

# Master designers: The power of visual imagery

By Joe Sage | Photos by Randall Bohl

**F**rom Concept to Collectible, one of three Concours-eve panel discussions held at the Arizona Biltmore on Saturday, January 23, featured two of the automotive world's most visionary designers: J Mays, who made his mark with Audi, Volkswagen and as head of global design for Ford; and Andrea Zagato, chief executive of the Zagato design company of Milano and the third generation of his family to lead Zagato.

**J MAYS** grew up drawing cars in small town Oklahoma. When J was nine years old, his family flew to Kansas City. He had never been anywhere, and was on a jet—traveling with Braniff, which had declared the end of the plain plane. “34 years before Jony Ive made candy-colored iMacs,” Mays recounts, renowned architect Alexander Girard and interiors master Herman Miller had transformed Braniff's planes, while fashion designer Emilio Pucci had developed the uniforms.

The plane was empty, so a Pucci-clad flight attendant led an amazed young J to first class, where he was seated “in a leather chair that must have been eight feet wide”—with a 7-Up in a martini glass with an olive. “I was no longer going to Kansas City,” says Mays today, “but to an alternative universe, where I would be a king, in my leather throne with my 7-Up martini.”

Looking back, he recognizes an epiphany about “the power of communication and visual imagery

and how it sways us all in life, and how much you can increase the pleasure in everyone's life if you can only capture that moment.” A star was born.

J migrated through drafting, architecture, commercial art and journalism studies, ultimately graduating from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena with a degree in transportation design. His career has included watershed designs for Audi, BMW, Volkswagen and Ford.

Mays' dramatic Audi Avus quattro concept at the 1991 Tokyo Motor Show led to “the production version of the Avus,” the Audi TT, which he calls “a Teutonic Bauhaus tribute that resonated and gave Audi a voice as a design brand, different from BMW and Mercedes-Benz.”

Mays and his team developed the Shelby GR-1 for Ford with Carroll Shelby himself, a clear homage to the timeless Daytona Cobra Coupe, tied to the development of the Ford GT supercar, a street-able GT40 racecar for the new millennium.

*Panel attendees preview the Coachwork of Zagato Featured Class on the lawns of the Arizona Biltmore the day before the Arizona Concours.*



He developed a stunning Jaguar F-Type concept (when Jaguar was owned by Ford).

At Volkswagen, Mays penned the Project 1 concept, precursor to the New Beetle. Studies indicating a consumer love for the circle led to the car's shape from the side—and to its simple logo.

Mays believes people purchase a product because they're prepared to spend a portion of their life with it—a similar relationship, especially with cars, to that with a spouse. You fall in love for emotional reasons. You build with respect, trust and reputation. But love is all about mystery, sensuality and intimacy—the things that really get someone to desire another person—or an automobile you've designed.

By a raise of hands, Mays proved that everything from smartphones (Apple) to cars (Ferrari), has one brand that stands apart, emotionally.

Mays says there are ways to get people to love a car. A Mustang is great, but a Mustang with Carroll Shelby standing by it is even better. One driven by Steve McQueen, better still. These backstories create a love affair that completely transcends transportation. Each of these products has a compelling story that people will buy, own and “participate in—it becomes a club.”

Mays revealed his secrets to the audience.

Be true to the brand, differentiated from the competition and meaningful to the customer (a Venn diagram shows this is an elusive zone). Don't be design blind. Don't copy anything. Be unique. Be on the edges or no-one will notice and no-one will covet.

Find the story you want to tell, stay on story, and customers will get the message. Don't add noise that obscures the story. Reduce, reduce, reduce. It is *not* about the customer: be customer-informed, but brand-led. If you know what the brand stands for, you're untouchable.

Don't delegate your enthusiasm.

Just make it magical. If there's no glamor, why pick up the pencil? What's wonderful? What's the gift? What will make them have a better life just by picking up the product?

Mays left us with this final thought: “Nothing gets old faster than ‘new.’” All the more impressive, then, that his work transcends the years.

Anyone who has spent time on the concours lawn or the rally route knows one brand that embodies everything Mays outlined: Zagato. Whether based on Alfa, Aston, Ferrari or any number of other already fine machines, an adaptation by Carrozzeria Zagato creates a standout. Coachwork of Zagato had a featured class at the Concours; and third-generation chief Andrea Zagato and his wife Marella—granddaughter of Renzo Rivolta, founder of ISO Rivolta—were honored guests.

**ANDREA ZAGATO**'s grandfather founded Carrozzeria Zagato in 1919. His father taught him that without coachwork, there is no glamor, no lifestyle, no magic about cars. The reason for a concours is the designer and coachbuilder.

Family companies risk following a pattern: the first generation is founder of the brand; the second generation tries to keep the brand alive; and the third generation destroys the brand. “I didn't want to be responsible for that,” Zagato says.

He studied Zagato's history—atypical aviation origins, always independent, but unusually consistent for an Italian company. They stuck to their story, a fundamental Mays had emphasized.

Zagato points out that Porsche has perfected one model for over 50 years. And the new Fiat 500—“the first successful Fiat in 20 years”—is consistent with what was expected from Fiat.

He recognizes perceived minimal engineering to actually be maximal engineering producing a minimal result, with its own simple rationalist, functionalist beauty. Zagato design achieved this.

Zagato product heritage was consistent: two-door coupés and roadsters. Andrea catalogued past product decades as racing, panoramic, gran turismo, geometrical, limited edition, neoclassic and so on, to current “iconic” models.

His turn at the helm had come at about the same time the Japanese developed lean production methods. Done for efficiency, this also let production lines become flexible. It was now possible to build a special, short-run car in the same line—a huge threat to the existing Zagato model.

While studying the Pebble Beach Concours, Andrea asked why Zagato could not build a new collectible car. “An approach like this could maybe save my father's company,” he reasoned. “Why should only a classic car increase in value?”

The firm had worked with 26 brands over the years—exotic Europeans and volume manufacturers. “The link between these brands and our company goes back to the founders,” he notes.

He started by going to Ferrari. “If your founder worked with my grandfather,” he would say, “why are you not working with me? You are not Mr Enzo Ferrari, but if he accomplished the work with us, you should be able to work with me. And they would say, ‘you're right.’”

Zagato says Ferrari is one of the most difficult brands to work with, and that's where he started, with authorization to do nine one-off 575 GTZs. The car was very successful (and two of those nine were at the Arizona Concours).

This gave him a basis to approach Bentley, who contracted Zagato to build nine Continental GTZs, which were also extremely successful.



J Mays



Andrea Zagato

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Zagato (top photo) and Mays (second photo) mingle on the Concours lawn amid an array of Zagato sheetmetal, such as the 575 GTZ (top), where they discussed their work with characteristic intensity.

Zagato and Alfa Romeo had done more than 50 models together, so just as Sergio Marchionne was buying Chrysler, Andrea made a deal to build the Alfa Romeo TZ3 Zagato based on the Viper.

The Aston Martin V12 Zagato followed very successful DB7 and R1 editions, so for the V12 they built 99. "Nine is a strategic number to me," says Zagato. "In the arts, if you build nine, stay under ten, it increases the value. We use 99 when we want to approach a larger client."

A 2004 Aston Martin DB7 is worth about \$30,000 today, while a 2004 Aston Martin DB7 Zagato recently sold for \$323,659. "The engine is the same. The interior is the same. Only the body is Zagato, but that special body increased the value ten times in ten years," Zagato points out.

A used Ferrari 575 Maranello may run \$50,000, while the Ferrari 575 GTZ has sold for over a million dollars. "This means the 575 GTZ is a collectible, and probably the 575 is not," says Zagato.

Enzo Ferrari used to build 150 cars a year, but now aims for over 20,000 per year. "This for me is very good news," says Zagato, "And Lamborghini is the same. Lamborghini is building 17,000 units, which is more than the entire production since the company started. Bentley, the same. With the Continental GT, the most successful Bentley ever, production has gone to 35,000, where it had been 200 per year. So this is the basic idea."

In 2000, Zagato changed from an assembly company to a three-unit total design center.

Zagato Oltre includes Scuderia Sports historic racing, and a lifestyle group creating such items as shoes, watches or a special Leica camera.

Zagato Atelier Classic builds Zagato cars that have been lost, using computer measurements from old photos—these are not reproductions, so they do not affect the owner of an original car. Examples include a Lancia Aprilia Sport Zagato and a Porsche 356 Carrera Zagato Coupé.

Atelier Contemporary is working on a Fiat 500 Coupé Zagato and a BMW Coupé Zagato. A Thunder Power electric car project for China includes car, logo, website and more—"one of the most interesting jobs," he says. Zagato has begun work on a car so autonomous it does not have a driver or even a steering wheel, to be presented at the 2020 Expo in Masdar City, Abu Dhabi. Watch also for a Mostro Barchetta Zagato powered by Maserati, as well as a Baby Mostro, and an Abarth Zagato in conjunction with Fiat.

The future looks very bright. We would say Andrea Zagato has indeed figured out how to keep the company alive—and thriving. ■



(L) J Mays, (R) Andrea Zagato.



Photos: Joe Sage (2)