
At the cutting wedge with the Alfa Romeo 33 Spider Cuneo

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While other Italian designers were pushing the creative envelope to its limits and presenting increasingly wild show cars at the dawn of the 1970s, Pininfarina took a different approach with its Alfa Romeo 33 Spider, instead paring back the new-fangled wedge aesthetic to its most basic form...

Amid an automotive landscape that was changing quicker than the Apollo astronauts were blasting towards the moon and spawning creations that were increasingly wild, it took a self-assured designer to exercise restraint and pare things back at the dawn of the 1970s.



But that's exactly what Pininfarina's Paolo Martin did when he came to draw an open-topped show car body on the chassis of the Alfa Romeo Tipo 33 Stradale for the second time.

For reasons that are unbeknownst to us, Martin's first attempt – christened the P33 Roadster and revealed at the Turin salon in November of 1968 – was dismantled following its moment in the spotlight.

That Franco Scaglione's eye-wateringly pretty Tipo 33 Stradale was not a commercial success may seem bonkers to you, but the thinly disguised V8-powered racer's price and impracticality (frankly, we can't decide which was more comical) put off even the most well-heeled of punters.



On the flipside, in giving its handful of unsold chassis to the likes of Pininfarina, Bertone and Italdesign, Alfa Romeo gave way to a selection of automotive history's most awe-inspiring prototypes, cars which embody this truly avant-garde epoch of design.

With its UFO-like headlight cluster, low wraparound windscreen and dramatic swept-back aerofoil, the ill-fated P33 Roadster was a magnificent looking car. But the frenzied response to Bertone's space-age Alfa Romeo Carabo and Lancia Stratos Zero concepts had clearly signalled the beginning of the so-called 'wedge era'.





Compared to the voluptuous Italian Grand Tourers of the 1960s, the P33 Roadster was hardly what you'd call curvy. But it seemed there was no place for curves at all anymore, and Martin returned to the drawing board to devise take two.

Martin had nothing to prove in 1971. The previous year, undoubtedly the most atypical Prancing Horse ever, the Ferrari 512S Modulo, had originated on his sketchpad. A sensational V12 spaceship on wheels, the Modulo had originally been pooh-poohed by Pininfarina's top brass, although Martin pushed on with its development after hours. Today, it remains a landmark car in the enduring histories of both Ferrari and Pininfarina.

From the outset, Martin's second take on the Alfa Romeo Tipo 33 was designed to be minimalist in every detail. He took the time to step back and look at the aesthetic language that was rapidly spreading throughout the automotive world. And then he decided to distil it into its most basic form.



The result is the Tipo 33 Spider – a car that we can only reasonably describe as a giant wedge of Italian cheese. And Alfa Romeo clearly felt the same, as they renamed it the Cuneo, which means 'wedge' in Italian. We admit, it's not as visually interesting as its predecessor, but there is an undeniable elegance in its overall simplicity, which is only enhanced by the bold, disco-era colour scheme.

Despite its multitude of razor-sharp edges, there are many delicate design touches indicative of Martin's finesse. You just need to know where to look. The subtly curved fins that span almost the entire length of the car, for example, or the tilted cover above the velocity stacks, which is supported by a strut of the small rollover bar and offers a near-explicit peak of the flame-spitting trumpets beneath. Oh, and there are no doors. Because who needs doors?



Our favourite features, though, are the discreet bumps atop the nose flanks of the bodywork to accommodate the front wheels. Even when you're aware of their presence, you still barely notice they're even there. It's remarkable.

The Alfa Romeo Tipo 33 Spider Cuneo debuted at the European Motor Show in Brussels in 1971 and its existence today leads us to believe it was a hit (or at least more so than its unlucky predecessor). It would be sacrilege to say that any of the concept cars based on the Tipo 33 Stradale have stood the test of time better than Scaglione's mind-blowing original.

But of the chassis that did receive trendsetting frocks penned by charismatic designers engulfed in the idea of the wedged way forward, the Cuneo might just be our favourite.

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