

CLASSIC DRIVER

Classic Concepts: 1968 Bizzarrini Manta

Lead

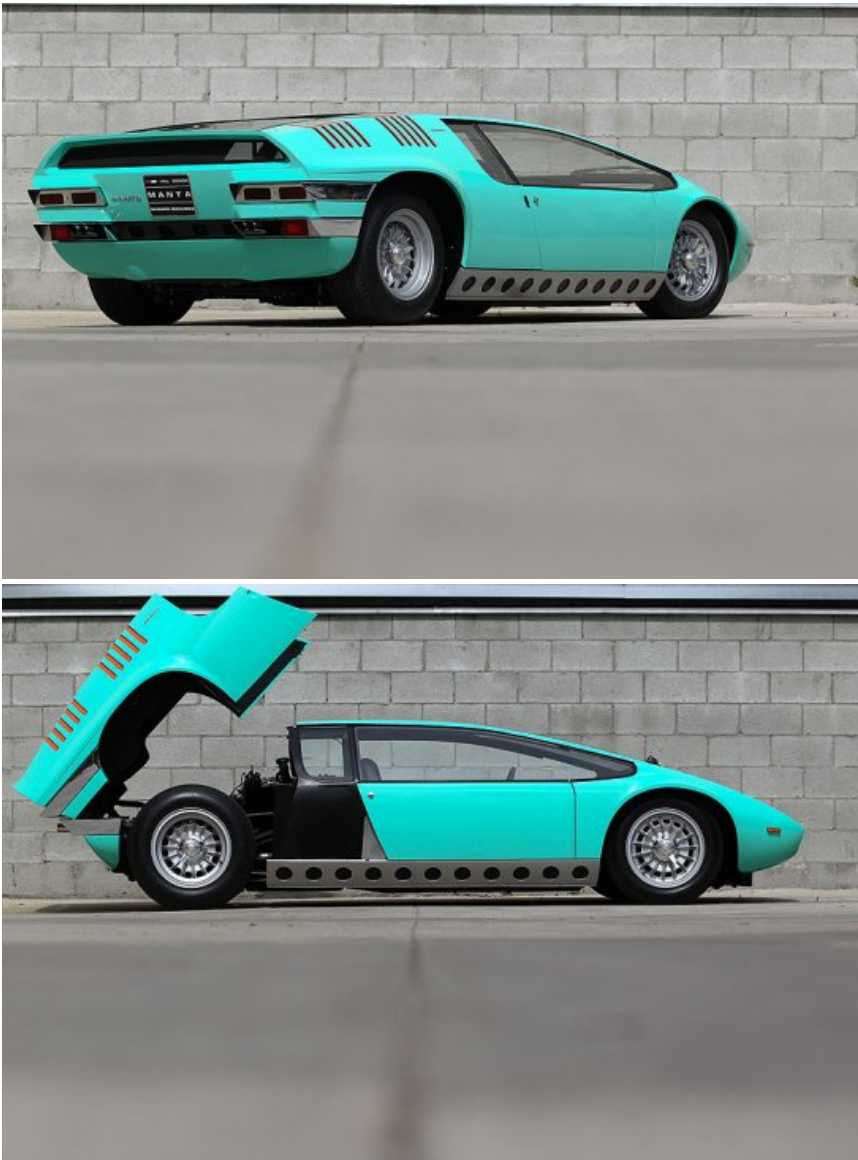
The origins of the Manta concept go back to the mid-sixties, when legendary engineer Giotto Bizzarrini began to develop the P538 competition prototype to race against the likes of Ford's GT40, Ferrari's 250 P and Porsche's 906.

With that calibre of competition, Bizzarrini ploughed maximum resources into the project, picturing a Le Mans win that would not only provide professional acclaim, but also serve as a personal triumph over Ferrari. The two parties had awkwardly parted company in 1961, following a disagreement between Enzo Ferrari and many of his most talented staff.

Although it started the 1966 Le Mans race, the P538 lasted just half an hour on the track before being incapacitated by a ruptured radiator pipe – but not before setting one of the highest speeds on the Mulsanne Straight. This did little to counter Bizzarrini's disappointment but, unbeknownst to him, his problems were soon to grow. A regulation change in the prototype category soon afterwards – which limited engine capacity to 5,000cc – immediately rendered the 5,359cc Corvette-engined P538 obsolete; and with the finances of the company resting on its success, the end was nigh.

The death of one so often leads to the birth of another, and such was the case with the P538. Bizzarrini's former collaborator and long-time friend Giorgetto Giugiaro, after several successful years at Fiat, Bertone and Ghia, was in the process of forming Italdesign. Giugiaro needed a platform for his first independent project and Bizzarrini needed cash, so the redundant P538 chassis (number 003) swiftly changed hands, Corvette engine and all. On 13 February 1968, Italdesign was formally created and a deadline for the inaugural project was set for the Turin Motor Show – allowing just 40 days for transformation from forgotten chassis to show-stopper.





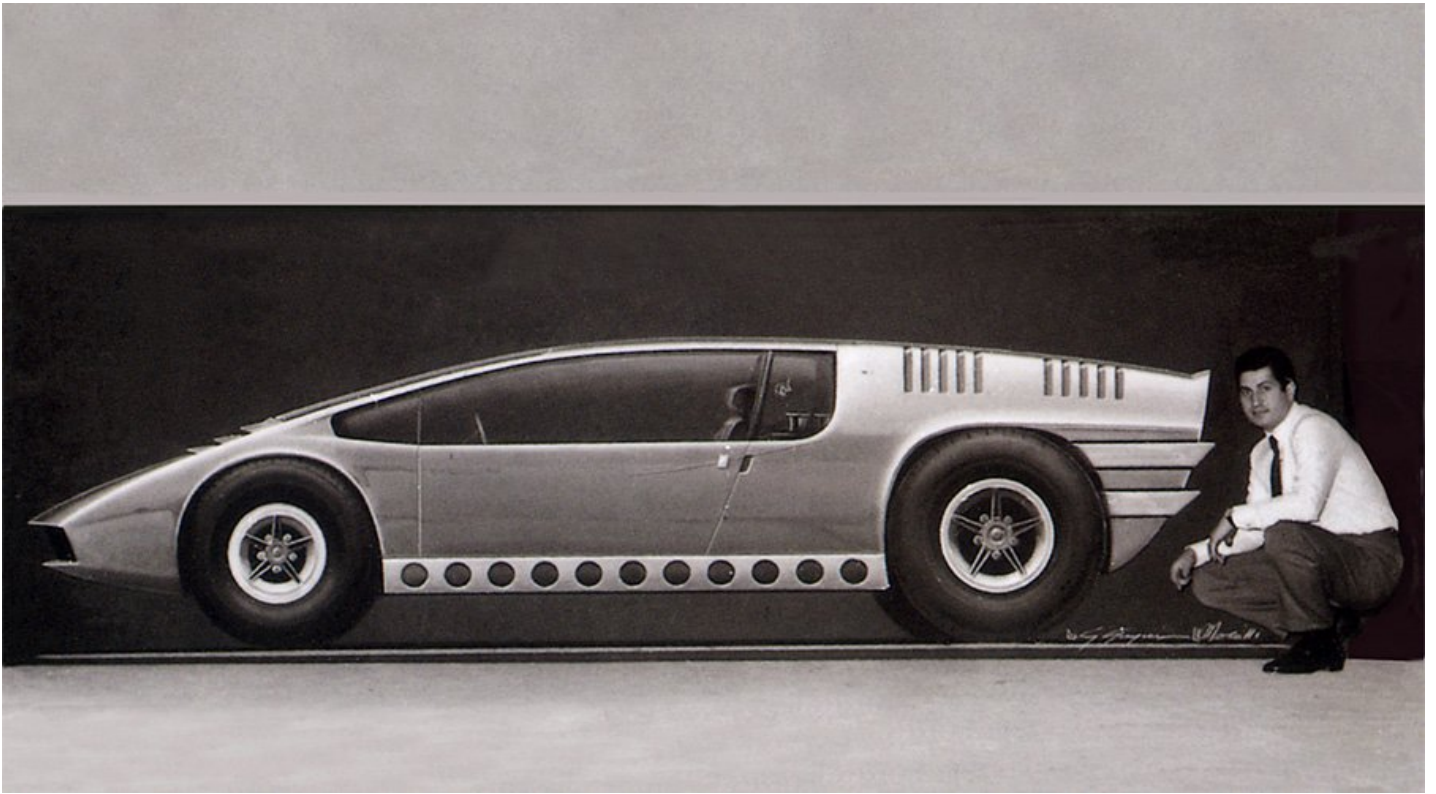
If there's one characteristic that differentiates the great from the good, it's the ability to work under pressure – and despite the seemingly impossible window, Giugiaro duly presented the new car in Turin. Resplendent in Acid Green with Orange accents, the Manta (named after the Manta Ray, thanks to its flat, aggressive profile) stunned show-goers. It was the world's first 'one-box' GT; the constant curve from bonnet to roof was unconventional to say the least, and resulted in a 15deg rake to the windscreen. To overcome the visibility issues, Giugiaro devised an ingenious solution: a 'venetian blind' system at the foot of the windscreen. It could be opened manually during low-speed manoeuvres through cityscapes, and closed to preserve aerodynamic integrity at the sort of high speeds allowed by the racing car underpinnings.

The low, wide stance afforded by the car's racing pedigree also meant there was a generous amount of lateral space for the talented designer to play with. Perhaps inspired by the 1966 Ferrari 365 P Speciale by Pininfarina, he gave the Manta a three-seat configuration with a central driving position – though some remarked that the encroachment of the front arches gave the driver-flanking occupants little legroom. The driver was a little more spoilt; and he also knew the steering column wouldn't impale him in an accident, given its collapsible design.



Having done the rounds as a highly successful PR tool for newly formed Italdesign, a decade of mystery shrouds the Manta's fate. It went missing in 1969 on the way back to Europe from an event in Los Angeles, only to resurface ten years later at a customs auction. Thereafter, it remained in Europe for some time before making its way to the States and it has since won multiple awards, including a class win at Pebble Beach. The Gooding & Co auction at this year's Monterey event should see the legendary masterpiece find a new owner once again, with an healthy estimate of \$1,000,000 - 1,500,000.

Though it was a 'rush job', the Manta not only skyrocketed Italdesign into the automotive stratosphere and inspired countless other designs (penned by Giugiaro or otherwise), it is also remembered as one of the most representative concept cars of the seventies, if not the 20th Century. Its existence may be easily explained as 'one man's trash is another man's treasure', but the truth is that there are few designers on the planet as talented as Giugiaro. And to prove that, bear in mind that he was just 28 when he created one of the most memorable concept cars in history...



Santa Monica-based company Gooding & Co will offer this extraordinary car for sale at its 2012 Pebble Beach auction, to be held at the Pebble Beach Equestrian Center on 18-19 August.

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