

CLASSIC DRIVER

Waking up Milan with Gianni Agnelli's Ferrari 166 MM

Lead

Dawn in the streets of Milan, and the air is torn apart by the sound of a 1950s Ferrari under full acceleration: not just 'any' 1950s Ferrari, but a very, very special 166 Mille Miglia. Rémi Dargegen takes up the tale...

A long list of luminaries



If you spent the last month or two asleep, or trekking to Machu Picchu, you might have missed one of the most important stories in the classic car world: that the [Coppa d'Oro Villa d'Este was this year won by the ex-Giovanni Agnelli 1950 Ferrari 166 Mille Miglia](#). But the Fiat patriarch wasn't the only notable previous owner. Next was Belgian Viscount Gery d'Hendecourt, who competed with the *Barchetta* and also had Olivier Gendebien, the four-time Le Mans Winner, win his first ever race, at Spa. Later, legendary Ferrari Concessionaire and Ecurie Francorchamps Grandee, Jacques Swaters, after buying and selling the car *six* times, finally decided to keep the Ferrari for himself. Many years down the line, he commissioned a full restoration, before being invited to display it at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1993. The Swaters family affectionately nicknamed the car 'Nonna' (Italian for Grandma), and ultimately owned her for 46 years.

Purity of design



As much as that particular period of ownership deserves to have its own tale told (perhaps another day...), let's back-track to the first of its many important owners. The 1950 ex-Agnelli Coppa d'Oro winner, chassis 0064M, is number 24 of only 25 Ferrari 166 MM's built, one with several flourishes uniquely applied at Agnelli's behest (in secret, we might add). Most notable are the 'teardrop' rear lights, and the understated, yet utterly striking two-tone paintwork. Beyond that, the car represents pure design and efficiency: just a small-capacity V12 engine, ultra-thin Superleggera-framed bodywork, and the driver. Created by Carrozzeria Touring in Milan, it was developed from the Ferrari 125S, and the *Barchetta* (meaning 'little boat') is a masterpiece of simple style. Just as importantly, the model (whose MM moniker was derived from a different version of a 166 winning the 1948 race) enjoyed a series of headline racing successes, including first place at the 1949 Mille Miglia *and* that year's Le Mans and Spa 24 Hour races, firmly putting Ferrari on the international map.

Travel back to June 1951



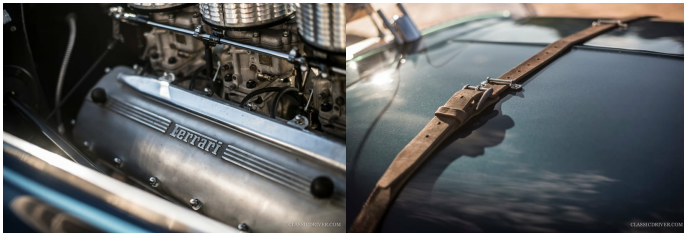
So now, imagine it's June 1951, in the streets of Milan. It's 07.00 and you're enjoying a decent coffee at Cova, the famous bar in the old city, when suddenly you hear a sound tearing up the silence of the morning streets. A few seconds later, you see a shape being parked in front of Cova and Giovanni Agnelli himself comes inside to order a coffee, to help him recover from a hot night in Milan and ensure a good start to the day.

Early-morning donuts



To photograph a Ferrari 166 MM is a real honour. But to photograph it at 05.00 in the centre of Milan, in action, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. We decided to do a sort of 'Agnelli Tour', to visit all the places Agnelli might have enjoyed during one night in the Italian city: the Scala Theatre to start the evening, the Duomo and its galleries, the navigli for some night fun, Cova for a morning coffee, and the Arch of Peace, known as the place for some early morning automotive donuts to wake up all Milan with the engine's incredible music. For while you might enjoy the beauty of this machine through these pictures, they lack the magical sound of its engine... and what a sound it is. Metallic, light, but full of fury at high revs, it's very (very) impressive to hear it at full acceleration in the streets of Milan.

Agnelli's magic



The car has tremendous sex appeal. Everyone stares, and listens, and yet nobody realises what a piece of history it is, what a monument that has – for a few hours – joined the other numerous monuments in the streets of Milan. Okay, so perhaps we didn't ask for the necessary authorisation to shoot everywhere, especially at this time of the morning, and yes, we had to deal with the police... but really, it wasn't difficult. One sentence was enough: "Eh, ma è quella di Agnelli!" ("Hey, but it's one of Agnelli's!"), and the police officers stand dumbfounded, mouths open, taking a step back in respect. "Okay, va bene!" they cry and we know that everything is going to be fine. In Italy, this is the magic of Ferrari and this incredible memento of Agnelli.

Photos: © 2015 Rémi Dargegen for Classic Driver
With thanks to Clive Beecham, the car's current owner, for providing historical information

Gallery

