog provides copious, precise information about the subtleties of their design, as if they were probing the nuances of a Rembrandt portrait. The nose was lowered and the air openings smoothed, while the central spine stood out like a dorsal fin... Perhaps Batman contemplated similar

details during quiet moments in the Batcave.

Yet these three cars are more reminiscent of Futurism, the Italian political and artistic movement (1909–16) that celebrated speed and modernity. "(A) roaring motor car is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace," said Filippo Marinetti, a founder of the movement, in 1909. It's a sentiment that may have been appreciated by Franco Scaglione, the BAT trio's designer.

The three cars sold for \$14.8 million and are conceivably desirable for their self-conscious use of motion as a contemporary means of bold personal expression. But are they worth it? Would you drive one to drop off your dry cleaning? Are they works of art? Your call, Batman.

JOHN RANSOM PHILLIPS, an artist and writer in New York City, is the author of *Sleeping Presidents*.



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Contemplating the Alfa BATs

With this trio of arresting objects, it's not the motion that matters

by Miles Collier



Darin Schmabel © 2020 RM Sothebys

The recent sale of the three Alfa Romeo BAT cars for \$14.8 million by RM Sotheby's is a noteworthy event, not for the price, which is considerable, nor for the cars' operating qualities, which are negligible, but for the very fact that it happened. The three cars were put on offer as a conjoined set, a risky sales strategy indeed for cars that enjoy a worldwide reputation and notoriety thanks to their striking appearance, and an equally notorious reputation of being largely "sales-proof." Tripling down by offering the three cars as a package deal would seem to be a brave decision. But all's well that ends well, as the cars sold on the day for a significant figure, but one, depending on your view, that was either very reasonable or completely over the top.

"Active matter"

And that is the issue we face with artifacts, cars, like the BATs. Cars represent many things to many different people, but the biggest divide comes from varying assessments of what a car is. First, automobiles are examples of that vexatious class of objects called "active matter." Active matter is simply an artifact, whether a flat-screen television, a subma-

rine or a piano, that only becomes fully understandable when we see it operate. While we may be able to infer function from static form alone, inference is a pale surrogate for experience. In the case of automobiles, we need to watch it move on the road, listen to its exhaust, feel its acceleration. If we are especially lucky, we get to drive it.

The second aspect of automobiles is their pure physicality. They are lumps of stuff, of matter, from another time. That stuff has historical value as physical things marinated in history. They show evidence of how they were designed, made, used, modified, repurposed, even damaged.

Both properties — matter and motion — are embodied in all automobiles. Depending on the orientation of the collector or owner, or even just the casual viewer, there is a tendency to value one of these two properties above the other. And that difference stems from the deep inner psychology of the person in question. Some of us are experiential in our engagement with automobiles. This means that as much as we might like how a car looks, or how much we appreciate it for its historical importance, in the end, we are primarily interested in experiencing it as active matter, as motion. We value it most as a dynamic creation to use and operate with all the adventures and experiences that necessarily occur.



Contemplating the past

But others of us are contemplative in our connection to automobiles. As much as we enjoy driving our cars, and enjoy them we do, the contemplative owner most values the automobile as a place of human activity from the past. The automobile is seen primarily as an expression of the human spirit embodied in the sinuous curve of a fender, or through the adventures the car experienced while being driven by famous drivers in famous events, or, in other cases, merely while being used in the ordinary way for ordinary journeys by ordinary people in the receding past. The automobile is a physical place made of aging matter sanctified by use and duration. It connects us to a lost time.

Motion or matter, phenomenon or artifact; these are two ends of a continuum and all car people, and indeed all cars, fall somewhere on that continuum.

BAT intentions

Much can be understood about the BAT cars by employing the matter/motion dichotomy. And for us to understand the two forces at work in this case, we need to go right back to the manufacturer's intentions in the day. Where on the matter/motion continuum did Bertone and Franco Scaglione intend these automotive confections to reside? Excellent analysis of the BATs has already been published in these pages, so I won't spend time on the history of these cars other than to say the BATs were primarily, if not exclusively, a *jeu d'esprit* by Bertone using aerodynamics as the field for his imaginative, technological frolic. And who better to sculpt the very flow of air with its vortices, its streamlines and eddies than Franco Scaglione, former women's fashion designer and now master couturier in light alloy rather than luxurious Italian fabrics?

Scaglione did not stray far from the fashion runway of the couture houses of Paris or Milan when he swathed the BATs in yards of gleaming, jewel-colored light alloy. Like the confections that make up a couture collection, and aren't intended for real wear, but rather are intended to inspire something more practical in the hearts and minds of the clientele, the BATs were there to demonstrate the stylistic possibilities of the real-world goal of a 0.20 drag coefficient by creating three automotive fantasies.

Titillating yet impractical

Never meant to be bought, owned and operated by real clients as functioning automobiles, the job of the three BAT cars was to shock, to amaze, to titillate and, above all, create buzz and excitement about Bertone. As a major designer for Alfa Romeo (the brand-new Giulietta 750 series was in the works), it only made sense that the then-aging Alfa 1900 be the mechanical underpinnings of the project. The result of this bid for notoriety was three cars that were never intended to function beyond being roadable after a fashion. This was purely stylistic exuberance, not practical car design.

The BATs were meant to be contemplated, and never had more than the barest pretense to active matter, for truly, they *do* have to be seen (but not driven) in full flight to give the full effect. They were required to operate the same way a couture dress needs to be worn by a sashaying anorexic model on the runway. And so the BATs' great strengths and weaknesses become apparent. These are exclusively arresting contemplative objects — matter, not motion. As other commentators have written, when it comes to driving, don't bother.

A fitting end

An automobile that is almost exclusively contemplative matter, an historical object, is going to have a relatively hard time of it in the collector's world of cars as motion and phenomenon. The only buyers will be people who understand that these cars are statements to be appreciated as sculpture, as fantasies in aluminum. Furthermore, the full expression of the fantasy is the three-part progression (BAT 5 to 7 to 9) of Scaglione's evolving vision. Perhaps we can think of these cars as the automotive equivalent of a Rembrandt engraving that evolved through three states: Each was a finished statement, but each state was also a profound reconsideration. So it is with the BATs. The seller understood this. As a series, the artist's statement can only be appreciated by seeing all three works together. Indeed, they need to live together to make artistic sense.

RM Sotheby's was able to market these remarkable works of industrial sculpture in a way that the right buyer was found. If you live on the contemplative side of the aisle and share the buyer's appreciation for these cars as art, the BATs will afford much pleasure over the years. ♦