Michelotti (and the Triumph Stag) – ‘A free pencil…’

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2015 marks the 45th anniversary of the launch of the Triumph Stag. Dave Moss looks back at the car and its talented instigator, Giovanni Michelotti…

In 1968, the Triumph Stag – and various other shadowy prototypes – were oddball survivors in the new BLMC stable. At the time marque plans were being fiercely guarded and nurtured by previously-independent operations then recently joined in an uneasy merger. But… the speedy and far-reaching model rationalisation that should have followed never materialised – and that allowed the Stag project just enough time to flourish.

The 45th anniversary of the car's launch in 1970 begs a look back at the career of one man central to Triumph's 1960's success – who almost accidentally provided the Stag's launch pad. For, despite its looks in production form, the car was neither a clever marketing initiative, or a natural development of an existing Triumph, dreamed up in a now long-demolished Canley corridor. If the Stag has an evolutionary background, it's in Turin, not Coventry.

Giovanni Michelotti was born in 1921, the son of an engine machine shop foreman. At 16 years old, he was an apprentice at Carozzeria Farina, gaining experience before and after the war in the art, craft and skills of coachbuilding, His first major project was the Alfa Romeo 6C 2500, built by Farina in small quantities in 1947, after which it was a natural progression to establish his own styling and prototyping operation – Studio Technico e Carrozzeria G. Michelotti, Torino. By 1949, he was working as a consultant for several top Italian studios of the day, amongst them Allemano, Ghia, Bertone, and Vignale.

Folklore has it that a chance meeting with Triumph's design chief Harry Webster in the mid-1950s led to Michelotti's involvement in the styling of a long succession of Standard Triumph production cars. The first of these was the 1956 Vanguard saloon, alongside work on the semi-official Triumph Italia 2000 coupé, made in limited numbers by Vignale. Michelotti also sketched Project Zobo, which emerged in 1959 as the stylish Triumph Herald, a simple but effective design embracing saloon, convertible, coupé, estate and van formats.

After this, almost all Triumph's 1960s and 1970s products drew upon the Michelotti magic. The Herald line was developed to include the Vitesse, the Spitfire and its six- cylinder hard-top relation the GT6. The flowing lines of the TR4 and TR5 followed, along with the popular four door 1300, 1500, Toledo, Dolomite and 2000 and 2500 saloons. After the Herald, the only Triumph cars with which Michelotti was not involved were the Acclaim, and development of the TR5 into TR6, which was the work of Karmann.

Though its finalised style suggests otherwise, the Stag was not directly conceived as part of

the Triumph 2000 saloon family. It was initially created by Michelotti as a concept car for the 1966 Turin Motor show – and hastily acquired by Triumph in their search for promising designs to suit the US market. It then underwent extended development, which continued through the 1968 BLMC merger – until its eventual public launch in 1970.

As with all the great stylists, Michelotti came up with several Triumph designs which never reached production, but may have influenced other projects. Amongst them in the mid 1960s was the Fury, a monocoque-design, Triumph 2000 based roadster in the style of a larger Spitfire, and the Lynx, seen by the company at various times as a potential GT6 or Stag replacement. Even today marque afficionados still discuss the relative significance of these two concepts in the Stag's evolution.



Michelotti Minerva

Another stillborn project was the Bullet, Triumph's planned TR6 follow-up, abandoned when BLMC chose instead to pursue themes and styling cues developed by BLMC designer Harris Mann for Zanda, a 1969 promotional show car which made use of early computer aided design techniques. From this work sprang the initially controversial hardtop TR7 and TR8 – and here Michelotti returned for his final Triumph project to pen the soft top derivatives of these cars.

Following the BLMC merger Michelotti presented several unsuccessful proposals elsewhere across the corporation. These included the abandoned Mini-based open-top ADO70 and ADO74 hatchback, the sleek ADO76 MGB update, a facelifted 1100/1300 series, and what was briefly known as RT1 – an early stage in what became the Rover SD1 project. There was though one especially enduring success for him in the commercial vehicle field – the 1980's Leyland National bus.

Triumph and its successors played a 20 year role in Michelotti's career, yet in total that work still ranks almost as a sideline – for he found time to shape over 1,200 cars. They ranged from the humble to the exotic – from the Daf Daffodil to a list of sporting Ferrari and Maserati models, to Volvo, BMW and others – and a "spider" for Renault, which led to the A110 Alpine. His work also graced Japanese marques as diverse as Daihatsu and Hino.

Michelotti's last major design was a prototype battery electric city car, built on the Fiat 126 platform, and penned in 1976. After that, in failing health, he briefly turned to scooters and yachts. He died from cancer thirty-five years ago in 1980, though his son Edgardo took over the studio, which lived on, allowing one more car to became fleetingly familiar to British motorists. It was styled by Tateo Uchida, son of a Hino director for whose company Michelotti had styled the Contessa Sprint. Impressed by the design, in 1964 Uchida moved to the Turin studio to begin a career as a junior stylist. He was still there when Reliant requested proposals for what became the Scimitar SS1 sports car…



Changing times and fast dwindling work forced the studio's closure in 1991, and the very nature of the business means we'll probably never know much more about the details of Michelotti's work. Interviewed by Italian magazine Quattroroute towards the end of his prolific career in 1977, he was reportedly asked for a feature title. "Call it… a free pencil" he is said to have replied.

So much great work, captured in so few words.

There's more on the Triumph Stag on Wheels-Alive… If you would like to read more about the Stag from the perspective of someone involved with the cars when they were new, and

who now owns and enjoys one, please click HERE.

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