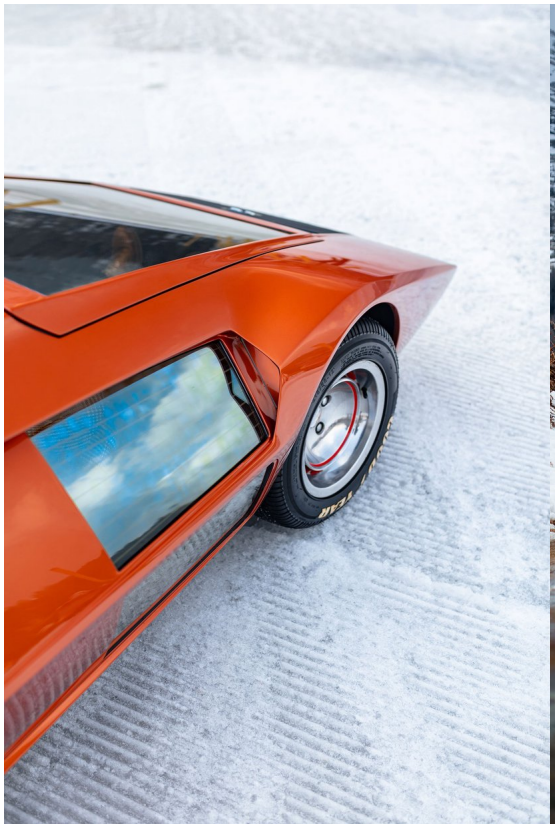
Keeping it sub-zero cool with the original Lancia Stratos Concept

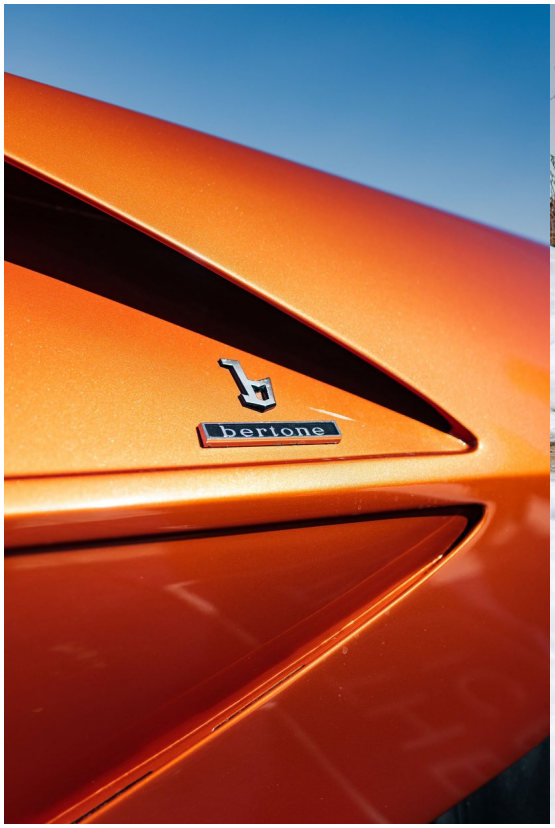
Lead
Designed by Marcello Gandini, the grandmaster of wedge design, the Lancia Stratos Zero concept car stunned the world when it was first unveiled in 1970. Last weekend, the mythical showcar truly lived up to its name when it descended for a sub-zero appearance on the frozen lake of St Moritz.



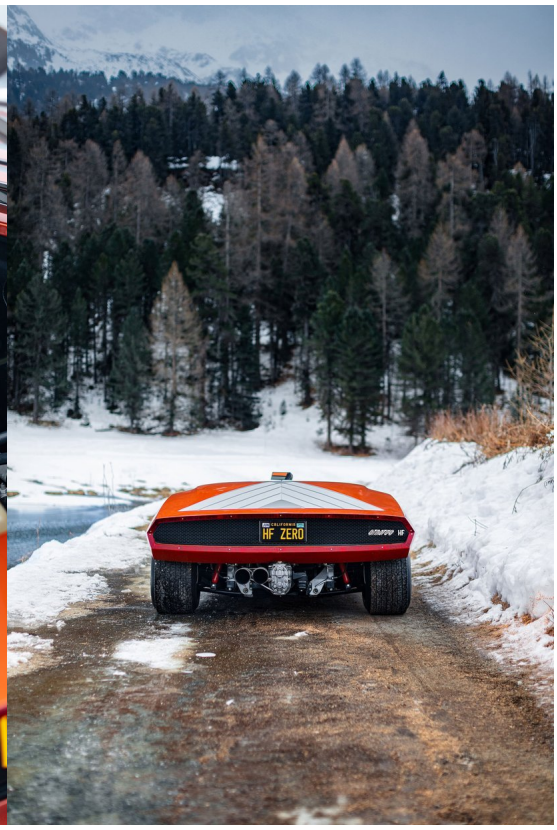
There’s a lot of talk about unknown objects travelling the stratosphere right now, but despite its out-of-this-world appearance we can assure you that this wedge-shaped vehicle on ice is neither a high-tech spying device, a weather balloon or a UFO from outer space. Still, we like to imagine that the crowds at the 1970 Turin Auto Show must have marvelled at the car with the same amazement as the ape people that surrounded the black monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 cult sci-fi movie ‘2001: A Space Oddissey’. After all, the futuristic concept car appeared to be made from a solid piece of metal, it was as flat as a flying saucer and so futuristically shaped that it could have just arrived from outside the solar system.

In fact, the mission of Bertone’s ‘Progetto Zero’ had been to reinvent the Lancia brand and surprise the manufacturer’s managers with a dramatic follow-up concept to the cars that had started the wedge movement in automotive design: the Alfa Romeo Carabo that had been designed by Marcello Gandini for Bertone in 1968 and the Ferrari Modulo that had been created by Paolo Martin at Pininfarina and unveiled at Geneva in spring 1970. When this Lancia was unveiled in Turin, the car was officially labelled “Stratos HF.” Nuccio Bertone had initially wanted to call it Stratolimite, as in ‘limit of the stratosphere’, clearly inspired by its space-age design and the general fascination around interstellar travel at the time. However, it came to be known simply by its internal nickname: Zero.

It is said that Nuccio Bertone personally drove the showcar on public roads when he went to meet Lancia’s top brass a few months earlier to discuss a more realistic sports car project which eventually became the Stratos Stradale. Although the production Stratos did not bear much resemblance to Marcello Gandini’s dream, its role in reinventing the Lancia brand through its success in rally racing cannot be understated. Even so, the Stratos Zero has to be considered one of the most impressive creations in the history of the automobile.



Last weekend, the Lancia Stratos Zero caused more than a stir when it made a sub-zero appearance at The ICE St Moritz. Its owner, the Californian car collector Philip Sarofim, even took the concept car for a couple of laps around the ice track on the frozen lake – we will certainly not forget the sight of the orange wedge racing across the ice in front of the alpine peaks anytime soon. After all, putting a one-off concept car with fragile mechanics, non-existent ground clearance and an overall height of only 84 centimetres onto a frozen lake already qualifies for the stunt of the year. In the end, Philip rightfully claimed this year’s Best of Show trophy for daring to bring the game-changing concept car to the Alps.



We at Classic Driver have had the pleasure of seeing the Stratos Zero in the flesh a couple of times after it was sold at RM Sotheby's in 2011. In 2018, the Stratos Zero stunned spectators and judges alike at the Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este. Shortly after, Philip Sarofim gave us and photographer Kevin van Campenhout the opportunity for a rendezvous with the wonderful wedge in the South of France. Now, on the Sunday morning after the ICE, we and Kevin had the chance for another tête-à-tête with the Zero, this time shooting it in freezing temperatures in the stunning setting of the Swiss Alps. Sometimes, even the wildest dreams can come true!

Photos: Kevin van Campenhout

Gallery

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