

# Ten automobiles

Date

**1953**

Publisher

**The Museum of Modern Art**

Exhibition URL

**[www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2422](http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2422)**

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*exhibition* **TEN AUTOMOBILES** *The Museum of Modern Art*

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#### TEN AUTOMOBILES

This is the Museum of Modern Art's second exhibition of automobiles. The ten cars included are post-war models designed for production in series; none of them is custom-built or experimental. Only those automobiles were considered which met standard safety and performance requirements, but they were all selected, as were those in the first exhibition, primarily for their excellence as works of art.

*September 1953*



**AUTOMOBILES ARE TWENTIETH CENTURY ARTIFACTS** no less worthy of being appraised for their visual appeal than were Venetian gondolas, English landaus, and, today, the furniture and other utilitarian objects we habitually evaluate as beautiful or ugly. We do not require an automobile to reveal the spiritual insights characteristic of sculpture — with which it shares many formal qualities — but it is also true that utilitarian considerations have never justified ugliness, and the complicated mechanics and functions of an automobile fail to render it exempt from esthetic criteria.



Vignale factory

Mass production techniques have generally replaced the craftsman who was alone responsible for the quality of his work, giving it, like the sculptor, the impress of his particular sensibility to form. It is hardly necessary to hammer out each sheet of metal by hand (without benefit of a mold or a die-press) in order to render accurately the automobile designer's conception of sculptural form — although that is how the craftsmen of Italy's Carrozzeria Vignale fabricate bodies for the American Cunningham (page 4). The esthetic merits of an automobile depend not on the methods by which it is produced — impersonal, in America, or picturesque, in Italy — but on the designer's mastery of sculptural problems.

These problems of sculptural form have to do with the ways in which a volume may be defined. Like the exterior wall of a house, the metal shell of an automobile takes its shape from the space it envelopes. Details on the surface of this shell, like the details on the facade of a house, can suggest by their shape and location the nature of the space enclosed. But, unlike a house, an automobile moves, and we expect an indication from its shape as to the direction its passengers face and the location of its wheels.

There are two distinct ways in which the automobile designer may package a quantity of space so that the package itself suggests directed movement. A box, with the top of the center portion raised to accommodate passengers, requires the addition of separate parts — fenders, bumpers, headlights — to provide scale and to indicate direction. The more closely such a design adheres to the flat planes of a box, the more important become the intersections of those planes.

An equally disciplined solution is to treat the body of a car as an envelope modelled so that separate planes flow into each other in one continuous, undulating surface. Scale and direction are then obtained by cutting holes in the envelope, rather than by adding parts to it. Perhaps the outstanding example of the automobile as a box is the English Bentley, famous for its "razor-edge" intersections. The Cisitalia illustrates perfectly the second approach.

There are, of course, innumerable variants and combinations of the two basic designs represented by the Bentley and the Cisitalia. Neither car exhausts the possibilities of automobile design, but both of them demonstrate the merits of consistency.

Pinin Farina's Cisitalia, produced in Italy in 1946 and now made in Argentina, remains the most successful design of its kind. Manufacturers in Europe and America have availed themselves of Farina's talents: in this country the characteristics of his style are called



"the continental look." They might better be called the Italian Style, since the coachwork for five of the cars in this exhibition was designed in Italy. The other five show an appreciation of Italian ideas.

No matter how it is designed the body of an automobile is a kind of package — a metal wrapping. It is enough for this wrapping to contain, without delineating exactly, the apparatus it conceals. A practical reason for this independence is that the metal package itself sometimes plays an important role in an automobile's performance. For example, the Porsche, a German sports car, has a flat front hood whose contours were determined, or at least influenced, by experiments in a wind-tunnel; at high speeds the Porsche's nose is kept firmly to the ground by the pressure of air currents.

Ferdinand Porsche's earlier car, the pre-war German Volkswagen, has a similarly shaped front compartment designed without benefit of a wind-tunnel. In both the Porsche and the Volkswagen, the motor is located at the rear, the two ends of the Volkswagen being considered as storage compartments — one for the luggage, one for the motor. Details of the design visually reinforce this effect. But the beautiful Porsche reveals no such logical concept, and the shape of its forward compartment suggests that it houses a motor although it is actually used to hold a spare tire. Apparently there is no particular function that can be considered decisive in the design of an automobile. In fact, esthetic preferences are likely to be justified *a posteriori* by elaborate technical rationalizations.

Still another, and sometimes a more potent, justification of what are in reality esthetic preferences is the notion of comfort. The interiors of American cars are often designed to duplicate in domestic comfort the living room of the driver's home. Excessively refined spring mechanisms, intended to protect passengers from the experience of being in a vehicle moving along a road, also produce that bouncing which rocks us like babes in a crib. Sometimes safety precautions are neglected in favor of comfort: a car that does not hold tightly to the road because its center of gravity is too high is technically imperfect, even though its extra height makes it easier for passengers to get in and out. In this case the preoccupation with comfort produces a curious indifference to a demonstrable safety hazard. The requirements of comfort are usually cited to excuse an obviously ungainly design, but it is more likely that a vulgar sense of design, like a sophisticated one, produces its appropriate rationale; the glorification of comfort is one example.

The error lies not in seeking comfort, but rather in defining comfort as the absence of all sensation. Thus if the motorist were to distinguish between the comfort appropriate to his living room couch and the comfort appropriate to a seat suspended between four swiftly moving wheels, he would doubtless resent the padded, sensationless limbo recommended in our advertising as the highest form of motoring pleasure. It is not only the monotony of the super-highway that makes it so difficult for the cross-country motorist to keep awake. A well designed automobile, besides being beautiful, would restore the motorist to the road. — A. D.



Bentley

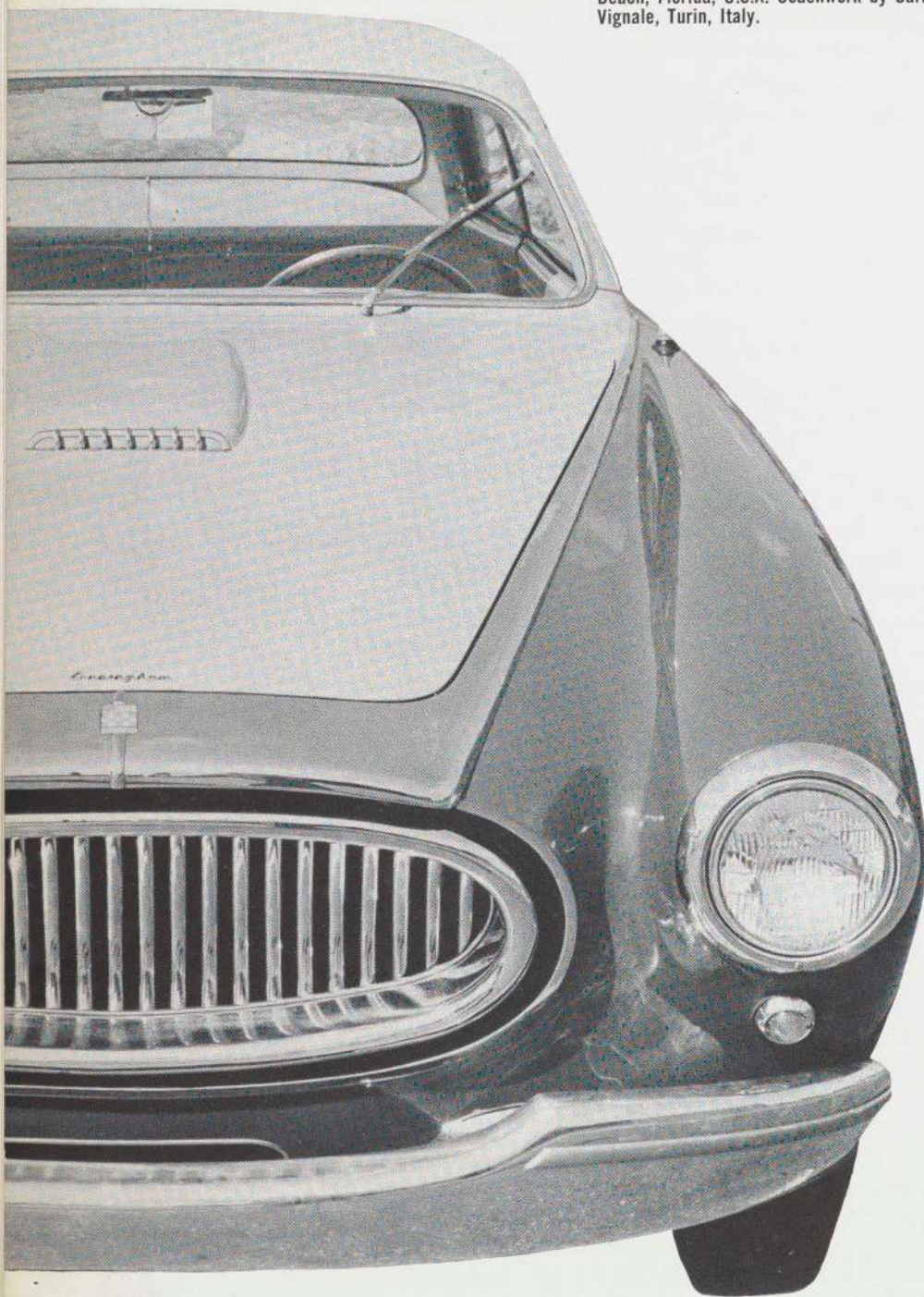


Cisitalia



**CUNNINGHAM model C-4, 1952**

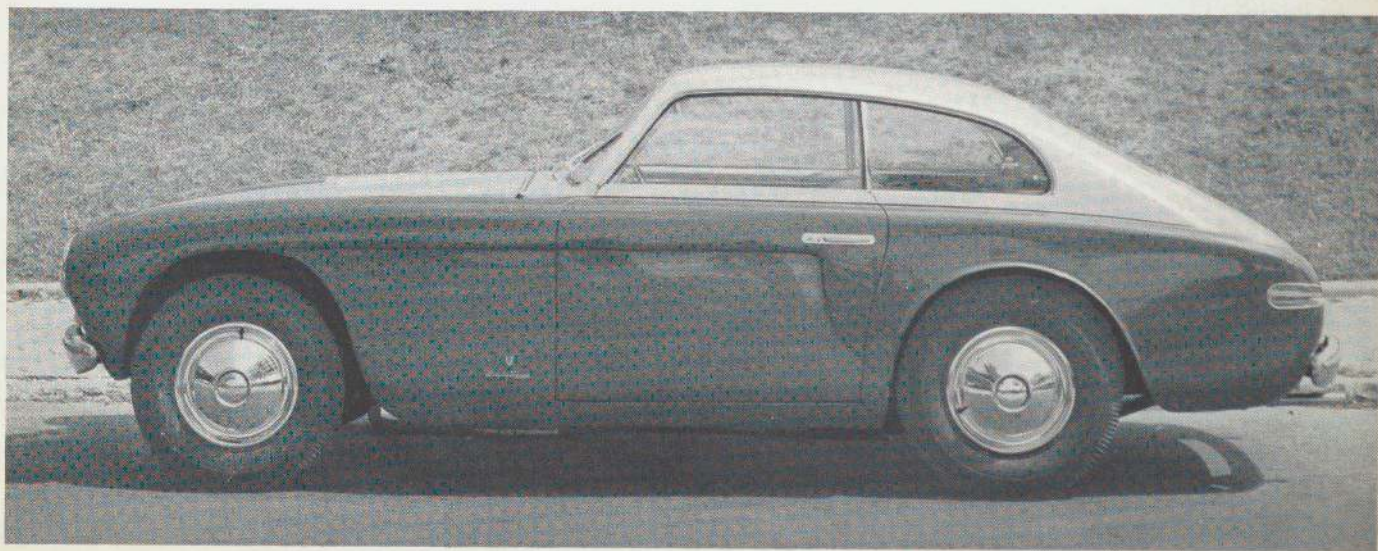
Manufactured by B. S. Cunningham Company, West Palm Beach, Florida, U.S.A. Coachwork by Carrozzeria Alfredo Vignale, Turin, Italy.







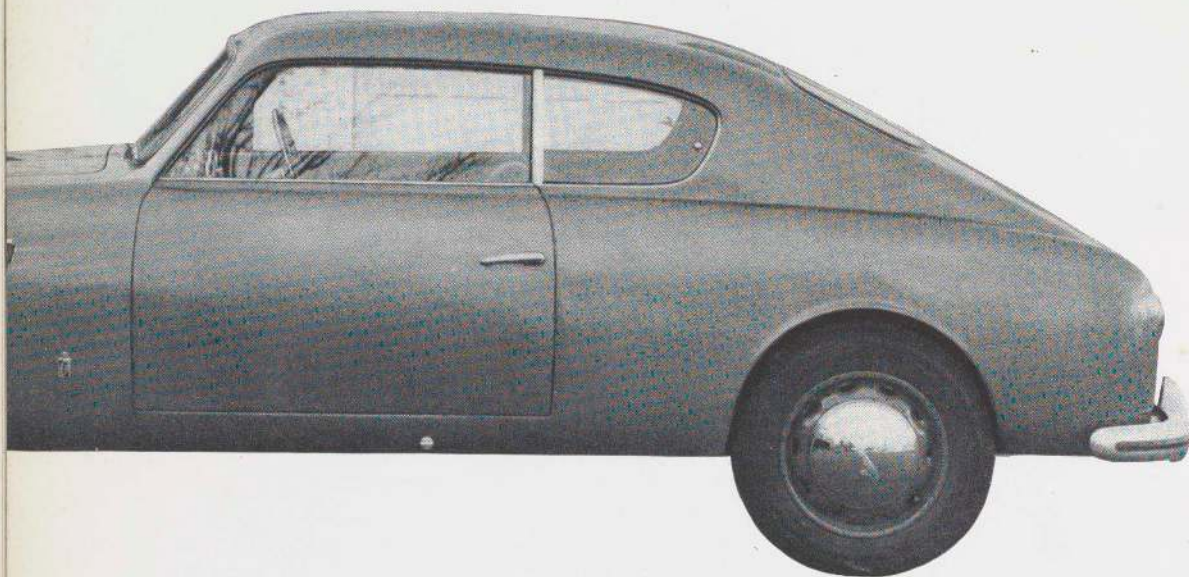
Many of the characteristics usually associated with small Italian sports cars are here adapted to the large scale of American touring cars. An oval radiator grille, recalling that of the Cisitalia, and front and rear fenders merging into the body, are among its best features. Handmade in Italy, where it was designed, the coachwork for the Cunningham is fitted to an American-made chassis powered by a Chrysler V-8 engine.

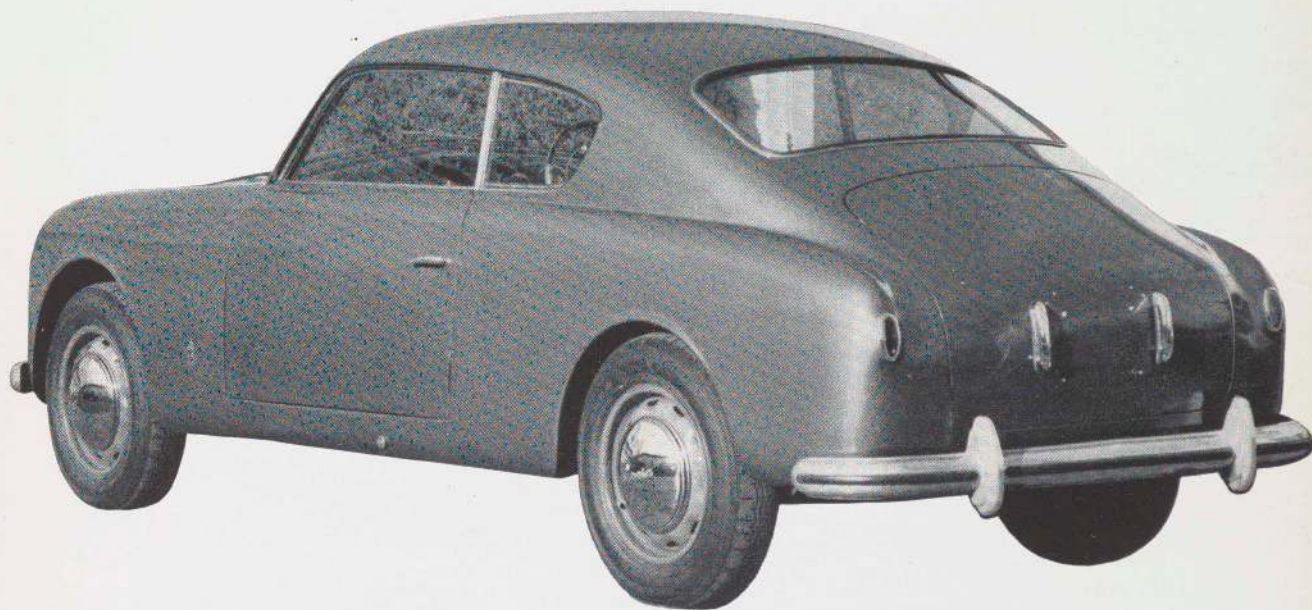




**LANCIA Gran Turismo, 1951**

Manufactured by Automobile Lancia, Turin, Italy. Coachwork by Carrozzeria Pinin Farina, Turin.





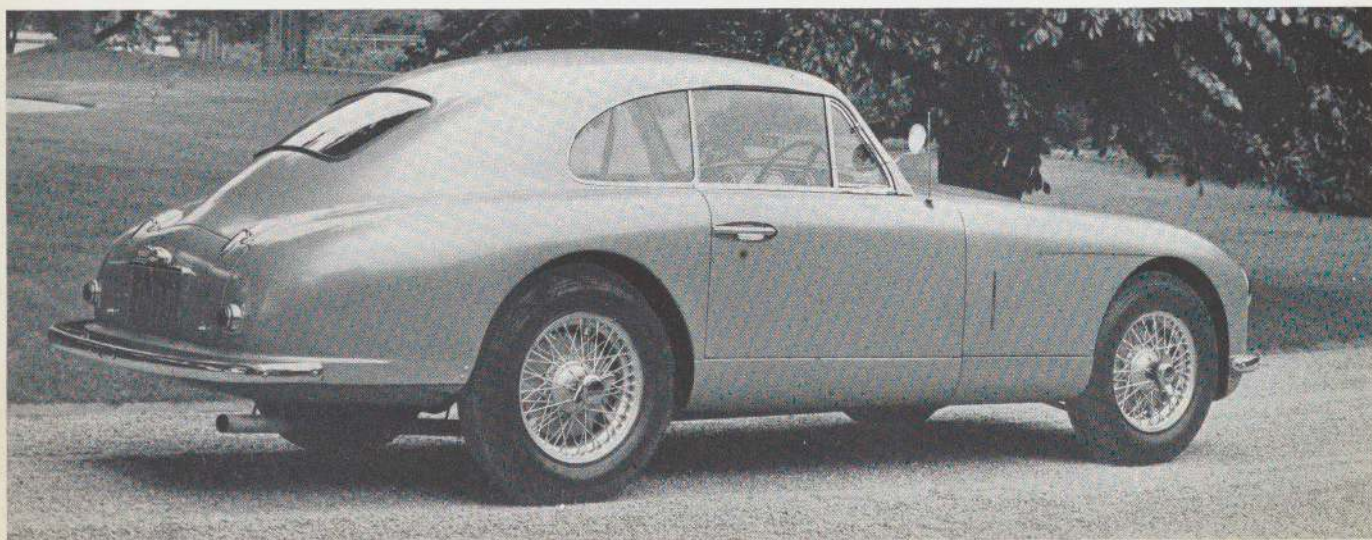
This model of the Lancia is an adaptation of the company's standard, series-produced four-door family car. Both body and chassis frame are formed in a single unit, like a box. An unusually successful part of its design is the relation of the sloping back to the rear fenders: flat and curved planes are here contrasted without irrelevant decorative detail. Intended for fast driving over winding roads, the *Gran Turismo* is one of the most maneuverable mass-produced cars now made, and it has won several long road races.

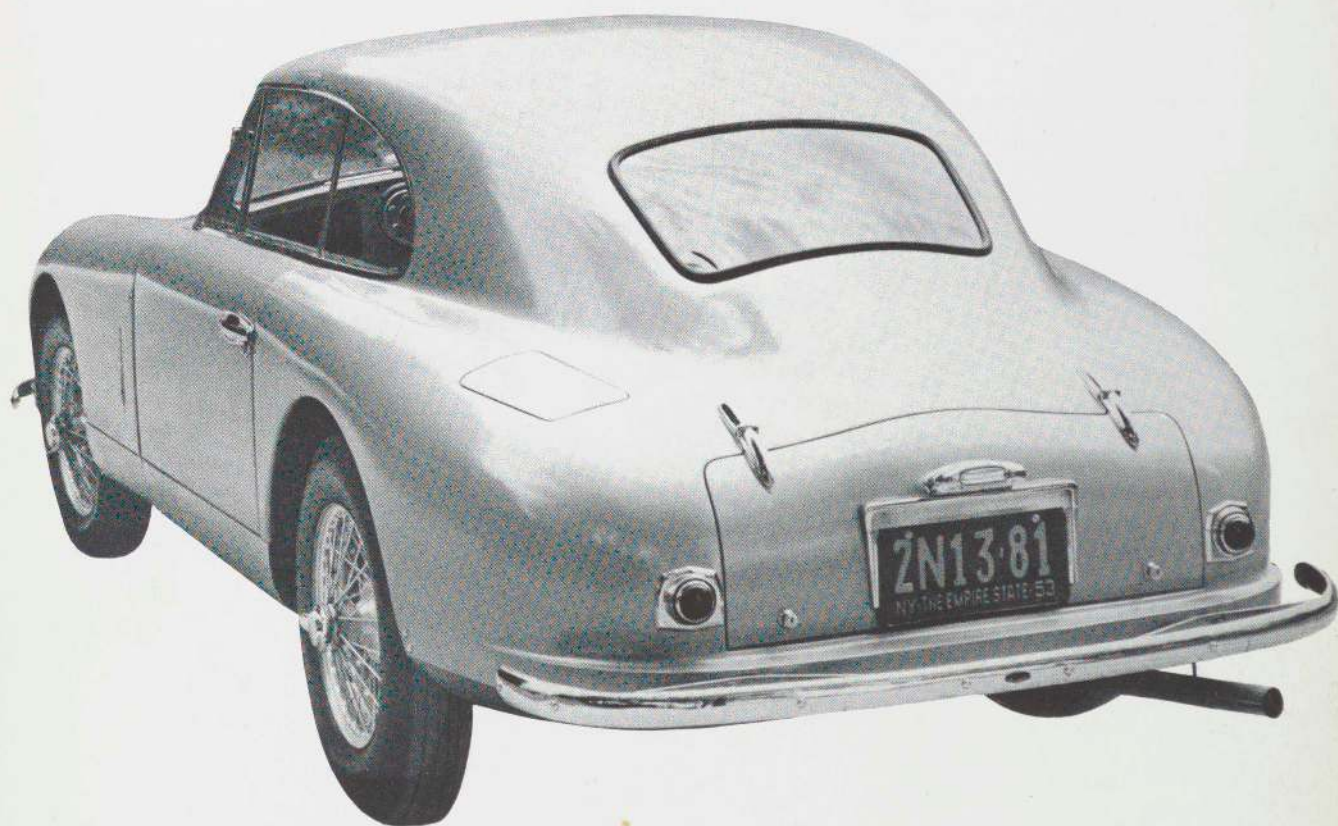
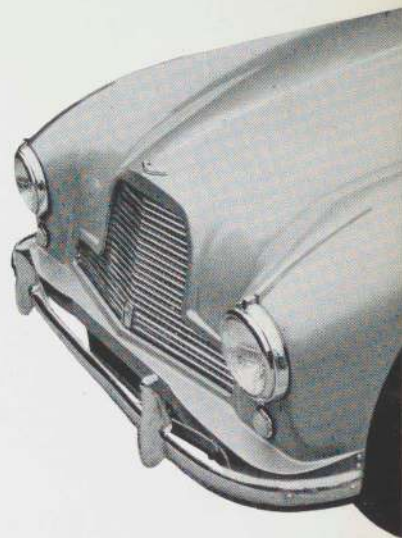


**ASTON-MARTIN model D.B.2, 1950**

Manufactured by David Brown Group, Feltham, Middlesex, England. Coachwork by the manufacturers.

Intended for both touring and road racing, the Aston-Martin retains details and accessories of passenger cars though its coachwork is built primarily of weight-saving aluminum. Front and rear fenders are treated as part of one enveloping shell, without individual articulation. An original and subtle detail is the transition from the rounded rear window to the top of the luggage compartment, which is itself modelled to indicate the rear fenders. The radiator grille is outlined with a metal ridge, suggesting the pressing and cutting techniques by which the car's body has been formed.







**STUDEBAKER Commander V-8 Starliner Coupe, 1953**

Manufactured by Studebaker Corporation, South Bend, Indiana, U.S.A. Coachwork by the manufacturers, designed by Raymond Loewy Associates.



The hood of the Studebaker is lower than the adjoining fenders—a refinement which, together with the car's general proportions and low center of gravity, constitutes its most striking departure from conventional American treatment. The uninterrupted side and rear window make the roof of the passenger compartment a clearly separate element, well suited to a contrasting color treatment. Among the most successful details are the gleaming undecorated hub caps (see front cover). This model of the Studebaker is the first American mass-produced car to adapt design characteristics of European automobiles.

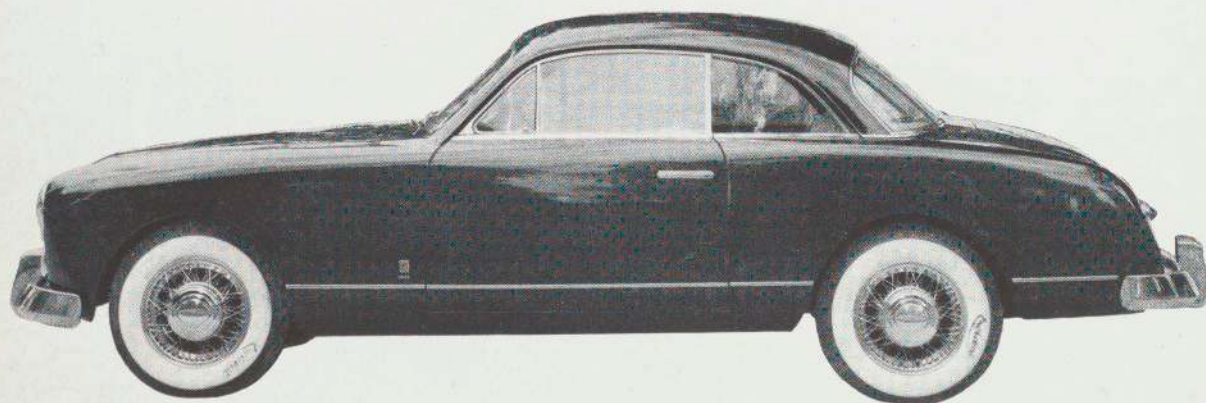








Based on a custom design by Stabilimenti Farina, the French Ford utilizes a Vedette chassis and a modified V-8 engine. Although its proportions are comparable to those of many American cars, the success of its design depends on the consistent use of moderately curved contours rather than on its size or its applied decoration. The side windows are particularly well studied.





**COMETE, 1952**

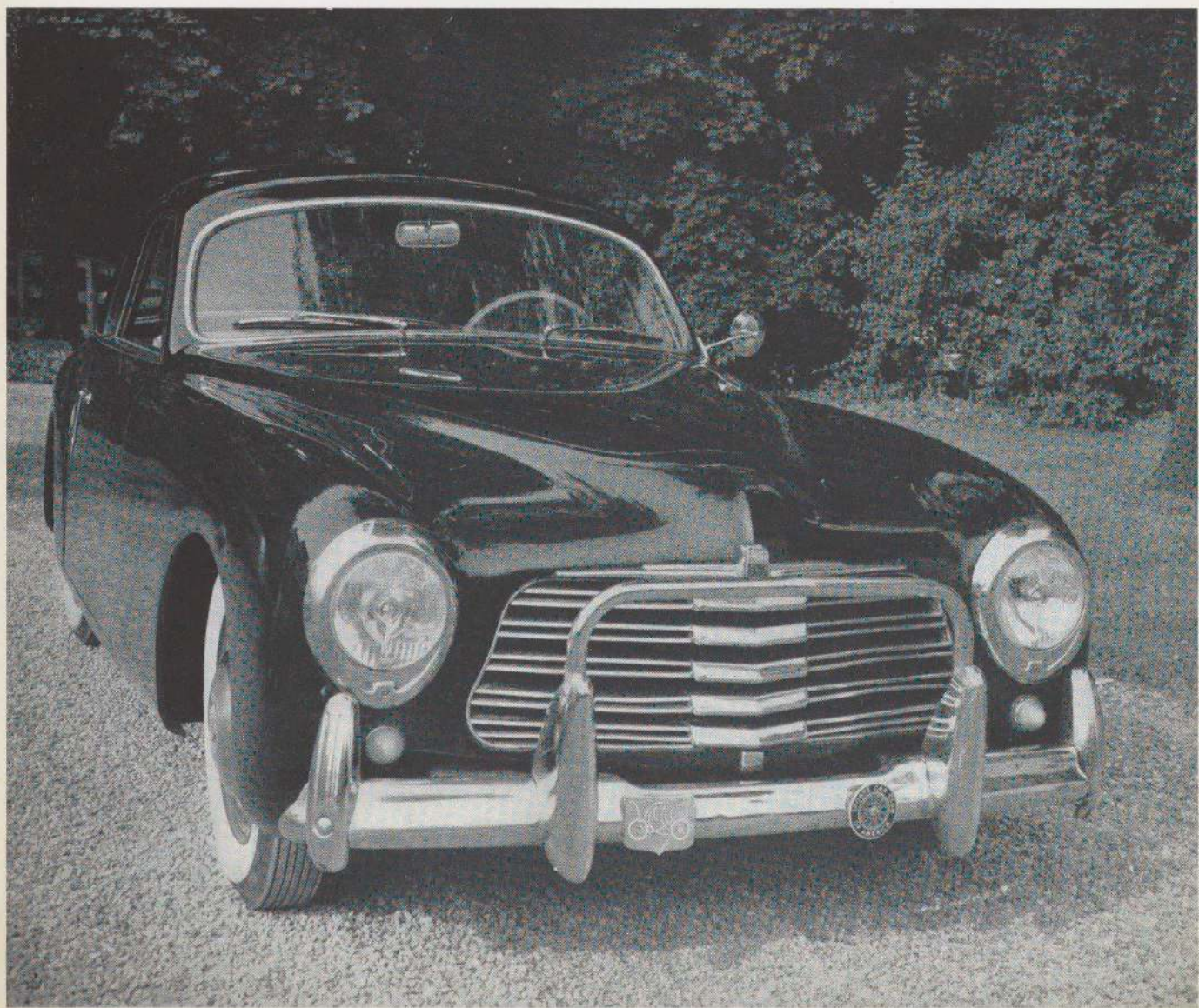
Manufactured by Ford S.A.F., Poissy, France  
Coachwork by Facel-Metallon, Paris, France.





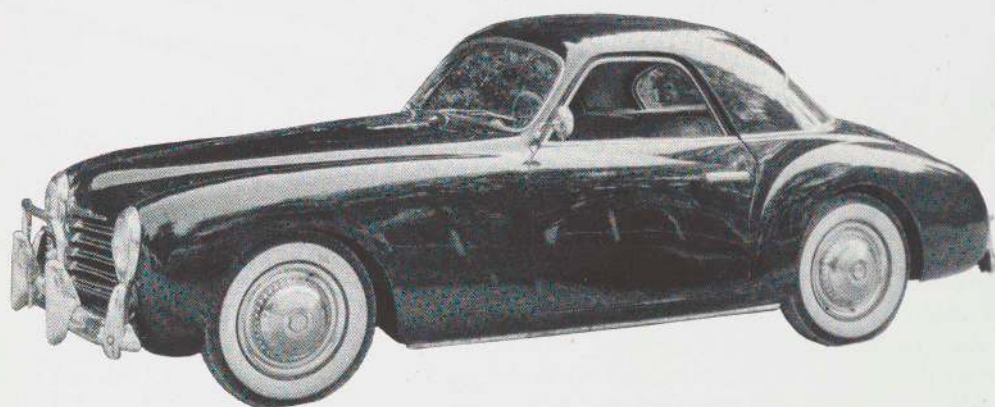
**SIMCA model 8 Sport, 1950**

Manufactured by Société Industrielle de Mécanique et Carrosserie Automobile, Paris, France. Coachwork by Facel-Metallon, Paris.

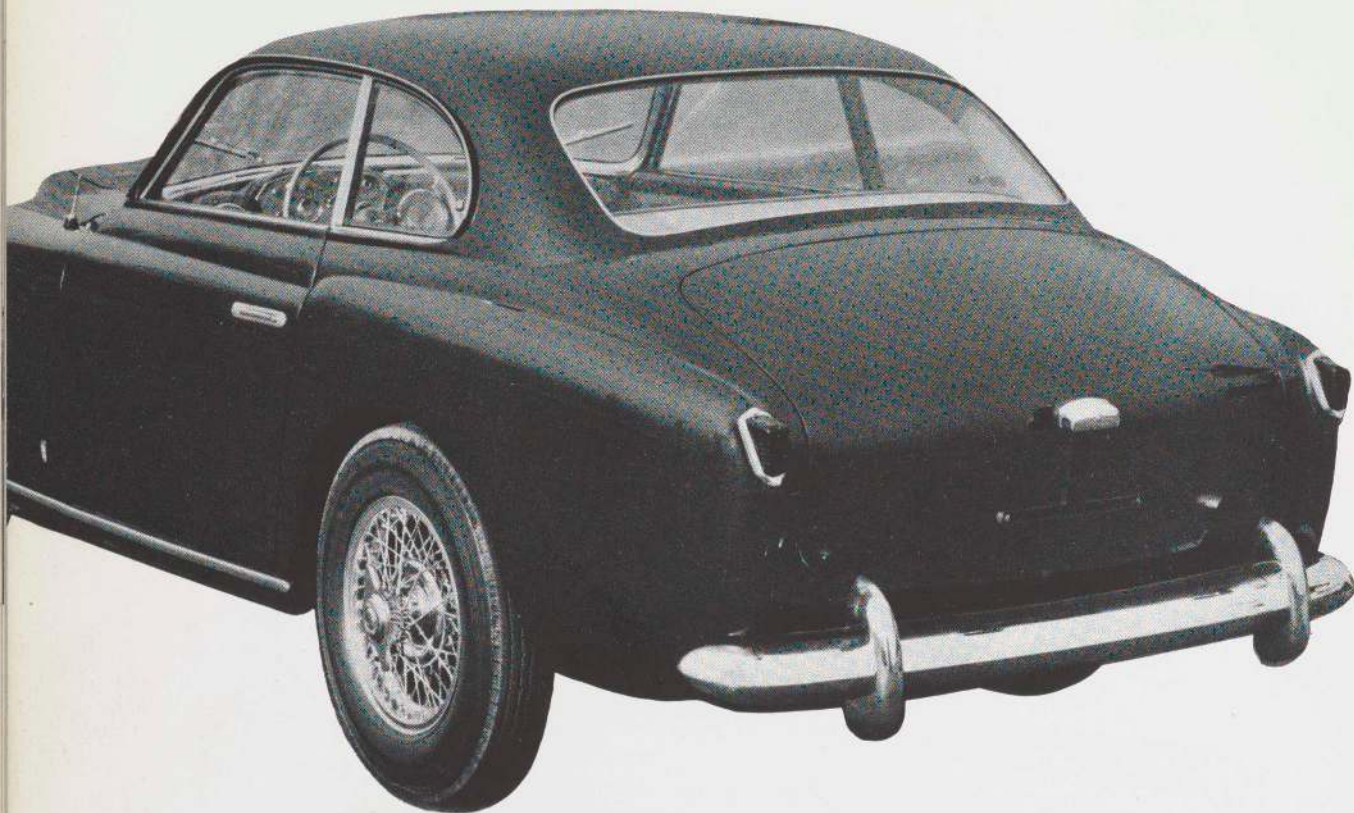




The SIMCA is derived from an Italian design (Pinin Farina's FIAT 1100) and is characteristic of much Italian work in its treatment of the body as a metal shell modelled to indicate front and rear fenders. In this version of the SIMCA the long line of the front fender merges almost imperceptibly into the door. An unusual detail is the single, symmetrically shaped side window.



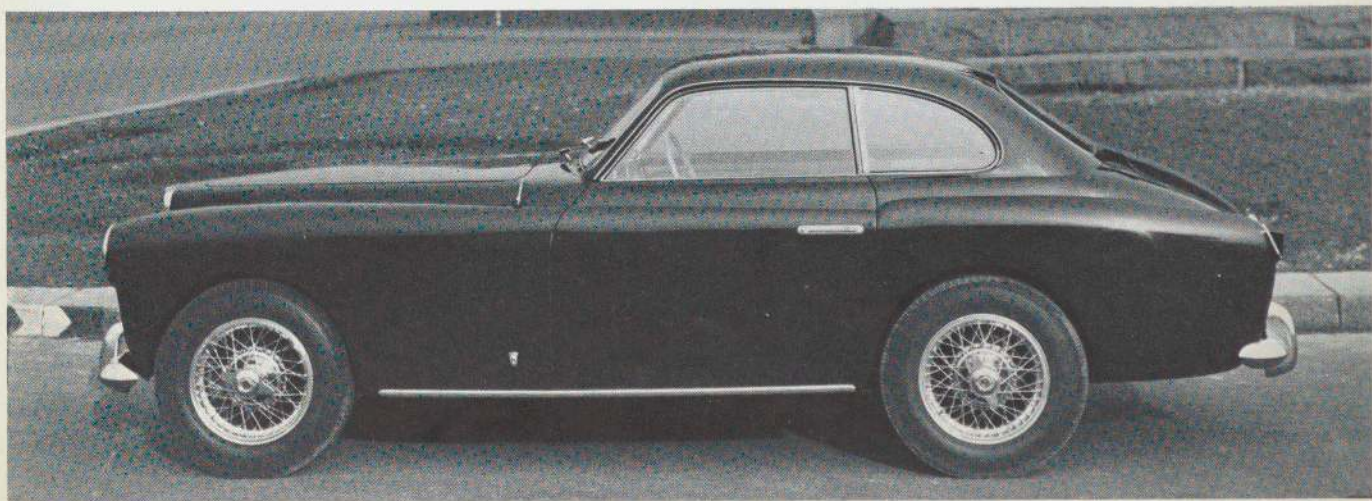




The standard chassis and engine of the popular MG roadster have been equipped with Italian coachwork to produce a car which, unlike its famous racing predecessor, has full weather protection and ample luggage space. The MG's traditional radiator grille has been retained, and may be compared with a similar solution for the SIATA *Daina 1400* (see page 21). The fenders run the length of the car, a transition from front to rear being effected by a slight change in profile occurring at the door. Wire wheels enliven a design otherwise bare of decoration.

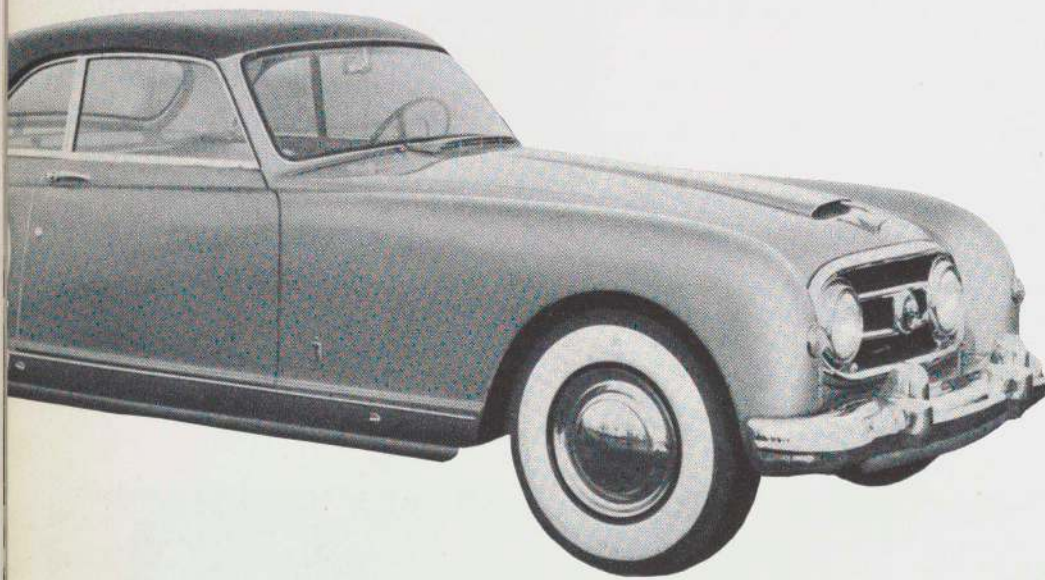


**MG model TD, 1950**  
Manufactured by MG Car Company Ltd., Abingdon-on-Thames, Berkshire, England. Coachwork by Carrozzeria G. Bertone, Turin, Italy.





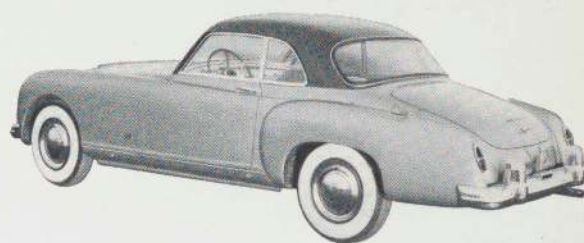
The Nash-Healey, like the Cunningham, employs an American engine and many American stock mechanical components. Designed in Italy to fit a specially constructed chassis, its coachwork recalls details characteristic of other Italian cars. Front fenders are fared back along the sides and seem to disappear into the doors; the radiator grille is a flattened oval incorporating the headlights.



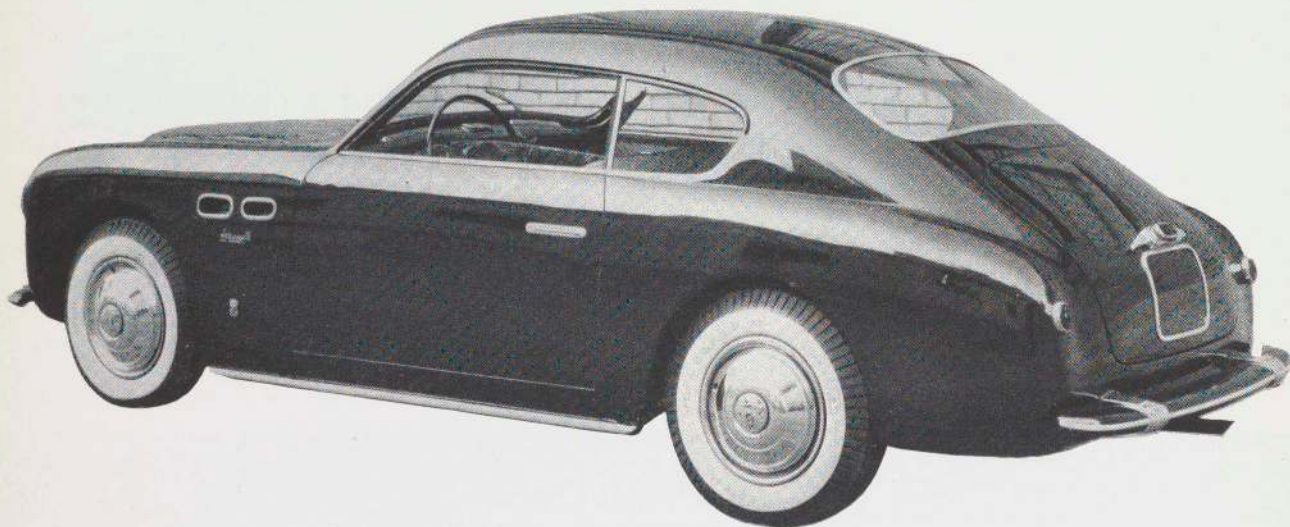
**NASH-HEALEY, 1952**

Manufactured by Nash Kelvinator Corporation, Detroit, Michigan, U.S.A., and the Donald Healey Motor Company, Warwick, England. Coachwork by Carrozzeria Pinin Farina, Turin, Italy.





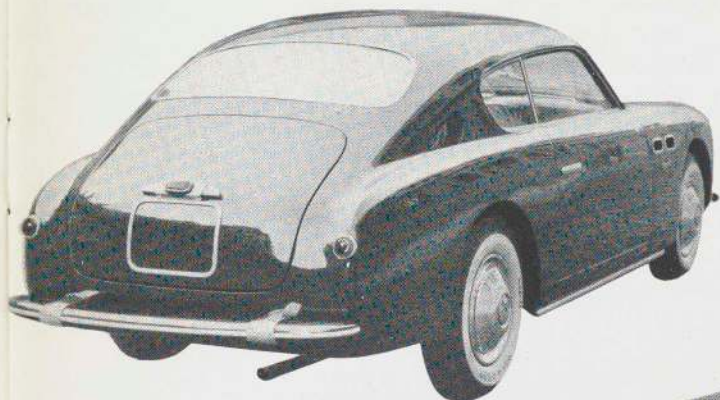




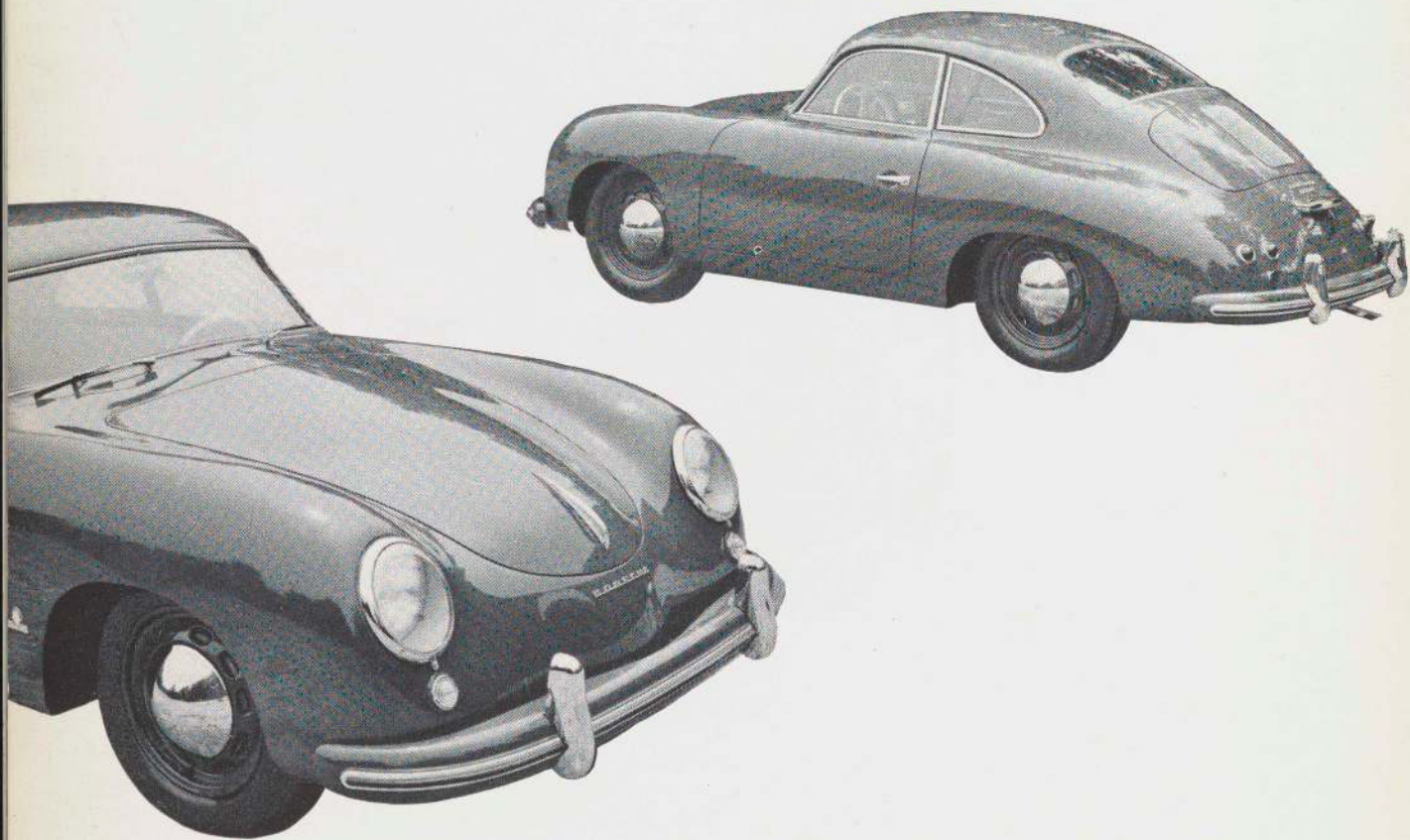
Although it is not an unusually large automobile, the SIATA's compact silhouette recalls the proportions of many American touring cars. However, in the SIATA every detail has been so thoroughly integrated that it is impossible to isolate any single feature as being responsible for the effectiveness of the design. Even a traditional radiator grille retained from earlier models has been made to seem the most appropriate solution. The unusually high placement of the rear window, the angle at which the side window is terminated, the door handle, and the air vents on the front fender, are all details of studied refinement and restraint. The SIATA is one of the most beautiful touring cars produced.

**SIATA Daina 1400, 1951**

Manufactured by Società Italiana Auto Trasformazioni  
Accessori, Turin, Italy. Coachwork by Società Anonima  
Stabilimenti Farina, Turin.







**PORSCHE 1500 Super, 1952**

Manufactured by Ferdinand Porsche Kommandet Gesellschaft, Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen, Germany. Coachwork by Karroserie Reutter, Stuttgart-Zuffenhausen.



An adaptation of the mass-produced Volkswagen, the Porsche also has a rear engine and a flat, tray-like chassis which prevents wind resistance on the underside of the car. Although some of its contours were determined by wind-tunnel experiments, the Porsche's body is designed to express the fact that it is, literally, a lid resting on a tray. The flattened circular openings above the rear wheels are intended to preserve the continuity of this lid, and for the same reason the front hood and fenders are incorporated in one undulating surface.





Consultant on the exhibition: John Wheelock Freeman  
All photographs by Alexandre Georges  
Catalogue design: Arthur Drexler

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The Studebaker Corp., *Studebaker*  
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Nash Motors, *Nash-Healey*  
Hoffman Motor Car Co., Inc., *Porsche*

