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## *Silver Cloud*

### **Fulvio Ferrari**

Post-war Italy spared no energy in achieving a better, more 'modern' standard of living. It was at that time that a flexible new commercial channel for promoting all types of goods arrived, in the shape of the advertising motor vehicle. This 'dynamic' brainwave, which drew on the tradition of theatre carriages and those used for village festivals, proved such a success that the 1951 Fiera del Levante trade fair in Bari held a competition for these vehicles. It was won by architects Franco Campo and Carlo Graffi, who had been commissioned by Società del Liquegas to design a mobile booth vehicle. This was certainly the most effective way of reaching country consumers on their own home ground the village square - to promote the new fuel. Gas was able to replace the still widespread use of wood by offering obvious advantages in terms of time and avoiding the troublesome aspects of smoke, and could compete with electricity in terms of price. The "Fire Carriage" looked like a giant beetle, and contained a colourful booth. The designers commented on it: "... during the day the aluminium profile races by, transparent and fast, while its bright lights at night enter the cities and villages, offering passers-by the excitement and surprise of something new".<sup>1</sup>

A couple of years later Agip-Gas also commissioned Campo, Graffi and Mollino a similar vehicle.<sup>2</sup> A Macchi chassis, which left the entire floor-plan free, was mounted to a large steel-bar construction plated with sheet metal.<sup>3</sup> Both sides of the vehicle were fitted with five large slanting windows made of special VIS safety glass, "applied for the first time on an industrial vehicle" the designers pointed out. The driving area-cum-lounge-cum-office-cum-radio room and the bottom-hinged rear end containing the access the steps also had large VIS windshields of an unusual flat, elliptical shape. The roof was also made of glass, and the floor was covered in linoleum. Together with the customary two seats for the drivers, there were also three specially designed armchairs upholstered in plastic material and fastened to the floor. They constituted the lounge-cum-office, complete with a typewriter fixed to a coloured masonite top. The design drawing also included a small table and two armchairs in curved plywood, which would tempt any collector nowadays, but which in fact were never made. "Nube d'Argento" came complete with a radio, two LESA record players and four external loudspeakers. Along with advertising posters, photographs, and graphic designs, the interior also contained 'a real-life' kitchen with a cooker and hood, a bath tub and water heater, a lounge with radiators and air extractors, as well as a garden light. The vehicle towed a single-axle, GT-style luggage trailer that contained advertising material, batteries and materials for mounting a two pitch canopy held up by a wing which consisted of a pair of 9-metre, lightweight Duralumin grid trellises braced by guy lines. This contained a sort of book, whose 14 large pages - which were normally packed together on the rear platform - unfolded for presentations, opening up like a fan to illustrate the possible uses of gas with the aid of photographs, diagrams and drawings. AGIP definitively discontinued the "Nube d'Argento" in the 1990s, but in 1965 and '66 the company assigned the vehicle - stripped of its interior advertising set-up and no longer employed for its

original function - to Editoriale Domus, that used it for a traveling exhibition of 800 model cars, organised by *Ruoteclassiche* magazine. A recent article<sup>4</sup> reveals how the exhibition attracted about a million visitors, confirming the virtues of the project, the reliability of the vehicle and the effectiveness of a means of communication invented during the 'naive' 50s.

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<sup>1</sup> *Franco Campo and Carlo Graffi, architects, Carro di fuoco, "Domus", November 1951, pp. 35-41.*

<sup>2</sup> It was registered in 1954, with number plate "Roma 206783".

<sup>3</sup> The vehicle was 10.3 metres long, 2.5 metres wide and 3.1 metres high.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. Domus, "Ruoteclassiche", September 2005.