# Vespa®

## ITALIAN STREET STYLE

PIAGGIO & C. s.p.a.

SCRIPTUM EDITIONS

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**Davide Mazzanti**

*Texts*
**Davide Mazzanti**
(the history of the Vespa)

**Ornella Sessa**
Architect and specialist in industrial design. Visiting professor in various universities
(the sixteen models).

*Translation*
**Donald Bathgate** (the history of the Vespa, the sixteenth model and updates to the present edition)

**Dialogue International srl**
(the first fifteen models)

*Revision and editing (English text)*
**Dorothy Barrett**

*Contributors*
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**Bill Buford** Author and European correspondent for *The New Yorker*

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**Lara-Vinca Masini** Contemporary art historian

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**The late Roberto Segoni** † Professor of Industrial Design, President of Degree Course in Industrial Design, Florence University

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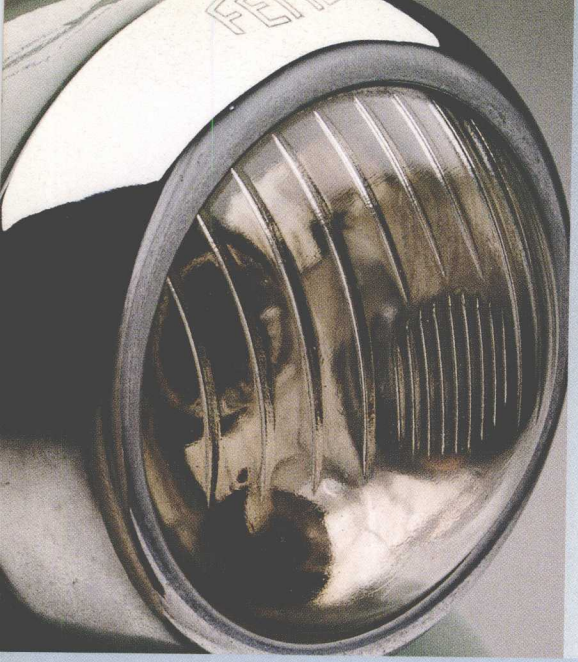
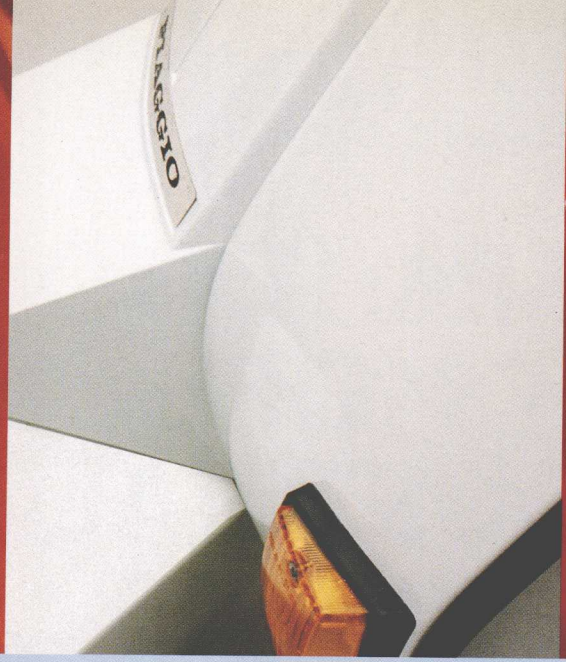
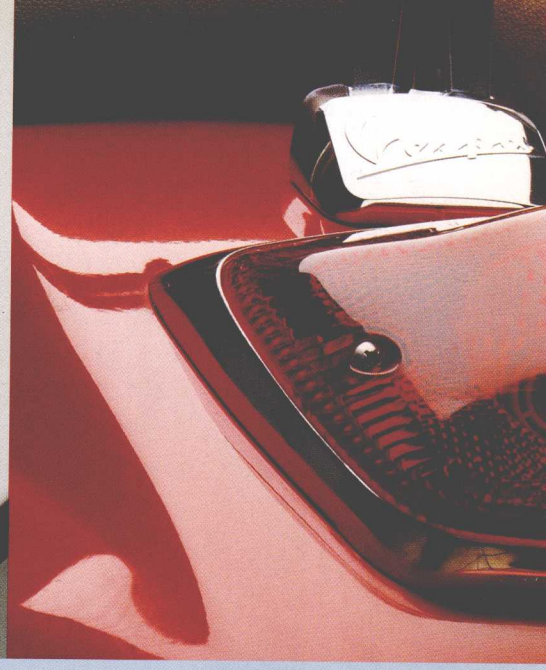


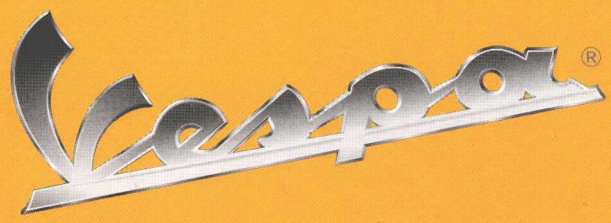
## ...and a Vespa for Peter Pan
**1963–1976**



## A splendid forty-year-old
**1976–1996**



## Towards a new summer
**1996–2008**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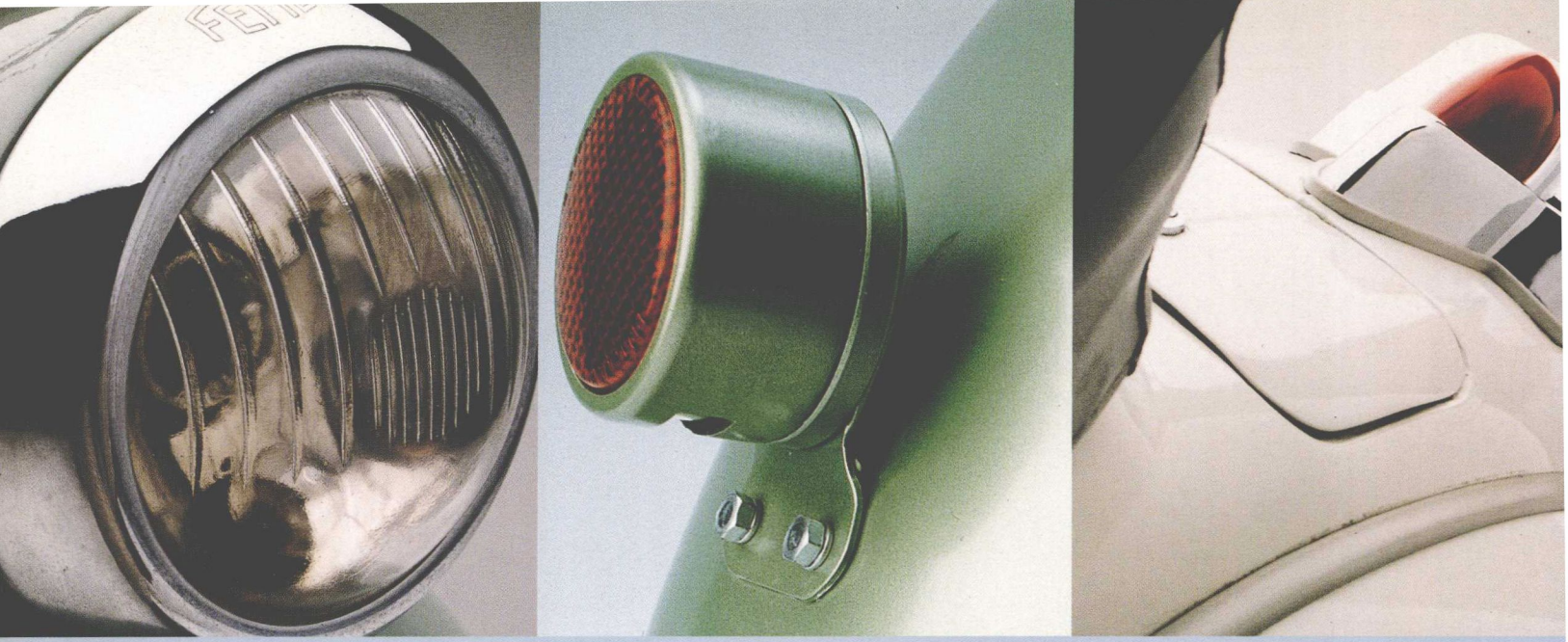

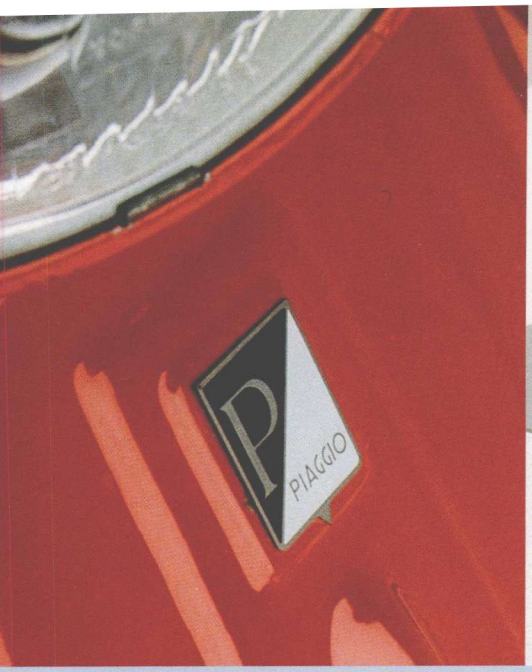


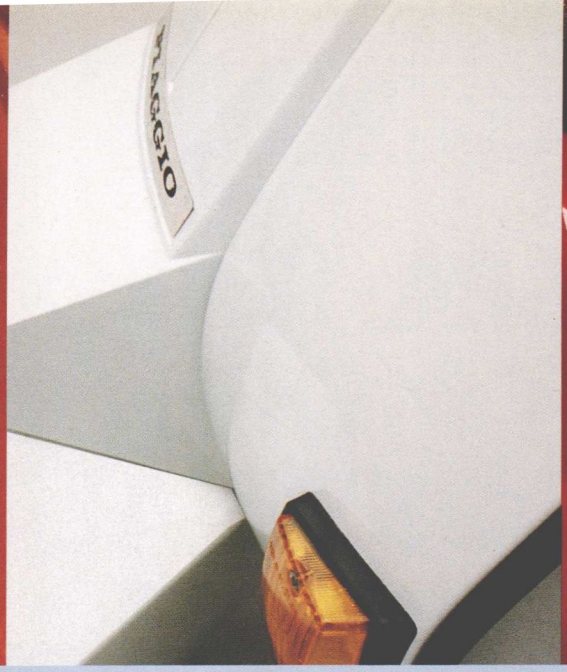


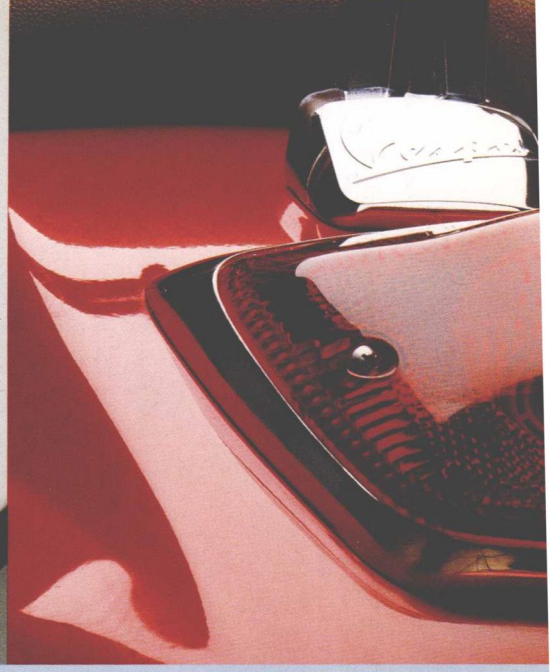

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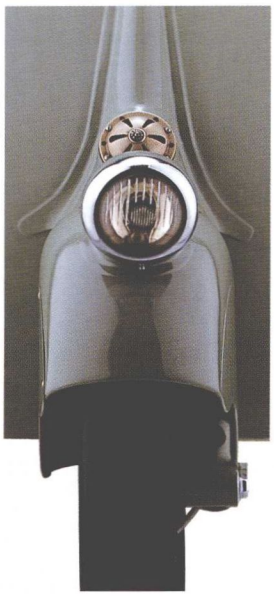
# VESPA: IT DOESN'T GET MORE INDUSTRIAL THAN THIS...



It is often said Italian design reached its heyday during the Fifties and Sixties – a truism amply borne out by design history. It is also true that those "Twenty Golden Years" were heralded in the years immediately after World War II by the Vespa, an exemplar of creative and inventive ability, the hallmark of so many other design products that were to win fame the world over by embodying the style for which Italy – where many of the world's best designers come from – is universally renowned.

These designers, it should be emphasized, have vastly different individual experience and cultural backgrounds, from the hands-on culture of the workshop on the one hand to the Faculty of Architecture on the other, not to mention the technical colleges and engineering universities, the academies and art schools.

While most of Italy's best-known designers have come through the Faculties of Architecture (the only discipline in which social sciences combine with technology-oriented subjects to produce a design culture needed if planning is to be expressed with any depth), there are several cases of equally famous personalities from the most diversified backgrounds: from the typically studio-based planner to the managerial entrepreneur able to harness, coordinate and combine the skills of others. Ettore Bugatti had studied in the shop of his father, Carlo, an eclectic, artistic craftsman renowned for the originality of his furniture; Enzo Ferrari started as a race-car driver and went on to become a highly gifted manager of talented designers and drivers. Marcello Nizzoli was a graphic artist and painter when Adriano Olivetti summoned him to design the Lexicon 80 typewriter, which he modeled directly in plasticene.

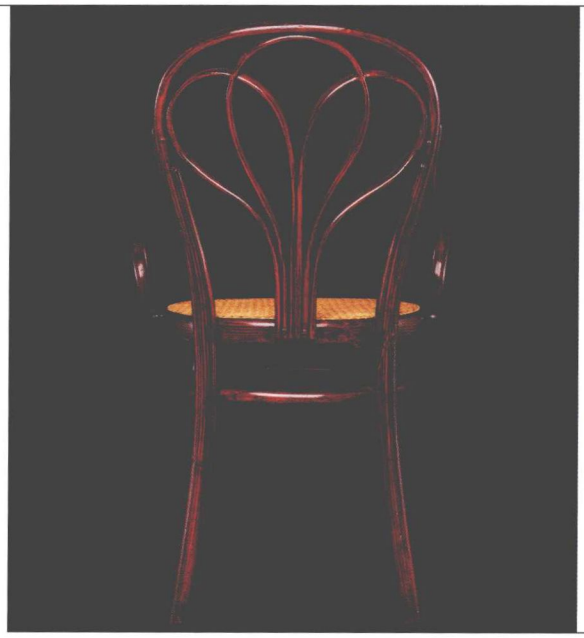
Battista Farina, nicknamed "Pinin" ("Littl'un" in the Turin dialect) worked in his brother Giovanni's body shop as a child and grew up drawing his automobiles alongside experienced workers as they formed bodywork blow by blow or modelers as they "shaped the plaster" of the mockups.

Dante Giacosa, on the other hand, was an engineer who could design a car down to every single component, from the mechanics to the bodywork, while, as a designer, guiding the evolution of the shape, as he did for his all-time masterpiece, the Fiat 500.

Marquis Emilio Pucci, one of the founding fathers of Italian fashion, a black-sheep among Florentine nobility, was born with a creative verve and sensitivity that enabled him to design the cut of his collections.

There are, naturally, many Italian-designed products just as well known as those that come

from the pen of a famous designer but whose paternity is uncertain or even multiple – products designed by people completely unknown only because they work alongside more famous personalities. Suffice it to mention Beretta pistols, or the refined elegance of Gucci or Ferragamo shoes – indeed, all designer-label products in which the name of the actual designer must never appear, whether it be a collective design team or a single person.



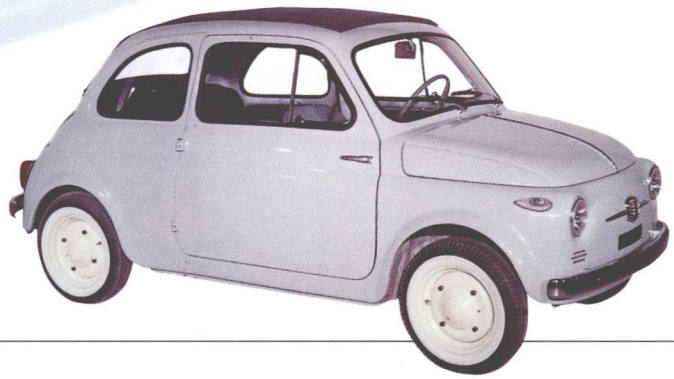
An innovative technique in working wood by steam bending was perfected by an Austrian carpenter, Michael Thonet, in the 1830s. More than a million copies of the famous "Model 14" of 1859 had already been produced by the 1920s. Here, one of Thonet's models of 1885.

At the 1954 Milan Triennale exhibition, just as debate was beginning on the definition of "industrial design" and what the profile and role of the designer should be (seeking to identify the examples best suited to shed light on such a vast issue), it was perhaps forgotten that almost ten years earlier, at Pontedera, Corradino D'Ascanio, an ingenious aeronautical engineer, had already provided a highly tangible example of top-quality design in the conception and realization of the Vespa.

It would probably have been enough to take the Vespa as an example and see how perfectly it fit the requirements of such a historic event that had brought some of the most respected elder statesmen of design around the same table those same authoritative figures who were later to lay the basis for defining the profile of the industrial designer in the then-nascent Italian industrial-design panorama.

It is true that equally famous foreign products already existed, too. Thonet furniture, the mythical Ford Model T, the Singer sewing machine, the Winchester rifle and the 1911 model Colt pistol especially come to mind, but these harked back to the nineteenth century or to the early years of the twentieth century and thus could not be properly considered as "modern" as those created in the years immediately following the end of World War II, in the mid-twentieth century.

What is certain is that these products – born be-





The Fiat 500, launched in 1957, despite its obvious identity as a vintage item, stands out as one of the most successful city cars.

The Colt 1911 is undoubtedly the most famous automatic pistol ever made. With more than 5 million copies made it can rightly be called a "definitive" article—still today it is absolutely identical to the very first piece made.

tween the middle of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century – and the Vespa were all spawned from the same lowest common denominator: at first, each interpreted and then became the paragon of cutting-edge syle in its time. The function and appearance of each product defined its time and was aimed to last over time. Any later attempts at redesigning – save those of extremely minor significance – ran the risk of irremediably ruining its original character and hence its very identity.

This truth becomes even more significant when one considers that there are very few examples of industrial products that have managed to stay in production for a long time, even allowing for slight updates and few important changes up to the present day.

Not even the Fiat 500 – which appeared ten years after the birth of another main player in the move to Italian mass motorization, the Vespa – could escape the inevitable aesthetic aging that labeled it a car of the Fifties, despite its remaining an unsurpassed example of a little/big town car. This perception gave it the (highly unusual in the automobile industry) distinction of becoming a vintage car before it became a merely "old" car during its long and honorable career.

Conversely, the Vespa underwent no aging process in either looks or function because, from the very first model in 1946, its shape was so new and different that it had very little in common with the style of either two-wheeled or four-wheel vehicles of the time. This uniqueness prevented it from looking dated like the motorcycles of those years, or the Fiat 500 or the Mini Minor, now do.

True, it was quietly redesigned more than once to keep it in line with developing changes in the market and technological evolution and production processes, keeping an eye on the parallel styling taking place at Lambretta, its only direct competitor. As opposed to the Lambretta, however, the Vespa was subjected to only very light, almost imperceptible retouching, with care being taken not to overstep the "legibility limit," which could have lost it that assertive, unmistakable shape so fundamental in such a strongly characterized product – knowledge fundamental to the designers who worked on the Vespa over the years and managed to not transform it into something else...

It can therefore be said that the Vespa is one of the select few industrial products that has kept its shape more or less unchanged from birth to the present day with only minor styling alterations.

It has kept the same performance level and ex-

pressive content as it began with, with no sign of the inertia common to most products that causes them to be identified with the outmoded styles in which they were created.

The Vespa and the more recent Porsche 911 both belong to this select category hitherto occupied only by the likes of the Winchester rifle and the incredible 1911 model Colt, the latter being a real record breaker in design history: after more than one hundred years it is identical to the very first model produced, unchangeable down to the smallest detail, because its design was essentially perfect.

Whatever design process is followed, a well-designed product can be thought up by anyone, either alone or in a group, as long as the designer, the entrepreneur or – why not – both together have the capacity to think up and excute an idea so innovative that it will make its mark on history. This is the story of the Vespa. Enrico Piaggio's intuition and the genius of Corradino D'Ascanio gave birth to it, just as Samuel Colt and gunsmith John Moses Browning gave birth to the best automatic pistol in history, the 1911 model, until the arrival of the Italian Beretta 98F.

The Vespa was always a highly innovative product, in the context not only of the period in which it was conceived but also that of the future, which in the post-war years, was not as easy to foresee. The traffic problems and the difficulties of urban mobility today are different from that era both in terms of quality and quantity. In the post-war years, the most urgent problem was procuring a simple and economical means of transport, affordable to everyone who had to get to work and couldn't manage the luxury of a car.

Even people who viewed mopeds as dangerous and complex would find the new vehicle simpler and easier to ride. It also had the great advantage of being easily accessible to women (for whom motorcycles were out of bounds, mainly for cultural reasons) because of a certain psychological serenity – one instinctively felt from the minute one started to ride it.

Its typological unorthodoxy made it incomparable to every other two-wheel vehicle then known; it conveyed a completely new image of utilitarian vehicle, friendly and reassuring. In Corradino D'Ascanio's words, "We had to set out on a path completely new and antitraditionalist par excellence."

You drove it sitting down, it was easy to set your feet on the ground, you were protected from the rain and cold, it even had a spare wheel, like a car, its engineering simplicity made it practically maintenance-free, and it was reliable enough

**The Lexicon 80, presented by Olivetti in 1948. Adriano Olivetti summoned artists and architects, representatives of a non-factory culture, to work together with the planning and study department he set up in 1929.**

Emilio Pucci, pictured in Florence in 1959, putting the finishing touches to the original sketches for one of his characteristic printed fabrics.

that drivers could embark on relatively long trips, secure in the knowledge that they would encounter no problems.

The design of the Vespa expressed all this from the very beginning. Its rounded contours, characterized by continuity in surface and shape, made it slim and lithe. It had on the one hand the reassuring familiarity of many common household articles, and on the other the natural harmony found in nature, especially among insects (it was no coincidence that on seeing the first prototype, Enrico Piaggio exclaimed, "Sembra una vespa!" ["It looks just like a wasp!"] or certain creatures of the sea. The shape of the Vespa (like that of the Porsche 911) is the fascinating synthesis of natural form and the idealized motion exemplified in the tapering of its back end to a teardrop shape, like that of an insect's abdomen, or the tip of a fish's tail.

The Vespa was also conceived as a "made to measure" vehicle of exactly the proper size to satisfy the real needs of a very broad spectrum of users – an organically designed vehicle both in the layout of its parts and in the comfort it offered its user. Everything was measured: the engine power, the weight and dimensions in proportion – naturally – to the performance and the use to which it was to be put.

Power, maneuverability and ease of riding were in harmony with what the public wanted: more power would have required, logically, a different size of vehicle, which in turn would have jeopardized security and practicality of use, as everyone who rides a scooter or a motorcycle knows (and the same principle applies to cars and every other kind of vehicle).

The design's ingenuity is all the more evident when one considers how the Vespa, so measured and familiar looking, is, all the while, so anticonventional: a monocoque (integrated) body instead of the old tubular frame, thus solving the problem of bodywork design; the engine driving