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### CLASSIC ALFA ROMEOS STAR AT "INTERCLASSICS & TOPMOBIEL"

The Dutch classic car season has got underway with InterClassics & Topmobiel, a combined car show hosted at the Maastricht MECC exposition centre. The success of previous years carried through to this latest edition, which again combined the friendly atmosphere of many car clubs, beautiful classics for sale, numerous traders from Holland and abroad, countless automobilia and parts, a Coys auction and thousands of visitors. A delightful display of exquisite priceless classic cars was also to be viewed at the TopMobiel extravaganza.

This year was marked with a display of classic film cars, including the original James Bond Aston Martin DB5, as well as a stunning gathering of highly exclusive pre-war Alfa Romeos. The most exclusive Alfa Romeo on display, which also inspired the event's stylish Art Deco poster, was the 12C dating from 1937/38. This pre-war racing machine was engineer Vittorio Jano's answer to the monstrous competition from Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union, and was fitted with a 4.5 litre V12 engine with four overhead camshafts and fed by dual compressors providing 430 bhp.

Unfortunately, the 12C proved to be very unreliable, and after only two races it retired costing Vittorio Jano his job in the process.

Despite its promising specifications, the 12C was a failure, with some experts claiming that Alfa Romeo's aero division had interrupted the marque's sports car programme. The 12C was only tested at a very late stage, at which point it was found that the chassis was too flexible. On top of everything, this Alfa Romeo followed the German manufacturer's trend by applying all-round independent suspension. The unpredictable character of the swinging rear axle was new for the Italians, and there was too little time to test and perfect the setup. The car's engine power was acceptable, but its 430 bhp produced at 5800 rpm fell short of the immense outputs ranging from 570-736 bhp developed by the fearsome Mercedes W125.



After Jano's firing, a new wider chassis was constructed for the 1938 season in a desperate attempt to improve handling, however this was still not good enough. At this time the 3-litre formula had become firmly implemented. The 12C was modified (312) and a sixteen cylinder engine (316) was also developed by combining two Alfa 158 voiturette cylinder banks with one crankshaft and engine block. The 312 and 316 Alfa Romeos competed in 1939 with intermittent success. During the 1939 season Alfa Romeo realised a design for a completely new car and also constructed a prototype. This was the mid-engined 512, however due to the outbreak of World War II the 512 never saw track action. What precisely happened to the 12C-37, 312 and 316 chassis remains a mystery as well as the total amount of chassis produced. What is known is that at least two chassis survived the war, and survive to this day.

Alfa Romeo continued their racing programme after the war, with a handful of competition cars which had survived the bombardments locked away in a cheese factory. With the 8-cylinder 308 driven by Sommer, Farina and Varzi, together with the later successful Alfetta's, Alfa Romeo dominated the racing circuits once again. During the summer Varzi drove in Europe, but during the winter a lot of European teams and drivers competed in Argentina which is perhaps why so many special racing cars have been unearthed there. Varzi also raced in Argentina, and he became so fascinated by the country he decided to live there. Here he also wished to make an impact on the racing front (despite being greatly respected already), and in 1947 after winning the Rosario and Interlagos races asked Alfa Romeo to develop a serious winner for the 1948 Temporada class. Alfa Romeo provided him with a 4.5-litre V12 engine producing 420 bhp, mounted in one of the 12C-37, 312 or 316 chassis.

The body was based on the pre-war model, but was modified slightly to tie in with the shape of the more modern Alfetta's of the day. As a result the car acquired its characteristic pear-shaped grille. However even after the war, the car still showed its flaws. Varzi had his hands full with the adventurous handling. It is maybe therefore why he only drove four times with the car before stepping back into his 308C, a car in which he had already booked a lot of success with. After Varzi's fatal crash in his Alfetta in Berne, 1948, the story of the 12C started to get sketchy. Firstly it is unknown if the car was located in Argentina or Italy.

As rumour has it, Argentinean racing driver Clemar Bucci acquired the car via the government thanks to contacts at the highest level. Bucci competed the car successfully during the later '40s and early '50s, even finishing second in the 1950 Argentinean Grand Prix. However the car eventually showed its age against the younger competition which prompted Clemar Bucci and his brother Roland to shorten the chassis for improved road holding. Later they also rebodied a 12C chassis with Farina-style 2-seat barchetta bodywork. With this bodywork, the supercar with pre-war roots could reach a top speed of over 280 km/h. Realising its value Bucci stored the original monoposto bodywork, and during the 1980s when the classic car market soared, the original body was relocated to the chassis.

Here the story takes a rather mysterious turn, as it appears that Bucci has sold two 12Cs over the course of 11 years. In 1995 Bucci sold a 12C to Carlos Monteverde, who shipped it to the UK for restoration by Tony Merrick. Whilst still under restoration the car was later bought by Symbolic Motors in the USA who completed the project. The car was then owned by Neil Hadfield, however has recently changed hands to Austrian Helmut Handlbauer.

Bucci, now 84 years old, recently sold the 12C on display at the Topmobiel show to Dutch enthusiasts after an impressive adventure of locating the car and tracing its originality.

Resplendent under the spotlights at the show, the 12C represented an absolute jewel which simply could not be missed. However, as with all indoor classic car events, the frustration of not being able to see, hear and smell the car in action under natural light was almost certainly present in each enthusiasts mind.



The Dutch owners of this latest 12C to leave the Bucci collect believe that they have the original Varzi car – the car which Bucci also campaigned in the Argentinean Grand Prix. The purchase was investigated by a leading European specialist, and during their research phase of eight weeks prior to the purchase, it became constantly more apparent that this was the car to buy. The car also bears hallmarks to original features which back up its history. Details include the chassis which was shortened slightly by Bucci and his brother when racing the car for improved road holding, as well as the crafted cylinder head made from welded steel which came about after an engine failure during a race in the 1950s. There are no signs of a chassis that was widened, so this is certainly not the chassis which Bucci used for the Spider.



Alongside this forgotten masterpiece, a line-up of no fewer than five Alfa Romeo 8C models from the 1930s was also on display. The Alfa Romeo 8C is the most recognised and valuable Alfa Romeo type of all time, with each example being a unique piece. Most of the 188 produced 8C 2300s were sold as rolling chassis, such as the 8C 2300 Corto from 1932 on display. This particular example was famed partly due to its attractive Zagato bodywork, but mostly as it was the first car which bore the legendary Scuderia Ferrari shield. Also within the display was an 8C assembled by Alfa Romeo in Paris, a factory that put together parts shipped over from Italy in order to avoid the heavy custom fees applied to turn-key imported cars.

As with the above, each of these vintage Alfa Romeos told a story, each a different character from the same family. Each used and loved for what they are; totally attractive in their charm. For this is the essence of beauty in a car: the history, the quality, the connection between man and machine; an essence which certainly runs no richer than with the Alfa Romeos displayed at InterClassics & Topmobiel.

by James Grange

