

# Dante Giacosa: OBITUARY

Andrew Nahum (The Independent)

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In his career Dante Giacosa spanned the golden age of motor manufacture. As the leading design engineer of Fiat from 1946 to 1970 he was effectively head of all Fiat car projects and, in that more individualistic age, was one of a handful of men around the world who could effectively control the output of a great car company. "Giacosa made Fiat what it is today," says Paolo Cantarella, the current managing director of Fiat Auto.

Giacosa joined Fiat in 1926. In the studios of the magnificent new Lingotto factory in Turin Giacosa learned engine design from the famous older Fiat designers such as Tranquillo Zerbi and by 1932 moved in to the aero-engine section. Giacosa had an innate sensitivity and tact and noted that "the draughtsmen, who were older than I was and the mainstay of the section, began to respect my abilities without feeling put out by the fact that I had an engineering degree".

The identification of Giacosa with a peculiarly Italian style of popular car began with a request in 1929 from Senator Giovanni Agnelli, co-founder of the Fiat company (and grandfather of the present head, Gianni) to design an economy car that would sell for 5,000 lire.

This was the period when economical small cars were being developed in all the industrialised European countries. Giacosa's new 500cc vehicle, originally called the Zero A, first ran in 1934. It was a triumph of engineering subtlety, squeezing a four-cylinder engine and a body which could take two adults and two children into just over three metres' length.

The tiny car also had independent suspension and out-handled many larger contemporaries. The radiator was squeezed in behind the engine for compactness which allowed a sharply sloping nose. The whole thing looked rather like a clockwork mouse and the Italians loved it and called it "Topolino" (the Italian name for Mickey Mouse).

During the Second World War Giacosa worked again on aero engines but also began planning a post-war range of economy cars. However, when the war in Italy ended he became involved in what seems, in the light of his commitment to utilitarian vehicles, a surprisingly frivolous project - the Cisitalia racing car - and although tiny numbers were built it was, however, an important achievement. Cisitalia was the brainwave of a mercurial entrepreneur, Piero Dusio, then the president of the Juventus football club. He wanted a small racing car to establish a standard low-cost formula for post-war competition.

Giacosa who, like many then at Fiat, had no definite duties, was allowed to do the design work. He adapted the standard Fiat 1100cc engine and various Topolino suspension parts with a light and elegant tubular chassis which surprised some colleagues, one remarking, in dialect, "Ngenere! che curage . . . quel telaio in tubi" ("Engineer, what a nerve - that chassis made of tubes"). The sight of a squadron of these

beautiful little single-seat racers, completed amidst post-war dereliction, lifted Italian self-respect when they raced at Valentino Park in Turin in 1946, piloted by pre-war aces like Tazio Nuvolari, Piero Taruffi and Louis Chiron and represented a symbolic and psychological regeneration for Turin.

More important than the single-seat racer was the stylish Cisitalia coupe. With a streamlined sports-car body "Pinin" Farina clothed Giacosa's drive-train with an almost perfect form. This defined the post-war Italian line in automobile design which was to make Turin a global centre for design (an example is displayed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York).

Returning to mainstream automotive work Giacosa started rebuilding the whole Fiat range. However, he is best remembered for the tiniest cars he built, because they are such a marvel of design integration. The Fiat 600, launched in 1955, was intended to repeat the trick he had pulled off with the Topolino, but this time four adults could be seated.

To gain even greater compression of the engine and drive-train Giacosa opted to condense them behind the passenger compartment and even used the engine radiator fan to blow warm air forward for heating. The tiny vehicle was exactly what Italy needed in the years of recovery for it combined extraordinary economy with the ability to fit into tiny Italian urban spaces. Some 21/2 million were built.

There followed an even smaller car, the Nova Cinquecento (launched in 1957), the conceptual successor to the Topolino, in which extraordinary steps were taken to refine the use of steel and save materials.

What, from the perspective of the 1990s, seems fascinating in these tiny utilitarian cars is also how they expressed a clear nationality. The Cinquecento was Italian as the Morris Minor was British - a luxury of cultural identity which has been extinguished by design convergence and globalisation.

Not all Giacosa's projects were utilitarian. There was also an intriguing 8-cylinder sports car (the 1952 8V) and an experimental gas turbine car, which expressed the expansiveness of the regenerating Fiat Company. In England the Rover company sawed the roof off an "Auntie" Rover when it wanted a test-vehicle for the new power plant. Fiat, instead, built a new car with fabulous Buck Rogers styling, huge fins and a tail-pipe which screamed "Jet".

Giacosa, like Alec Issigonis, came at a certain moment in the evolution of industrial organisation and was one of the last designers who could virtually dictate the whole progress of a car himself; indeed he said, "I have never considered it necessary to discuss projects in meetings with a number of other people during the phase of conception and design." In addition he was in effect head of all Fiat auto projects from 1946 to 1970, an extraordinarily long period in control of the design of a major car company.

Nevertheless, he was intensely modest and thoughtful about industrial culture, noting in his fascinating account *Forty Years of Design with Fiat* (1979): "Discipline is a spontaneous emanation of culture and upbringing . . . without culture and hence

discipline there can never be freedom." His remarkable qualities earned him the deepest respect at Fiat and in Turin and throughout the car industry.

Dante Giacosa, engineering designer: born Rome 3 January 1905; died Turin 31 March 1996.