



1939 Lancia Astura Ministeriale Convertible Sedan, Pinin Farina

Owner: Behring Museum, Danville, California

L A N C I A

Lancia the unlucky he was frequently called, but that was only during his racing days—and, in truth, it was not so much that Vincenzo Lancia was unlucky but that the cars he was racing were not up to the strain he inflicted upon them. When he turned to making cars of his own, which even he couldn't break, Lancia's luck changed. As a race driver, Vincenzo Lancia was spectacular; as an automobile manufacturer, he was magnificent. In 1906 he set up *Fabbrica Automobili Lancia e Cia* in Turin; in 1910 he hung up his driving gloves to devote the rest of his life to automobile engineering. And what an engineer he was.

It was while cruising on the high seas shortly after the Armistice that Vincenzo Lancia first got the idea that would make his name immortal in automobile annals. Noting how a ship's hull so effectively handled buffeting by the ocean's prodigious forces set him to thinking about the comparative archaism of motorcar construction, based as it was still on principles set down during the horse-

drawn carriage era. Naval design made eminently more sense. Lancia patented his stressed-hull concept in 1919—and pioneered unitary construction. The same car carried independent front suspension. The first prototype was road tested in September 1921, officially unveiled at the Paris and London automobile shows in the fall of 1922, in full production by early 1923. Lancia called the model the Lambda, carrying on the tradition of Greek letter names he had begun with his first Alpha of 1907. There tradition ended. The Lambda was both revolutionary and prophetic, one of the landmark automobiles in world history. Through 1931, in nine series, 12,530 Lambdas were produced.

Its successors were two, one of them seen here: the Astura (Latin place-names having replaced Greek letters in Lancia designations by now). Vincenzo Lancia introduced this model in November 1931 and thereafter turned his engineering acumen to smaller light automobiles which he believed, sooner than most

European manufacturers, would allow his company to better withstand the buffeting of the Great Depression. The Astura was an unabashed luxury car. That this model became a favorite of Benito Mussolini probably didn't appeal to Vincenzo Lancia much. He didn't suffer buffoonish poseurs gladly. That the Astura proved a favorite of the Italian coachbuilding industry—and particularly to the inventive Battista Farina, who had been nicknamed the diminutive "Pinin" as a child—was more to his liking.

Sadly, Vincenzo Lancia was dead—at fifty-six, at the height of his creative powers—by the time the Behring Museum Astura Ministeriale was delivered to *Il Duce*. Its compact V-8 engine, with cylinders set at 17.5 degrees, developed 82 hp, sufficient to propel this lengthy parade car 75+ mph. The roof was heavily padded, the rear seat upholstered in deep rolls of leather. In supreme comfort, Mussolini traveled in this car until . . . Fortunately, this Astura didn't suffer the same ignoble fate. It was barn stored for awhile, then saw service as a taxi on Capri. Today it rests in the Behring Museum as an enduring monument to the genius that was Lancia.