

CLASSIC DRIVER

[How could we possibly forget the Autech Zagato Stelvio?](#)

Lead

A forgotten footnote in the history of Zagato, the Autech Stelvio exemplifies everything that's great about the century-old Milanese design house. We don't expect everyone to take to the curious Japanese saloon, but polarising opinion has always been Zagato's forte. Let's dive in, shall we?



For every great Zagato design, there is a handful more that haven't stood the test of time. Few could deny that the Aston Martin DB4GT Zagato, for example, is one of the most beautiful and desirable sports cars of all time. But the same certainly couldn't be said for the Bentley Continental GTZ and the Ferrari FZ93. That's not to say they don't have their merits or, indeed, their following. After all, the appeal of the Milanese design house's striking creations surely is that not everyone finds them appealing.



This brazenly styled saloon is one of those forgotten Zagato designs, whether rightly or wrongly is for you to decide. The reason you've probably never come across it before is because it was based on a Nissan and sold solely in Japan. Yes, in the mid-1980s Nissan's native tuning subsidiary Autech was tasked with spicing up the humble Leopard, presumably to capitalise on the wave of wealth that was sweeping the country at the time.

Autech could handle the grizzly bits like the powertrain and chassis, no sweat – its president was Shinichiro Sakurai, father of the Skyline, after all. But for the bodywork, it needed something that would strike people like a karate chop from Mr. Miyagi himself. Who else to turn to but the craftsmen at Zagato in Italy who, judging by their latest of-the-era creations, were enjoying a super-strength harvest of the local grappa?



The styling is, for want of a better word, plain weird. But not necessarily in a bad way. The boxy dimensions and sharp, jutting angles were characteristic not only of Zagato but automotive design in general in the late-1980s, and it had a face that only a mother could truly love. But overall, the proportions and stance are pretty good – there are definite shades of the Aston Martin V8 Zagato and the Alfa Romeo SZ. They, too, weren't the most conventional looking cars.

You have to wonder what the designers were thinking when they dreamt up some of the aesthetic features, though. We can just picture cocaine-fueled big wigs inexplicably excited about the NACA ducts in the wheels and the side mirrors shrouded awkwardly in the front wings. It almost looks as though the Italian designers gave up halfway through – no doubt lured to a dinner table somewhere – and left the caretaker to finish it off.



Beneath the bulging bonnet resides a V6 officially rated at 280HP (though we all know it kicks out well over 300), while all that power is sent to the rear wheels via a four-speed ZF gearbox – not the spriteliest of 'boxes, but at least it's got an overdrive. Compared to the exterior, the Stelio's interior can only be described as an anticlimax. But that said, it looks like a lovely place to sit and there are myriad gadgets and even a few Zagato cues.

Priced at 18m yen, the Stelio was astronomically expensive. In fact, you could buy a Honda NSX-R for less. Together with the divisive styling, it was this that was to be the car's undoing. It's believed Nissan sold around just 88 examples before the model was replaced. Of those, only a very few have escaped Japan in the years since, including this silver example – chassis number 31 – that's [currently for sale at JB Classic Cars in the Netherlands](#).





Zagato will celebrate its centenary in 2019, and while you'll no doubt see numerous celebrations of the design house, featuring its most famous creations, spare a thought for those which didn't win the public's adoration to the same degree such as the Autech Stelvio. It's rare, quirky, and entirely befitting of the excessive era in which it originated.

It's the 18-million-yen question – it plays with our judgement, tearing us from loving to loathing and back again. It's everything that's great about Zagato, but also a lot of what's not. Of course, we'll leave you to make up your own mind about the Stelvio. All we know is that it's not a car best forgotten, and we actually really rather want one.

Photos: Jérôme Wassenaar for JB Classic Cars © 2018

Gallery

