



# ITALIANS IN FRENCH COUTURE

Best known for his flamboyant work on French chassis, the Parisian coachbuilder Joseph Figoni also had a fruitful relationship with Alfa-Romeo, thanks in part to his close friendship with Luigi Chinetti. During the 1930s this association resulted in a series of dramatic road, race and record cars. Previewing their new book on the subject, **Peter M Larsen** and **Ben Erickson** survey some of these magnificent Figoni-bodied Italian beauties

Joseph Figoni opened his coachbuilding enterprise in Boulogne-sur-Seine, now Boulogne-Billancourt, outside Paris in 1923. That same year, Alfa-Romeo (the company name was hyphenated in France during this period) established its first French headquarters at 36 rue Marbeuf, a side street just off the Champs-Élysées. Two years later in 1925, Alfa-Romeo had an extraordinary Art Déco edifice built there, designed by the

famed architect Robert Mallet-Stevens and inspired by the striking Tourism Pavilion he had designed for the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. The ground floor showroom was a *tour de force* in Art Déco aesthetics.

Also in 1925, a young mechanic named Luigi Chinetti was working for the factory racing team at Montlhéry. When the team returned to Italy, he stayed in France, not wanting to

return to the home country where Fascism was on the rise. Not long after, Chinetti found himself working for the French Alfa-Romeo subsidiary as well as its main concessionaire, the Garage Mallet in rue la Boétie, doing what he did best: wheeling, dealing, fixing and racing the extraordinary cars the company built.

The Garage Mallet handled a number of marques, and Figoni had already been making bodies and doing repair jobs on various chassis



for them for some time. It was this work that brought Joseph Figoni and Luigi Chinetti together, and the first two elements of a unique constellation fell into place when their business relationship turned into a friendship for life. Years later, after the war, when Chinetti was well-established in the USA, he would always look Joseph up and share a bowl of pasta whenever his travels took him back to France. The third and fourth elements were added 1932 and 1933 when their friendship came to include the legendary drivers Raymond Sommer and Tazio Nuvolari. The masterful 8C 2300 Alfa-Romeo chassis was the fifth. It was an hermetic fusion of talent, creativity, mechanical superiority and sheer dare-devilry.

Luigi Chinetti had sold Raymond Sommer his first eight-cylinder Alfa in 1932, a short-wheelbase Zagato Spider, chassis 2111018. Sommer then ordered a skimpy and very light Le Mans *torpédo* by Figoni that made his car approximately 100kg lighter than the two Touring-bodied lwb works cars against which he was competing in the 1932 Le Mans race. In addition, some Figoni-designed aerodynamic addenda made the car a bit more wind-cheating than the competition. An extra-large tank gave superior range for fewer fuel stops, and the car's handling was possibly slightly improved in relation to the works entries.

As a result, Sommer won the race with Luigi Chinetti as co-driver. It is not an overstatement to say that the rest is history. For Le Mans 1933, the Figoni body was mounted on 8C chassis 2211109 which won once again, now with Sommer and Tazio Nuvolari at the wheel. Nuvolari crossed the finish line a mere 400 yards ahead of Chinetti in another 8C. The two had dived with one another

throughout. In 1934, the Figoni body was fitted, with some modifications, to chassis 2111040 which retired with engine trouble after only 14 laps. Its final appearance was on chassis 2311232 in 1935, which retired after 69 laps. Two more Alfa-Romeo 8Cs ran with Figoni Le Mans *torpédo* bodies in 1933 and 1935.

And so the little-known tale of Joseph Figoni's involvement with Alfa-Romeo France in the early 1930s is indeed the fascinating story of how these men in their magnificent machines came together. How the Figoni shop from 1932 to 1935 became a beehive, buzzing with Alfa Romeo activity, as a *Who's Who* of racing drivers and wealthy patrons came by on a daily basis to oversee progress on their cars, while Luigi Chinetti, via the Garage Mallet, placed orders with Figoni for bodies on Alfa

chassis and had cars fixed, refurbished and reworked. It is a story of fast cars, brave men and the great eight-cylinder supercharged bolides that brought them fame. Yet it is also the story of the beautiful six- and eight-cylinder road cars that Carrosserie Joseph Figoni bodied from 1932 to 1935. ■

Joseph Figoni: Le Grand Couturier de la Carrosserie Automobile, Volume One: Alfa-Romeo by Peter M Larsen and Ben Erickson will be published later this summer. Visit [www.moteurs.dk](http://www.moteurs.dk) for more details; the UK stockist will be [www.hortonsbooks.co.uk](http://www.hortonsbooks.co.uk). A full review will appear in due course.

**1** This 6C 1750, chassis 121215054, was first shown on the Alfa-Romeo stand at the Paris Salon in October, 1933. It was finished in light grey and black and was highly influential on the development of the unique Figoni *faux cabriolet* design that appeared on Delahaye and Talbot chassis in 1936-37. In the summer of 1934, this car appeared at a number of concours d'élegance in the south of France. At Monte Carlo on 5th April it won the *1er Prix*. This image shows the Alfa a week later at the concours d'élégance in Nice where it was presented by Mme Steur, an elegant chaperone in an *haute couture* dress with buttons galore. It deservedly took the *Prix d'Honneur* (Jean-Pierre Cornu)

**2** A happily smiling Joseph Figoni flanked by Tazio Nuvolari and Raymond Sommer after the 1933 Le Mans victory. Figoni's coachbuilding enterprise was a mere 10 years old, yet his work had been on the winning Alfa-Romeo 8C chassis two years running (Archives Claude Figoni)

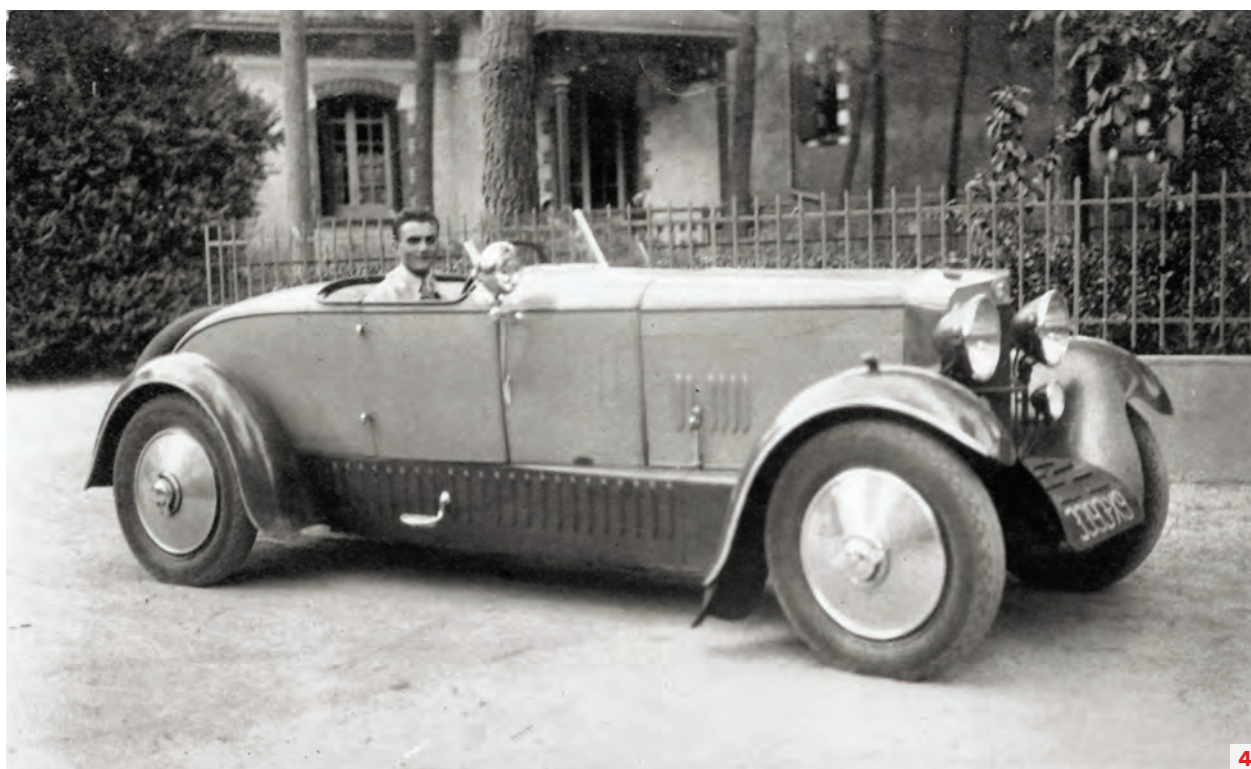
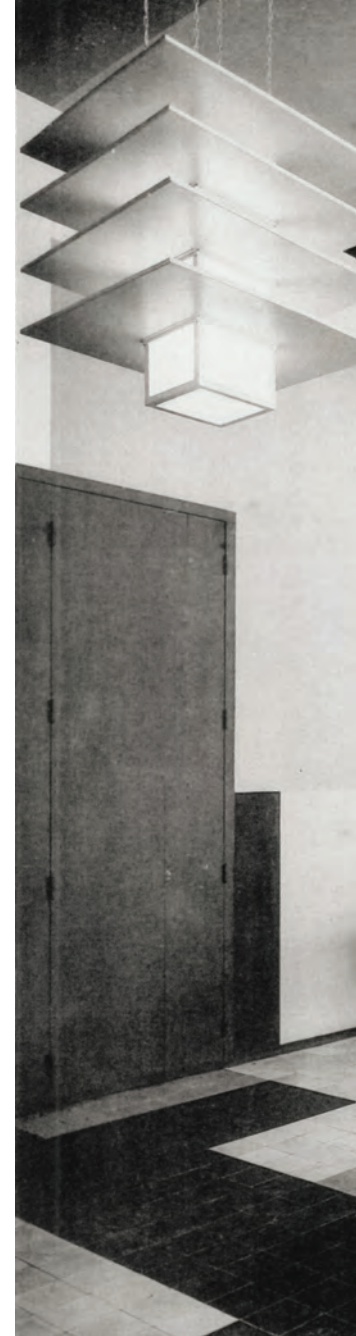




**3** Robert Mallet-Stevens's rebuild of the Alfa-Romeo premises in rue Marbeuf was an exercise in great elegance housed in great simplicity. Note the stylish Art Déco 'blades' on the façade and the equally chic signage (*Federico Ottenziani*)

**4** A dapper Luigi Chinetti in 1928, seated in a well-proportioned Alfa-Romeo RLSS roadster by the coachbuilder Maron-Pot. The car had a *spider* (dickey) and was grey over red with grey pleated leather as well as mahogany woodwork encasing the passenger compartment. The latter was a styling cue also used by Joseph Figoni on Bugatti and Ballot torpédos at the time (*Benoît Bocquet*)

**5** The gorgeous Art Déco Alfa-Romeo showroom was themed with more blades as well as advanced backlighting diffused through pink, red, white and black stained glass created by the famous glass artist Louis Barillet (*Federico Ottenziani*)



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**6** A thoughtful-looking Luigi Chinetti (right) with a happy Raymond Sommer after their 1932 Le Mans victory. The Alfa's Figoni body was a Weymann-type construction covered in Zapon, a faux leather that was popular at the time. The surface was matte when compared to painted metal. The shared accomplishment of Chinetti, Sommer and Joseph Figoni had just catapulted all three to enduring fame (*Motorsport Images, LAT*)

**7** Raymond Sommer and Luigi Chinetti perched on chassis 2111018. The Figoni Le Mans *torpédo* began at the point where the light-coloured beltline of the Zagato body was chopped off and continued down to the chassis rail in a straight slanted line. Note the Spartan tonneau cover over the rear seats and the broken side exhaust. The semi-aerodynamic wings and the extended front radiator cowl were part of the Figoni design (*Benoît Bocquet*)

**8** Englebert milked Sommer's and Chinetti's victory to the bone. Much was made of the fact that 2111018 had travelled the entire winning distance of 2954km without a single tyre change, which was indeed something for the tyre manufacturer to be proud of (*Peter M Larsen*)

**123 kms à l'heure pendant 24 heures .....**

**AU GRAND PRIX D'ENDURANCE DES 24 HEURES DU MANS LE PNEU ENGLEBERT**

**EST 1<sup>er. ABSOLU</sup> à 123 kms. de moyenne totalisant donc 2954 kms AVEC SOMMER-CHINETTI SUR ALFA-ROMEO**

*Sans changer leurs Pneus Englebert*

CHINETTI SOMMER

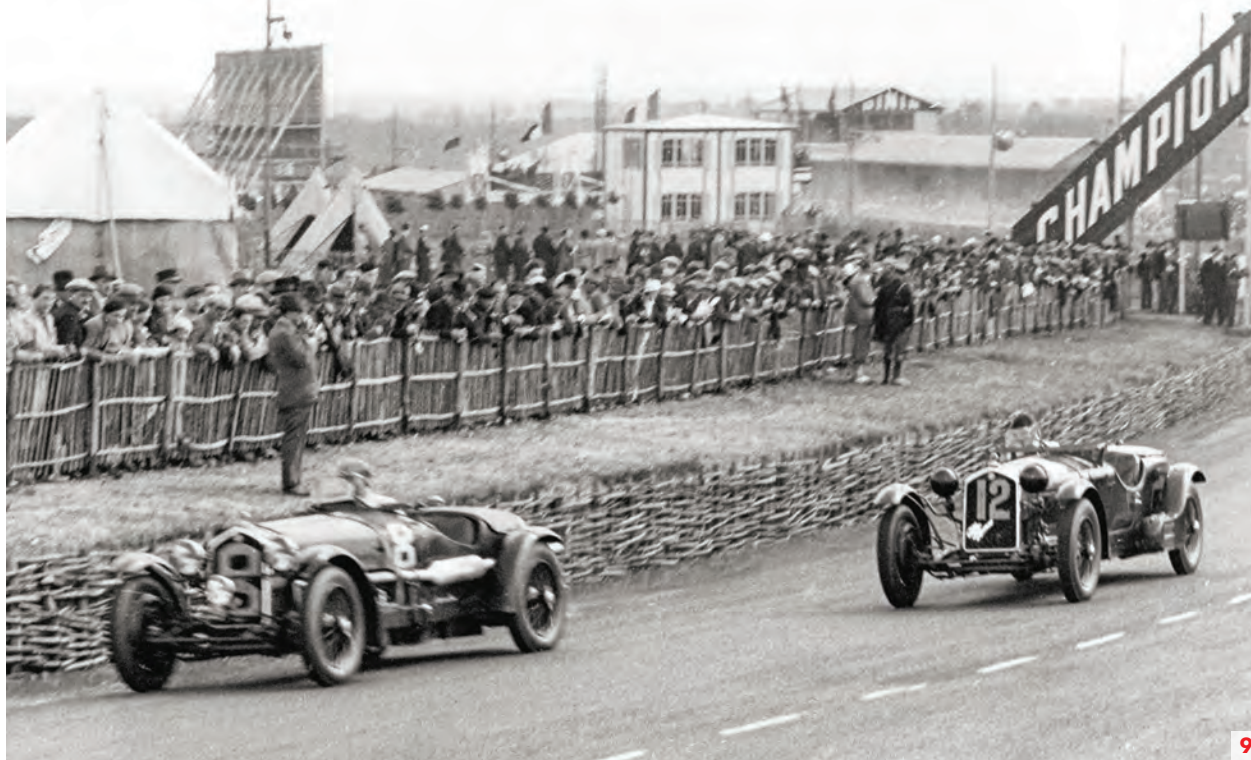
SOMMER au volant de son ALFA victorieuse, en vitesse.

LES VAINQUEURS et LEUR ALFA-ROMEO à l'arrivée.

STÉ FRANÇAISE DU PNEU ENGLEBERT 9, RUE DE DREUX - PARIS

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**9** Chinetti in number eight (chassis number unknown), leading number 12, chassis 2211067, the Touring 8C 2300LM driven by Brian Lewis and Tim Rose-Richards in the 1933 Le Mans race. Chinetti's car had been bodied by Figoni on behalf of Philippe de Guinzbourg, son of an expat Russian industrialist who had settled in France (Motorsport Images, LAT)

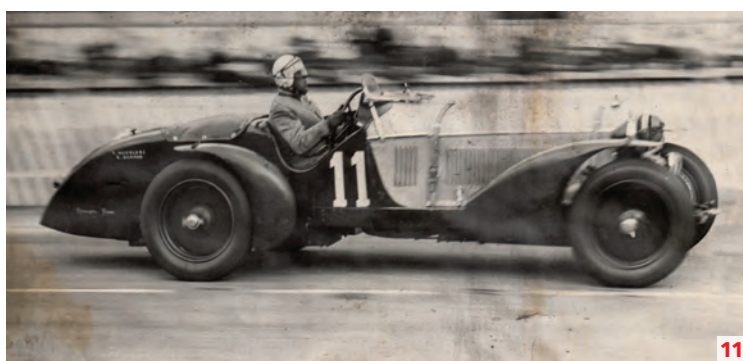
**10** A still-young Luigi Chinetti (seated left) with Philippe de Guinzbourg, who used his *nom de course* Philippe Varent, celebrating their second place result. Chinetti had driven with extraordinary skill and lost to Nuvolari by a matter of seconds (Motorsport Images, LAT)



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**11** Nuvolari took the lead close to the finish line and won the race in 2211109 after 233 laps and 3144.038km. While the 1932 front radiator cowl was not used, as Sommer had mounted that on his 8C Monza (2111042), the clamshell shaped rear profile was identical to that of 2111018 the previous year. Note Nuvolari's and Sommer's names at the top of the rear body overhang and the 'Carrosserie Figoni' script at the bottom (Archives Claude Figoni)

**12** The 8C 2300 by Figoni that is highly likely to have been chassis 2311211. It was shown on 23rd March, 1934, at the concours d'élégance in Cannes by Miss Doris Stouvenaut of Monte Carlo, where it won a first in class award. The car is lost, although parts of it live on in another chassis (Institut Audiovisuel de Monaco)



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**13** Raymond Sommer presenting 8C chassis 2311212, his 1935 Le Mans car, for press and fans. The diagonal cut where the Touring beltline stops clearly demonstrates where Sommer's now well-used Zapon-covered Weymann-type Figoni body was mounted on his donor car; 1935 was the last time this coachwork and its accessories ran at Le Mans (Collection Flavien Marçais)



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**14** Figoni performed repairs and updates on a number of 8C Alfa-Romeos. This included the Hellé Nice Monza, chassis 2311213, which was given a striking colour scheme in two shades of blue. Here is *La Nice* on 24th June, 1935, driving the Monza hard during the Peña Rhin GP, which took place round a street circuit on the Montjuïc mountain in Barcelona. Nice did not finish, while the race was won by Luigi Fagioli in a Mercedes-Benz (Federico Ottenzali)



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**15** In 1935, Chinetti staged two record attempts at Montlhéry using 8C chassis 2211135. Figoni constructed an aerodynamic radiator cowl with no grille. The radiator remained in place and the cowl acted as an extension, much like the one Figoni had created for 2111018 in 1932. The front brakes were dismantled, and three driving lamps fitted. In this group photo taken prior to the start of the first record-breaking attempt on 7th August, 1935, Chinetti is at the wheel. The body was dark as it had been repainted by Figoni, while the light chassis rail reflected the previous colour of 2311235. Note the *quadrifoglio* on the bonnet and the Maserati filler cap on the radiator. Both record attempts failed (Collection Serge Pozzoli)



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**16** Chassis 2311212 ran as number 15 at Le Mans in 1935. The engine stalled on the 69th lap due to fuel problems, and Sommer was forced to retire. The omnipresent illustrator Géo Ham created this emotive sketch of Sommer pushing the car out of the way after it had broken down (Olivier Figoni)

