

*The Chrysler Glorias*

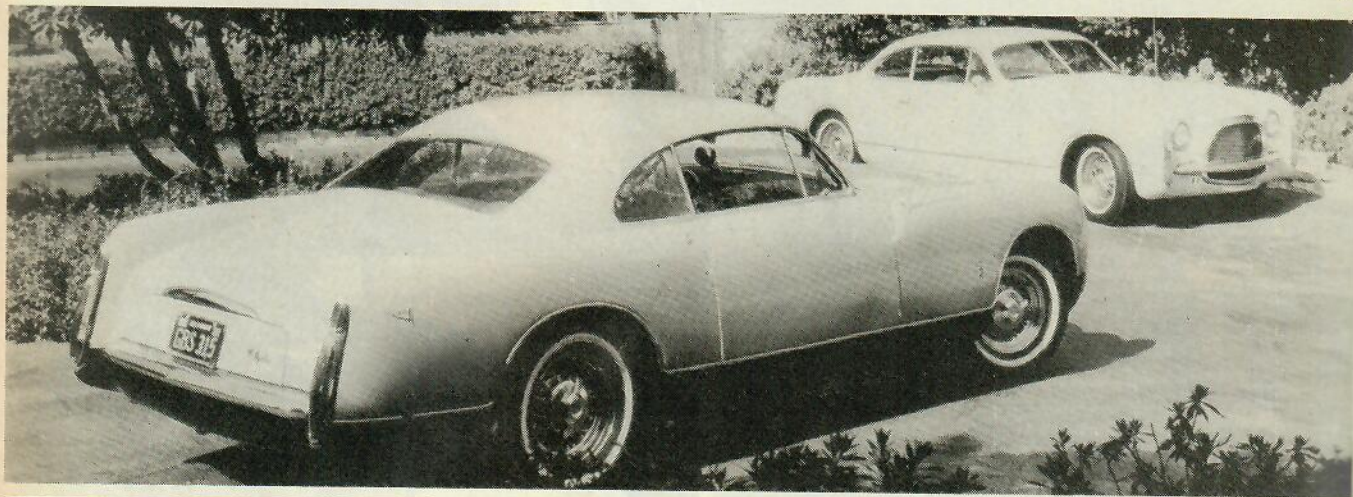




1952 - 1953

# The Chrysler Ghias

## Crossing the line between concept and reality



By Dennis Adler

*"Our cars are not of the future, but new idea cars exploring excitingly new workable areas of styling and design."* So Virgil Exner said in 1949, of his plans to build running prototypes for Chrysler, in cooperation with Ghia in Turino, Italy. A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court? Indeed, a Chrysler designed in Detroit by Exner and his staff, and built in Italy by Ghia. Between 1950 and 1953 this event took place numerous times at the behest of Exner and Chrysler president K. T. Keller.

While General Motors' and Ford's *show car* programs in the early '50s were heading off in myriad directions, laced with overtones of Buck Rogers, Chrysler was approaching the future of automobile styling in a more refined, if not less flamboyant way. In the case of the Ghia cars, what Virgil Exner designed, Carrozzeria Ghia built, and Chrysler exhibited in both foreign and domestic auto shows. Each of the Ghias was more than just a styling exercise, actually, a completely finished production quality automobile, which ultimately led to their public sale, rather than the traditional mothballing.

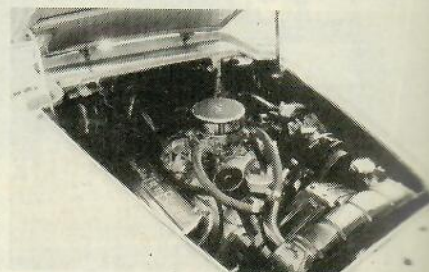
The first Exner designed Chrysler Ghia was built in 1951 in Turin, on a 125½-inch wheelbase Chrysler Saratoga chassis. The completed all steel-bodied car was shown to Chrysler brass on November 2, 1951. Named the K-310 (and you thought the K-Car was new

...) after Chrysler president K. T. Keller, the first Ghia was quickly followed by a second version, the C-200 convertible, which was publicly debuted on April 2, 1952 during the Parade of Stars Auto Show held at the Waldorf-Astoria. The public response to the car was what Chrysler had hoped for, and a third series of Exner designed and Ghia built "idea" cars was already under way.

While the actual production dates are sketchy, 1952 and '53 Ghia cars emerged with the name *Chrysler Special*. These would become the "third" product of the Chrysler-Ghia program, and by far, the most production-like in design and appearance.

Within a year's span, two versions of the Chrysler Specials were shown, a short wheelbase fastback and a longer wheelbase sports coupe. By virtue of their serial numbers, the fastback was built first, using a shortened 119-inch wheelbase New Yorker chassis. The sports coupe was built on the full size 125½ inch wheelbase chassis. Both cars shared a similarity in overall design, differing slightly in front and rear end treatments. Both were powered by the 331 cu. in. Chrysler Hemi V8, which provided a plentiful 180 hp, directed to the ground through a 2-speed Power-Flite transmission in the '53 sports coupe, and a Fluid-torque automatic in the earlier '52 fastback.

Aside from the truncated wheelbase, the major difference between the Chrysler Specials was roofline and trunk designs. The fastback actually



had no exterior trunk, with access to the storage area provided from inside the car. The spare tire, jackstand and handle were secreted in the lower section of the rear deck, behind a panel that hydraulically lowered from the back of the car, exposing the items on a pull-out shelf! The spare for the sports coupe was retrieved less dramatically, being mounted upright in one corner of the large trunk.

Both of the "Specials" originally were designed by Exner in his basement and built as quarter scale models, which were then sent on to Ghia. The project that resulted in these two cars was not actually sponsored by Chrysler engineering, as had been the two earlier Ghia models; rather, this third, and most successful series, was ordered by





C. B. Thomas, Chrysler's Export Division president. The ties to Thomas were so close, that the first long wheelbase car Ghia built was nicknamed the *Thomas Special*.

In designing the Ghias, Exner had requested that each be built out of steel, rather than aluminum, as was the practice with nearly all the Italian coach-builders. This was the case with one exception, the '52 Chrysler Special fastback, which oddly has steel front fenders, and aluminum throughout the rest of the bodywork!

There must certainly have been some interbreeding of thoughts between Exner, Ghia and others unknown, since there are some distinct similarities between the Exner designed Chrysler Ghias and several other cars which saw the light of mass production in the years soon afterward. Not the least, but certainly the most obvious, was the Karmann Ghia, which from the cowl rearward holds a striking resemblance to the fastback Chrysler Special. Virgil Exner Jr., said no less when asked if he thought the Karmann Ghia was similar to the Chrysler designed by his father. He replied that it was exact!

The sports coupe or notchback Ghia was the larger of the two Specials, and was built on a 125½-inch wheelbase New Yorker chassis. (Although the actual number is not known, more than one of each Chrysler Special was built, but no more than a handful in total).

With the Ghias, Exner excelled in the expression of motion through long flow-

ing lines. The sports coupe was less than five feet high, yet nearly 17 feet in length. The wide, low stance gave it an almost "chopped" appearance, combined with the fully exposed 15-inch wire wheels and abbreviated front and rear overhang. Exner used a single chrome strip running the entire length of the car to "cut" the body line 10 inches above the rocker panels, accentuating the lower portion with a darker paint scheme. A press release from Chrysler made note of the two-tone paint and the distinct separation of the upper and lower body lines by saying, "... it accents the car's road-hugging appearance by both directing attention to the lower portions of the body and by creating the impression of an exposed racing car chassis."

This third Ghia model, released in 1953, suggested the most practical approaches to a production version. The lines of the car were kept clean and razor edged, in keeping with the Italian influence Exner was known to favor. A key feature of the design was in the rear deck which slopes gracefully down inside the rear fender line, terminating in a bumper bar, set into the body at the lower trim line. This rear quarter design, particularly that of the fastback version, appeared on several European marques dating after the Chryslers.

In an era that was laden ... no ... overburdened, with chrome and similar affectations, the Ghias were noticeably barren of excessive trim, carrying out a theme of functionality that was apart

from their contemporaries at Ford and GM.

The interior concept was similarly straightforward and functional. The front seats, upholstered in leather, had seatbacks split 60/40 for easier rear seat passenger entry and exit. The instrument panel was safety cushioned, (a feature pioneered in the '40s by Dutch Darrin), and the interior door panels were padded and finished in leather. Instrumentation consisted of two large pods, on either side of the steering column, one containing speedometer and odometer, calibrated in Kilometers per hour, and a conventional ammeter, oil pressure, fuel and coolant temperature gauge in the other.

Today, both of these Chrysler Specials make their home in Southern California. The sports coupe is owned by Joel Shapiro, the fastback by Bob Frumkin, both members of the Chrysler Owners Club. The sports coupe is possibly the original Thomas Special, although there is no documentation. In 1953 this car was sold by Chrysler to horseracing great Johnny Longden. The fact that these cars were sold rather than stored or crushed, as is often the fate of "idea" cars, adds support to the theory that the Chrysler Ghias were more than just styling ideas. Each of them was distinctly more relevant to "real world" thinking than other futuristic models of the era, and in their limited production, the Chrysler Specials came closer to crossing that line between concept and reality. CC



**CHRYSLER SPECIAL.**  
 "the New Beauty and Grace of the  
 New "Idea" Sports Coupe, is acknowledged by press and public  
 as the Sensation of the Show."

wrote an American visitor to the 39th  
 Annual Automobile Salon in Paris.



**THE NEWEST** Chrysler Corporation advance in motor car development, the Chrysler Special, foreshadows many styling and engineering innovations which are already reflected in the new Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto and Chrysler cars.

**CREATION** of new "idea" cars of this type enables Chrysler Corporation "to keep out in front" in automotive research because the finished models allow engineers and stylists to actually test their theories of design on the road. *Note* wire wheels—first reintroduced to American motoring public on the Chrysler K-310.

**KEYNOTING** this new Chrysler creation is the meticulous attention to fundamentals. It has characteristically low sweeping lines in the continental mode. It has a sleek, safe, *LOW HOOD SILHOUETTE* which has also been fused into the 1933 Chrysler Corporation motor cars.

**STANDING 55"** high, it is built on a modified 125½" Chrysler chassis, and is 214" in overall length. Its poised and fleet appearance is enhanced by a new type of two-toning which carries a dark color along the lower 10" of the "Special's" body.



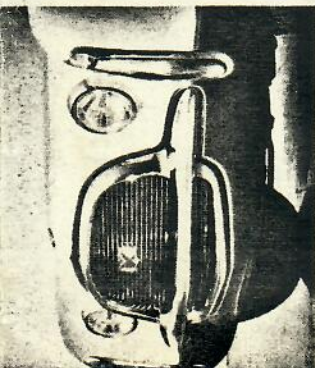
# the Chrysler

## "SPECIAL"



THE NEW "IDEA"

# Sports Car



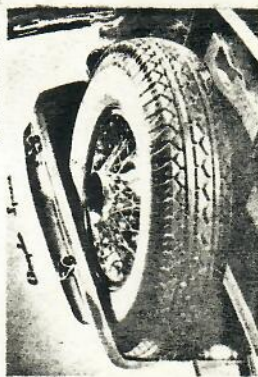
Integral grille and bumper unit . . . hydraulic bumpers set vertically into both front and rear fenders . . . door latch and lock are set behind door under rear side window so as to not interfere with driver . . . to open from inside, you simply press button on the dashboard—to open from the outside, you press button under rear side window . . . a new innovation is the spare tire access door in the lower deck which is "let down" hydraulically from the interior control allowing spare wheel to roll out for easy handling . . . the ultimate

## Fashion Highlights

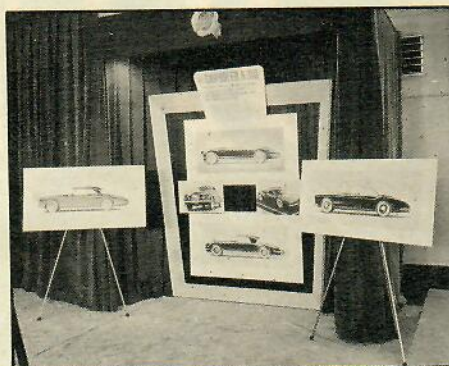
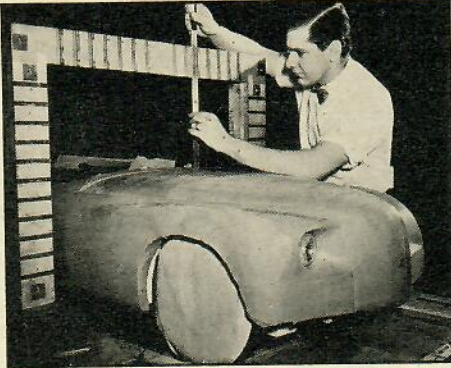
in interior decor in a sports car . . . smart in green and beige leather. Safe with easy access to all controls and the safety cushion dash.

**MECHANICAL HIGHLIGHTS**—powered by Chrysler's famous FirePower V-8 hemispherical combustion chamber engine . . . power brakes, a feature first introduced on American passenger cars by Chrysler Corporation . . . and *full-time* power steering—another Chrysler Corporation first, and still an exclusive feature of Chrysler Corporation cars.

LITHO IN U.S.A.







The K-310 was Exner's first Ghia showcar, built on a long, conventional New Yorker chassis. The original clay model was  $\frac{3}{8}$  scale. Ghia craftsmen built the all-steel body with Ex's bold grille and stand-up taillights, which later influenced Imperials. Posh all-leather interior easily accommodated five. The K-310 toured MoPar dealerships in 1951 and 1952, drumming up much needed business.

modelers, and about four or five designers taken from what used to be Chrysler's Art and Color Section, along with some new recruits." Among these were Maury Baldwin and Cliff Voss, who would both enjoy long tenure at Chrysler. Exner also worked with Paul Farago, who had a specialty sports car shop near Detroit. Said Virgil, Jr., "Farago was also a very good seat-of-the-pants engineer, and [was] in on many of the experiments."

The first Exner special was the K-310, the "K" being for Keller (Ex was no dummy), the "310" ostensibly for its horsepower (though Chrysler claimed only 180bhp from its V-8 hemi at the time). A hunkered-down blue-and-black coupe with a big egg-crate grille and "gunsight" tail lamps, it prefigured in detail Exner's handsome '54 Imperial parade phaeton and the production

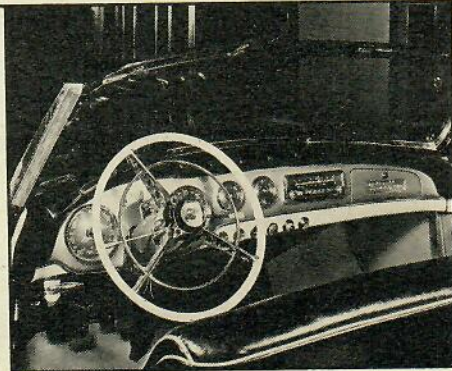
1955 Imperials. The K-310, and a follow-up convertible called C-200, toured Chrysler showrooms, proving to the public that there really *were* enthusiasts at MoPar after all. The Ghias were tremendous sales helpers for dealers during 1951-52 — and they needed all the help they could get.

These early specials set many standards, which Exner would maintain. He insisted that they all be designed as practical road-going automobiles, not simply static showcars like many GM Motorama specials. With one or two exceptions, all were fully engineered to be mass-produced if necessary. They were also mainly of steel construction, though the Italians preferred aluminum. "We didn't think it would hold up," Virgil, Jr. commented. In general too, the Ghia specials displayed Exner's styling philosophy: open wheels, bold

front ends with hefty grillwork, "definition" at the rear through such components as the gunsight tail lamps or the spare tire imprint on the deck (nicknamed "the toilet seat" by detractors).

The next two Chrysler-Ghias are the two cars we feature here in color, both called "S.S." (Styling Special). Unlike the K-310 and C-200, which have disappeared, these were located years ago and carefully restored by Bob Frumkin in California.

The fastback was built in 1952 on a chopped (119-inch wheelbase) New Yorker chassis using the stock 180bhp hemi coupled to Fluid-Torque transmission. Because the Italians had problems with the complex curvature of the fenders, those components were rendered in aluminum instead of the usual steel. The notchback, built in 1953, had a conventional (125½-inch wheel-



The C-200 was a convertible follow-up to the K-310, initially painted Jade green and black. It is seen here being loaded on a van for Detroit after its arrival at New York's West Side dock area (some other interesting collector cars in the parking lot!) Bejeweled dash featured a speedo in mph (uncommon on Ghias) and a left-hand tacho registering counter-clockwise. The Yugoslavs liked the C-200 well enough to feature it on a stamp in 1953.





The 1953 Chrysler D'elegance [sic] was the progenitor of the VW Karmann Ghia according to Exner; you can see familiar KG lines in the greenhouse and lower sides/rear fender. Bombsight taillights were soon decorating 1955 and later Imperials. Cover the front and rear ends to make a VW pussycat magically appear.



The GS-1 of 1953-54 was sold in low quantity to the public by Chrysler's Paris distributor. An evolution of the D'elegance, it rode a New Yorker 125½-inch wheelbase and was powered by a Chrysler hemi. Have any of these handsome brutes survived?

base) chassis and the new PowerFlite two-speed automatic transmission. Both cars were sponsored not by Chrysler Engineering but by the president of the Chrysler Export Corporation, C.B. Thomas. The first '53 notchback, nicknamed "Thomas Special," was sold by

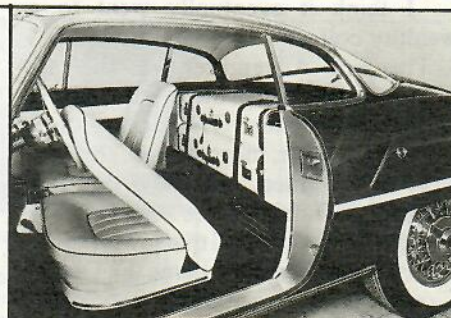
notchback was done, as I recall, at the request of C.B. Thomas." Both cars used comprehensive instrumentation (speedometers in km/h), and had extensively padded dashboards and inside door panels. The 1953 version was of all-steel construction, Ghia now having

specialty two-seaters, the VW Karmann Ghia, which was introduced in 1955.

It would be redundant to comment at length on the D'elegance-Karmann Ghia relationship (see CAR COLLECTOR, March 1980). Suffice it to say that Virgil Exner, Jr. called the former



Plymouth's 1954 Explorer benefitted from a shorter-than-average wheelbase: 114 inches. This gave the hunkered-down coupe a sporty look, but it was strictly a 2+2. Fitted luggage, fresh-air scoops above windshield, exhaust pipes in unit with tail lamps were Explorer features.



Chrysler in 1953 to horseracing great Johnny Longden.

"These two cars were designed in Dad's basement in Birmingham (Michigan)," Virgil, Jr. told me. "They were done as quarter-scale models, whereas the K-310 had been three eighths. The

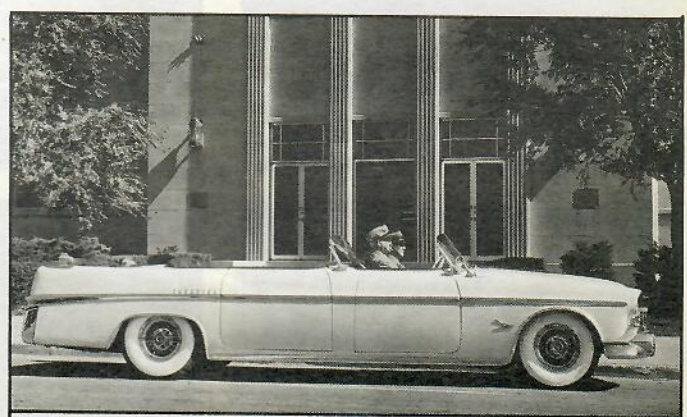
apparently learned how to carve the beautifully shaped fenders.

The notchback, in turn, led to another 1953 experimental called the Chrysler D'elegance (not "d'Elegance" as it should be), which itself helped to inspire one of the world's most popular

"just dead nuts on the whole Karmann Ghia idea, except that on account of the rear engine, the nose was changed." A forthcoming book on the K-G, by CAR COLLECTOR'S European editor, Jan P. Norbye, has another, different slant on the VW's origin, suggesting



Not an Exner showcar, but included here to show the Ghia influence, the A-600 prototype was an early Chrysler experiment in unit body/frame construction, which appeared on production cars in 1960. A-600 used modified 1955 Chrysler/DeSoto sheet metal, Imperial front bumper and grille, and New Yorker wheel covers. Wipers were removed to try jumbo cowl vent; large scoops above windshield suggest that this area was considered for ventilation as well. If it looks streamlined compared to the stock 1955s, bear in mind that it was sectioned through the body sides.



A 1956 variation of the Imperial parade phaeton that Exner designed before the production 1956 Imperials, and which were greatly influenced by the phaeton.



HIGHLIGHTS OF THE CHRYSLER  
SPECIAL SPORTS COUPE (MODIFIED)

The Chrysler Special Sports Coupe is a further example of the successful blending of Continental sports car styling and practical automotive design that characterized its predecessors, the K-310 and the C-200. Designed by Chrysler stylists and engineers and handcrafted by Ghia of Turin, Italy, it was built to bring to life many advanced styling and engineering ideas.

Mounted on a standard Chrysler New Yorker 125½ inch wheelbase chassis, the Special stands less than five feet high, yet is nearly seventeen feet in overall length. The basic theme of functional simplicity is carried throughout the car by emphasis on a long, powerful looking hood, low racy lines, fully exposed wire wheels and short overhang front and rear. This theme is further accented by using a minimum of chrome.

Body side trim is confined to a narrow chrome band which outlines the full wheel openings and runs the length of the body 10 inches above the bottom. It forms the line of separation between lower dark green and upper light green colors. This lower 10 inch color band serves to accent the car's road-hugging, fleet appearance by both directing attention to the lower portion of the body and by creating the impression of an exposed racing car chassis.



The long low hood -- suggesting power and unlimited performance -- sweeps forward between blade-like fenders to a clean, graceful, grille. The flat hood line is broken in the center by a large, rearward facing functional air scoop and by two smaller decorative scoops on either side.

The thin, knife-like fender treatment, with its strong suggestion of vertical lines -- which ordinarily tend to increase apparent height -- is made possible by the inherent lowness and width of the car and by the inboard location of the headlights. The grille frame and bumper bar form an integral unit. The large chromium plated vertical snubbers set into the sharp leading edges of the fenders create a gleaming "razor-edge" effect. The fully exposed chromium plated wire wheels with their simulated knock-off hubs, strengthen the feeling of fleetness and power which pervades this car.

The rear deck slopes gracefully down inside the rear fender line and terminates in a bumper bar set into the body at the lower trim line. An unusually spacious trunk for a car of this size and contour houses the spare wheel and tire mounted in the standard vertical position on the right hand side. A receptacle for tools is neatly recessed into the left hand panel. Trunk carpeting tastefully matches



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9 Marque *Chrysler*  
10 Châssis . . .  
11 Numéro *1236750*  
12 Marque  
13 Numéro *49444*  
14 Moteur . . .  
15 Nombre de cylindres *8*  
16 Force en chevaux *34*  
17 Type ou forme *conduite intérieure*  
18 Marques *Ghia*  
19 Carrosserie *gris et rouge*  
20 Garniture intérieure  
21 Nombre de places *3*

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