

Flaminio Bertoni

Born 1924. Designer of the Citroen DS car.
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1. The Citroen DS as Sculpture



At the 1963 Amsterdam International Autoshow, Citroën presented a DS body as a sculpture, upright like a rocket, on a rotating platform. It created a sensation.

2. The Life of Flaminio Bertoni

The following chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Italy on this Day website at www.italyonthisday.com.



The sculptor and automobile designer Flaminio Bertoni, the creative genius behind the groundbreaking Citroën cars of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, was born in 1903 in what is now the Masnago district of Varese.

Bertoni, who lived in or near Paris from 1931 until his death in 1964, designed bodies for the stylish *Traction Avant* luxury executive car and the enduring workhorse '*Deux Chevaux*' - the 2CV - which became almost a

symbol of France.

Yet both of these were eclipsed, some would say, by the brilliance of Bertoni's aerodynamic, futuristic *Citroën DS* - also known as 'the Goddess' - which was named the most beautiful car of all time by the magazine *Classic and Sports Car* and was described by the Chicago Institute of Design soon after its launch as among the '100 most beautiful things in the world'.

Bertoni was fêted in France, where he was made a Knight of Arts and Letters by the government of Charles de Gaulle in 1961 but

it was not until almost 40 years after his death that his achievements were given recognition in his home country, where his son, Leonardo, set up a museum in Varese to celebrate his work.

Even as a small child, Bertoni's ambitions were clear. He immersed himself in books about his idols, Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, from the age of six.



Bertoni's Citroën DS was named 'the most beautiful car of all time' by the magazine, Classic and Sports Car

Although he would embrace car design with passion, his involvement with the nascent automobile industry came about by accident. Having graduated from technical college in Varese, he was forced by the death of his father to look for a job rather than continue his formal education further.

It just so happened that the first offer of work came from a small car manufacturer in Varese, Carrozzeria Macchi, where he was taken on as a joiner's apprentice. The company soon realised where his true talent lay, however, and within only a few years he was their head draftsman.

His first visit to France came in 1925, when he was invited to Paris following a visit to the Varese factory by some French engineers. Bertoni met André Citroën and was impressed by his energy and forward thinking, yet at that stage wished to make his career in Italy.

Within six years, however, he had decided to make his home in Paris. Having fallen out with Carrozzeria Macchi because his ideas were seen as too advanced, and when his mother made it clear she disapproved of his girlfriend, Giovanna Barcella, the lure of a new life in the sophisticated French capital, which was at the forefront of automotive design at the time, became too much to resist.

When he and Giovanna stepped off the train at Gard de Lyon in October 1931 he had no job and she was already three months' pregnant but everything fell into place the following year. Two months after the birth of his son, whom he would name Leonardo in honour of Da Vinci, he was taken on by Citroën.



Bertoni's iconic 2CV (above) remained in production for 42 years, with sales topping five million.

His first design triumph came in 1934 with the *Traction Avant* - literally 'front wheel drive' - which he presented to the company not as a design on paper but a fully scaled sculpture in plasticine. The car had a lightweight all-metal body and a substantially bigger passenger compartment than was typical. It seemed certain to be a success but its development had been so expensive that the company was bankrupted soon after its launch.

Fortunately, the tyre company Michelin not only came to the rescue of the company but were keen to see the *Traction Avant* project realised. Eventually, 750,000 were sold.

The next few years were difficult for Bertoni. In 1936, dismayed at how little time her husband spent at home - while not working, he was exhibiting his sculptures and drawings and enjoying the Paris nightlife - Giovanna returned to Italy, taking Leonardo with her. After the outbreak of the Second World War, he was twice interned as an alien, although on each occasion he was quickly released. He also spent a year in hospital after a serious motorcycle accident, although he put the time to good use by studying for an architecture degree. Once recovered, he took Citroën's plans for what was originally named the *TPV* - a 'tres petite voiture' to rival the German 'people's car', the Volkswagen - and developed the distinctive bodywork lines that would instantly set apart the fabled *2CV*. Conceived at first as a purely functional vehicle aimed at agricultural workers, it would in time become a French icon. Launched in 1948, it remained in production for 42 years, selling more than five million.



The 1930s luxury saloon the Traction Avant (above) was Bertoni's first major success designing for Citroën

By now married for the second time, to the dancer Lucienne Marodon, he followed the 2CV with a car aimed at a much different market as France recovered from war keen to reconnect with its opulent past. The *Citroën DS* - the letters were a play on the French word '*Déesse*', meaning Goddess - was unveiled at the Paris Motor Show in 1955, where visitors were wowed not only by the beautiful sculpted curves of the car's superstructure but by its hydro-pneumatic suspension, front power disc brakes and power steering. It was hailed as 'a magic carpet ride' and 12,000 orders were placed on the opening day.

Bertoni created one more fine car, the *Ami 6*, and also managed to put his architectural skills into practice in the United States, where a system for building houses designed by Bertoni enabled 1,000 homes to go up in 100 days at a project in St Louis, Missouri.

He frequently exhibited and won prizes for his drawings and sculptures both in Italy and France. The imposing Monument to the Fallen in Varese's Piazza della Repubblica was in part sculpted by Bertoni, working for Enrico Butti.

Bertoni, who always walked with a stick after his motorcycle accident, which left him with one leg shorter than the other, died in Paris in 1964 after suffering a stroke. His second son, Serge, from his marriage to Lucienne Maradon, passed away a few years later, the victim of a road accident.

Leonardo Bertoni, who died in 2015 at the age of 82, campaigned for the last 15 years of his life to see that his father's memory was preserved in his native country, setting up a museum in Varese to celebrate his work. The museum has since closed but the exhibits are now on display at the Museum of Transport at Ranco, about 20km west of Varese on Lake Maggiore.



The Estensi Palace and Gardens in Varese.

3. The Flaminio Bertoni Museum

The following chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from an article by Matteo Licata published in September 2021 on the Medium website at www.medum.com.



1957 DS 19 on display at the Museo Flaminio Bertoni (picture from the Author)

Flaminio Bertoni, who was born in northern Italy but emigrated to Paris by 1931, sought recognition for his artistic endeavors all his life.

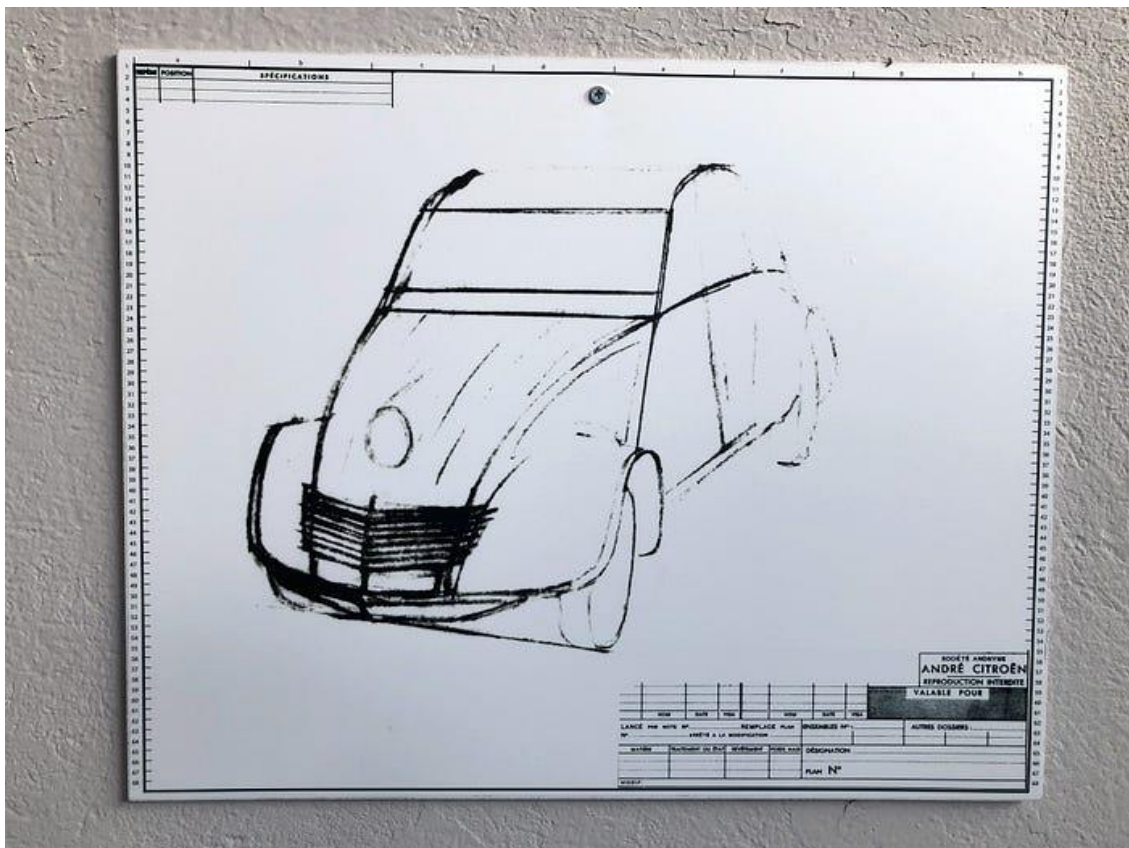
Yet, to this day, he remains pretty much an unknown for everyone except Citroën enthusiasts who, like me, venerate him for having styled the Marque's most iconic models.

The Museo Flaminio Bertoni, hosted within the larger Volandia museum complex, successfully strikes a delicate balance between Bertoni the artist and the industrial designer by

Displaying the cars loaned by the Citroen ‘Conservatoire’ together with several of Bertoni’s sculptures in the same area.

Nowadays, it’s hard to imagine just how sleek, rakish and modern the Citroen Traction Avant looked in 1934, upon its presentation.

Attracted by sculpture since a young age, Bertoni expressed his ideas at Citroën’s “*bureau d’études*” mainly through scale models. His sketches look and feel like the preparatory sketches of a sculptor, quickly fixing his ideas on paper before carving them in three dimensions. Legend has it that Bertoni created the Traction Avant’s shape within a single night of feverish work on a scale model that André Citroën approved the following day.



Sketch from the 2CV's development (picture from the Author)

Nowadays, it's hard to imagine just how sleek, rakish and modern the Citroën Traction Avant looked in 1934, upon its presentation. Thanks to its unibody construction and front-wheel-drive configuration, it sat so low that it didn't need running boards on its sides, which was quite radical for a family saloon at the time.

The Traction on display is perhaps one of the most common models of the range, a post-war 11BL in black. Equipped with a 1911cc inline-four engine, this is a so-called “*Legère*” model, which differs from the regular 11B model by its narrower track and shorter wheelbase.



1947 Traction Avant 11BL (picture from the Author)

The [2CV](#) is instead represented by a Spécial model from 1990, the very last year of production. This is kind of a pity, as I think an earlier model would have been a better fit with the rest of the exhibition. Although much of the 2CV's aesthetic was pretty much defined by its engineering parameters, Bertoni's touch

nevertheless made it look less of a farmer's tool than the original prototypes.



1990 2CV6 Spécial (picture from the Author)

But the elephant in the room, or, perhaps more appropriately, in this case, the shark, is her majesty the DS. Like the Traction Avant it was meant to replace, the DS was the brainchild of chief engineer André Lefebvre, who tasked Bertoni to develop a shape as aerodynamic as a raindrop.



1957 DS19, above (picture from the Author)

That's what led Bertoni to seek inspiration from marine creatures: the DS had no imposing radiator grille but a shallow "mouth" under its finely sculpted front bumper, with "eyes" almost popping out of the smooth body that gently tapers towards the tail, much like a fish.

The DS became an overnight sensation when it was unveiled at the Paris motor show in October 1955, gaining worldwide acclaim as an absolute design masterpiece. However, Bertoni resented not having his contribution publicly recognized by Citroën, which, in keeping with period industry practice, never gave public credit to individuals within its organization. *pretty* is not a word I'd use to describe the Ami6. It has, however, charm and personality by the bucketload.

The black beauty on display is a rare early DS19, still equipped with a plexiglass rear window due to Citroën's supplier having yet to learn how to manufacture such a wraparound, curvy piece of glass. Although later DS models were improved in all areas, these early DSs are the ones that fascinate me the most, as we so rarely see them.

For how much I love classic Citroëns, *pretty* is not a word I'd use to describe the Ami6. It has, however, charm and personality by the bucketload. The model's defining feature certainly is the inverted rear window, which is a clever solution to an apparently insurmountable problem: designing a three-box saloon within the size limitations of the 2CV's chassis.



1957 DS19 (picture from the Author)

Flaminio Bertoni was never fully satisfied with the DS's rear end, which he had to hastily modify in the last stages of development, coming up with these lovely cone-shaped indicator mounts. Funnily enough, this is the part of the car that perhaps changed less over the model's nearly 20 years of production.



1963 Ami6 Berline (picture from the Author)

Coherently with his flamboyant, idiosyncratic character, Flaminio Bertoni's favorite creation wasn't the celebrated DS, though, but the rather baroque and contrived Ami6, presented in 1961.

Within the given length, a more conventional roof design would have severely limited the headroom for the rear passengers, so Bertoni came up with this unmistakable shape. It may not win any beauty contest, but the Ami6 was a cleverly designed car and Bertoni's last one.

Flaminio Bertoni was suddenly killed by a stroke on February the 7th, 1964.

4. Saving the Life of Charles de Gaulle

This chapter by Matteo Licata was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Medium website at www.medium.com.

The Citroen DS was introduced at the Paris 1955 Motor Show (below). It was a revolutionary car that featured many new technologies and improvements, such as the hydro-pneumatic suspension or the later introduced driving lights. The day it was introduced, it made history already because in the first 15 minutes after the introduction of the DS, 743 orders were placed, and a total of 12'000 orders came together at the end of the day. This was a record that stood for over 60 years. By the end of production in 1975, a total of 1.4M units had been produced. The DS was also modified by many french coachbuilders who converted them into station wagons, coupés, convertibles, delivery vans and special limousines.



Four years after the premiere of the Citroën DS, France received a new President. During WWII, General Charles de Gaulle had led the resistance against the Germans. His appeal to the French population, which was broadcast on the British radio station BBC in 1940, brought him great publicity. In 1945 he became President of the provisional government of France. However, after differences of opinion with Social Democratic and Communist politicians and his disapproval of the Constitution of the Fourth Republic, he resigned after only three months. But in 1959, he returned to the presidency and became the leader of the Fifth French Republic.



France's President in the Citroën DS

In addition to the introduction of a new currency and various other reforms, de Gaulle also renewed the government vehicle fleet. He was particularly fond and impressed by the Citroën DS.

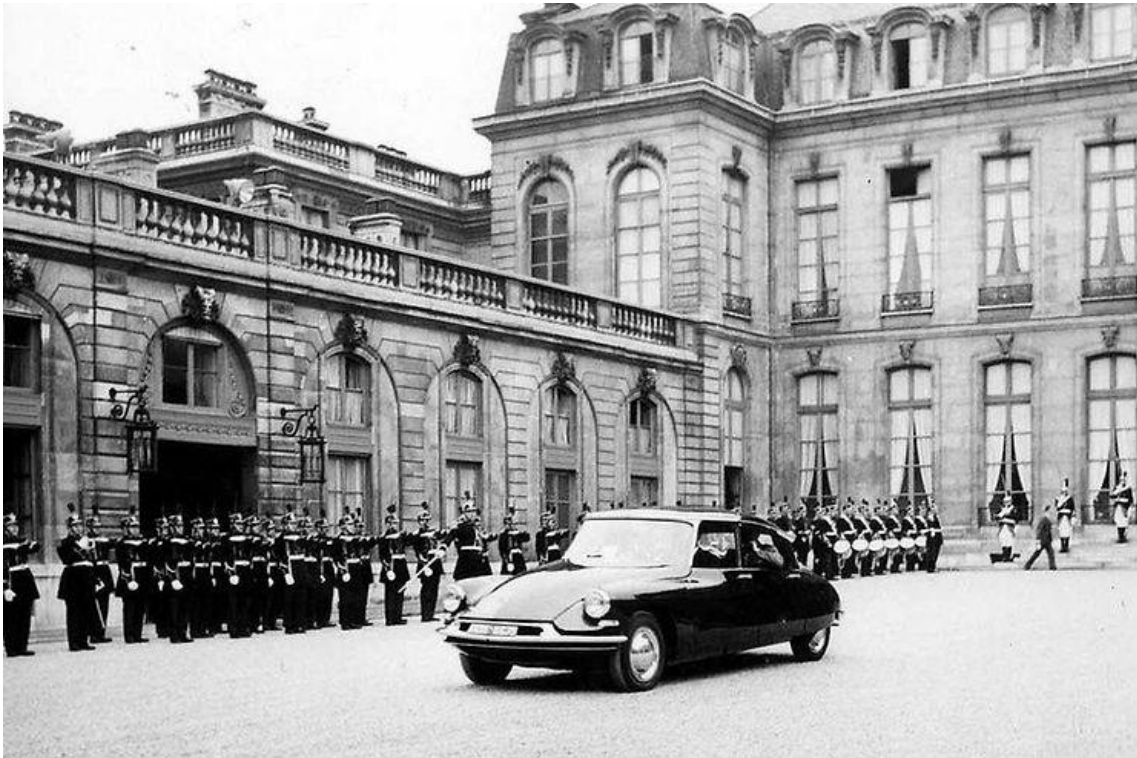
He then commissioned a large number of this model in black from a dealer and friend of his. Consequently, from that point on, the sedan appeared at public appearances by the President and ministerial appointments and trips by members of the parliament.



Citroen DS Parade

Citroën offered the DS Prestige in a chauffeur variant with a partition wall between the cockpit and the rear seats. De Gaulle deliberately decided against this variant for his personal vehicle. He always regarded his chauffeur as a friend with whom he

wanted to talk while driving. In 1961, on his way to Villacoublay military airport, his personal vehicle and the black DS convoy were attacked by terrorists. Fortunately, no one got hurt. De Gaulle was targeted by the Organisation armée secrète (OAS) in retaliation for his initiatives to give Algeria back to the Algerians.



The second assassination attempt at Petit-Clamard near Paris followed in 1962. As his black Citroen DS sped along in Paris at 110kph, 12 OAS gunmen opened fire on the convoy. A hail of 140 bullets, most of them coming from behind, killed two of the president's motorcycle bodyguards, shattered the car's rear window and punctured all four of its tires. The Citroen went into a front-wheel slide, and de Gaulle's chauffeur managed to take control of the vehicle and drove to safety, all thanks to the car's superior suspension system. The suspension automatically adjusted the height of the car to keep it level and enable the chauffeur to maintain control. De Gaulle and his wife kept their

heads down and came out unharmed. De Gaulle commented "Ils tirent comme des cochons" (They shoot like pigs).



Bullet holes in Charles De Gaulle's Citroen DS

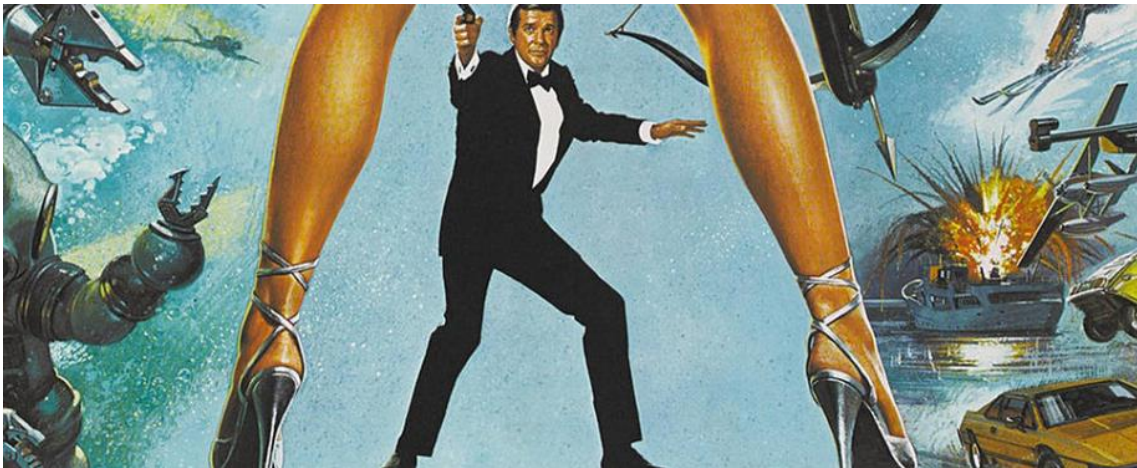
De Gaulle was urged to take safety precautions to protect him and his staff from future assassinations. He eventually had to give in and agreed to modify the DS with bulletproof panels and commissioned a custom-made presidential limousine called the "Présidentielle". This car was built by coachbuilder Chapron and was based on a DS 21. General de Gaulle used this limousine only three times on official occasions and still preferred his normal DS 21. Even when he resigned in 1969 and Georges Pompidou became the new President of France, there were no further appearances by the DS Présidentielle. This was due to the fact that the fashion had changed in the meantime and the body shape seemed old-fashioned even compared to the normal DS.



Citroen DS Présidentielle by Chapron

5. James Bond Escapes in a Citroen 2CV

This chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the James Bond Lifestyle website at www.jamesbondlifestyle.com.



In 1981, the James Bond movie “For Your Eyes Only” had one of the most famous chase scenes (at least for Citroën lovers) featuring a yellow Citroën 2CV.



During the downhill chase the 2CV leaps over the villain’s car.

In the movie, James Bond is assigned to find a missing British vessel, equipped with a weapons encryption device and prevent

it from falling into enemy hands. Near the beginning James (played by Roger Moore) and his soon to be female conquest Melina Havelock (played by Carole Bouquet, below) hop into her 2CV after James' Lotus gets blown to smithereens. The 2CV doesn't let them down — it comes out a bit bruised but still earns itself a place on the movie poster.



Carole Bouquet and Roger Moore.

The car in the film, with license plate M - 1024 - A, is a 2CV 6 Club and is owned by Melina Havelock (played by Carole Bouquet). Bond and Melina have to use the car after Bond's Lotus Esprit has just destroyed itself when some henchmen tried to open it. When the 2CV crashes during the chase and is set on its wheels by helpful bystanders, Bond puts himself behind the wheel of the car ("You don't mind if I drive, do you?") and continues the escape. The 2CV is almost completely destroyed during the chase but makes it safely back to Hotel Bellavista.

The car chase is supposed to take place near Madrid in Spain, but was actually filmed on the island of Corfu, Greece. Bond and Melina are chased through the village of Pagi and the surrounding countryside. The villa of Hector Gonzales can still be visited on the island.

Several 2CV's were used for the filming of the chase scenes. The trailer version that was used at Pinewood Studios is at the Beaulieu National Motor Museum in the UK. At least one of the working 2CV's is owned by Nigel Wild, a car collector who keeps a collection of Citroëns in a church. Another one is in The Netherlands, and one more is at the Conservatoire Citroën in France.

Citroën launched a special edition 2CV 007 edition to coincide with the 2CV product placement in the film. This was a "Jaune Hélios" 2CV 6 Spécial, painted in yellow with 007 and fake bullet hole stickers, seen below.

