

**P.I. Interview:**  
 Tsutomu "Tom" Matano  
 San Francisco, California

**P**I Member Tom Matano is Director of Industrial Design at Academy of Art College in San Francisco. He is a graduate of Art Center college of Design and has spent thirty years in the automotive design industry. Prior to joining Mazda, he held design positions at General Motors, General Motors Holdens, Ltd. in Australia and BMW in Germany. In 1983, he became a Chief Designer at Mazda North America where he is most famous for developing the Miata. He continued to become Vice President of the Design Division and Executive Vice President of Western Operations for Mazda R&D North America, and Executive Designer & Director of Mazda North American Operations.

From 1999 to 2002, Matano worked with Mazda Headquarters in Japan, as an Executive Designer in the Global Advance Studio and the General Manager of Mazda Design. He managed the Chief Designers group that creates the entire Mazda car line designs, as well as the Europe and North American studios. Mr. Matano was also the featured speaker at the Pantera International festa DeTomaso in 1997 and he has repeatedly served as a spokesperson and trophy presenter at the Concorso Italiano for the DeTomaso marque. Tom is the proud, long-time owner of a special DeTomaso Vallelunga.

**PI:** When you were a design student in Japan, what cars turned you on?

**Matano:** I went to an engineering school. I loved cars ever since I started to walk. I couldn't afford to be in racing. So, I tried auto-crossing and rallying at college level events.

**PI:** When you came to America to go to Art Center, were you already a graduate of a Japanese design school?

**Matano:** I sent my portfolio to Art Center from Japan and was informed that my work was not acceptable. So, I decided to come to the States to start with a language school and improve my portfolio at the same time.

**PI:** What was the difference between the way they taught industrial design in Japan and the way they taught it in the U.S. For instance, in Japan was there a lot of reverence toward the old master's way of doing things?

**Matano:** I couldn't answer this question; because I never took any design courses prior to going to Art



PI member and auto designer Tom Matano

Center.

**PI:** You worked for a German firm, BMW. I notice lately BMW has been getting pretty outrageous as in the Z4, 7 Series and 5 series that followed. Have they at last lost their conservatism that was there when you were there?

**Matano:** I would like to answer this question in two parts. BMW has a tendency to keep one theme for two generations with small changes between the two. Then take a large step on the third one. Mercedes Benz, on the other hand, their model

changes take a very consistent step at each generation. Therefore, every third generation of BMW needs to make a large step against Mercedes' consistent steps. The other part is that recent series of Mercedes Benz took larger steps than their usual changes and shifted their design towards a sporty sedan direction that has been a domain for BMW. There has been a steady pressure from another German make, Audi, with its modern Teutonic design. Between those two makes, BMW needed to redefine a new direction. BMW had to



Vallelunga drawing by Tom Matano

be bold in their search for the new direction. The judgment of recent new design direction remained to be seen. It needs a test of time to make a proper judgment for those premium cars. My concern is that the life of those new generations designs are not as lasting as their predecessors.

**PI:** We see Italian designs all the time but few of the new ones seem as great as the Sixties shapes like the Dino race cars, Ferrari P3/4, etc. Are we right or are there just as great designs today?

**Matano:** It is not fair to compare those one-offs or small volume production cars against today's mass-production cars with shares of safety and other regulatory and manufacturing restrictions. I just say that those were simpler times in the automotive industries. And Italy has lost many of those craftsmen today.

**PI:** We know that you own a Vallelunga. Have you ever found out who designed it? Norbert MacNamara says it was Mario Fissore.

**Matano:** I spoke with Trevor Fiori who worked on Elva BMW with Fissore about the same time the Vallelunga was in the works. He said that Mr. DeTomaso himself was working with Fissore and he didn't see any other designer was involved.

**PI:** Do you think DeTomaso was trying to do a mini 250LM?

**Matano:** The original alloy bodied Vallelunga had more 250 LM like front end than a production fiberglass bodied car. It also had an entire rear half of the car which opens up for engine service just like 250 LM. But, the similarity stops there. The side view profile of the Vallelunga is unique for a mid-ship layout car.

**PI:** What parts of the design do you like and what parts would you do over if you were updating it?

**Matano:** I like 360-degree visibility the best, thanks to its low engine location. It is still very contemporary. It hasn't dated at all in my opinion.

**PI:** What is the longest trip you took in your Vallelunga?

**Matano:** About 150 miles driving up and down PCH.

**PI:** What's been the reaction of passerbys? Do they believe it is such an old car?

**Matano:** They don't see my car. It is too small and too low... Some cars chased me on the freeway, first to catch up and followed behind my car for a while as if trying to identify the car. Then, they usually come up

along side of my car....

**PI:** Would the Vallelunga have been more respected as a sports car if it had had a more exotic engine, say a double overhead cam like Ronnie Hoare had fitted to his?

**Matano:** Overall maturity was needed. If it was for the US market, it was too small in both engine size and body dimensions. But, mostly the respect came from a racing heritage. Abarth or Lotus command more respect and are well known.

**PI:** What do you think of the original Pantera design?

**Matano:** It was rather a clean and slightly feminine, less muscular side of exotic car design at that era with delicate curves, and quiet balance instead of pronounced curves and loud balance.

**PI:** What about the Mangusta?

**Matano:** In my opinion, it was one of the best Giugiaro designa. It had a modern, clean, well-balanced, good proportiona and a soul.

**PI:** Speaking of the Mangusta what do you think of the reintroducing of old names on new body styles such as the Qvale Mangusta? Do you feel it's legitimate?

**Matano:** It has been said in the auto business that introducing a new name costs company over \$10 million dollars to get common name recognition. Therefore, you see many old names returned to the marketplace. Many cases are just a return of a nameplate. They don't mean to capture historical connections.

There are a few cars that capture the essence of the old car that bared the same name or capture the design cues of the old cars. Some may have re-issued the old design. The Qvale Magusta is the former case. I forgot the name of the manufacturer that came up with that swing-down roof mechanism. But, as long as you use that roof system, that rear portion of the roof is very much fixed on that particular shape.

**PI:** What do you think of the Gallardo, the new mini Lambo? It was

designed by a Belgian I think, and I don't know if he was up in Germany when he did it. Do you think it is still an Italian design? Or is it an Italian design filtered through German mindsets?

**Matano:** It is a modern interpretation of the Lamborghini theme. It is a much better design theme execution that that of the Diablo. It has a good blend of Italian Style and flare with German precision.

**PI:** Porsche introduced the Cayenne, a SUV. To me it seems like a boring design with a few Porsche design cues. But they sell them and it makes money. Do you think a sports car maker betrays its tradition when it makes an SUV?

**Matano:** Traditional sports cars are one of the categories of sporting vehicles nowadays. A definition of the sports car has not changed but other type of cars can be a sporting vehicle today. Lifestyle has been broadening. Formal business attire is almost gone and I think that this has got something to do with a decline of domestic sedan sales.

**PI:** Has your school switched over to computer generated designs or are industrial design students still doing drawings the old fashioned way?

**Matano:** We should never throw away traditional hand drawn sketch skills. Students today have to develop both traditional skills as well as new computer based skills within the same 8 semesters.

**PI:** We notice you are a judge at a concours. Do you think the many high class concours attended by auto designers are influencing some future designs? (for instance in finishes of metal, etc.)

**Matano:** It is an important input for the creative process. It is important to learn the past masters and that concours are the best place to see them.

**PI:** Going back to DeTomaso, what did you think of the Longchamp in its time?

*Below: Do you see any similarity?*



**Matano:** It is clean and well proportioned, but lacked a soul as an Italian exotic.

**PI:** What about the Deauville?

**Matano:** Iso Fidia and the first generation Maserati Quattroporte were ground breaking large sedans when they were introduced. In fact, Fidia was an inspiration for the Opel Record. The Deauville was again a clean large sedan but lacked a flash or substance.

**PI:** What about the latest DeTomaso car, the Guara. Is it ready for prime time, so to speak, or already dated?

**Matano:** It showed a limitation of how difficult it is for a small volume producer to make a high quality car that matches what a larger OEM could produce.

**PI:** Ford tried to bring back the two seat Thunderbird and I heard they are thinking of dropping it because of slow sales. Now they are bringing out the Ford GT. Do you think there's a right way to do "retro" and a wrong way and if so, what was the mistake with the new Thunderbird?

**Matano:** Both the new Mini and Beetle are good examples of the right way to bring the original design to be interpreted. They both utilized the latest technologies and know how to sustain the accountability in today's market situation. The T-bird was not. The Ford GT belongs to an entirely different category.

**PI:** In the design of the Miata, I heard that Bob Hall brought in a Lotus Elan and that gave a lot of inspiration about feel and so forth. Do you think bringing a real car into the studio can focus the designers? Can you give us another example?

**Matano:** We bought the Lotus Elan to have our Japanese managing directors to understand our concept of a true lightweight sports car. We also bought a Triumph Spitfire for our Japanese designers to drive it everyday during the project for them to gain the experience of living with a convertible sports car. But, neither car was for styling inspirations. The Lotus was our spiritual connection where the engineer's belief was directly connected to the final product.

I brought a friend's Ferrari 275 GTB to the studio while we were working on the third generation RX-7 theme. I didn't want to compare it against contemporaries such as Porsches, Corvettes and so on. I wanted to compare it with a design that stood the test of time. My aim for the third generation RX-7 was to

design a timeless design.

**PI:** In your opinion, would a new Pantera be correct to have an update of the old body style?

**Matano:** If someone can capture the unique position and an essence of the Pantera with modern technologies, there will be a truly modern version of the Pantera to be successful.

**PI:** In the redesign of the Miata, you had a lot of feedback from owners. Is this important?

**Matano:** For the second generation, our planning group and engineers did take in many feedbacks. As for design, feedbacks are important in correcting weak points in usability and avoiding new mistakes. But, for the theme, we knew what we wanted to do.

**PI:** What is the demographic for sports car buyers in the \$25,000 to \$150,000 range. What are they buying the car for? To recapture their youth? Mid life crisis?

**Matano:** As definitions of so-called sports cars are becoming more diverse so are buyer demographics as well as their purchase reasons.

**PI:** You have a nice collection... what is your favorite and why?

**Matano:** My current collection consists of:

1. 1996 M-Edition Miata, Starlite Blue. I modified the top and interior to light gray to match my gray hair from an original tan top and tan interior.
2. 1995 RX-7 Silver
3. 1977 Lancia Scorpion
4. 1967 DeTomaso Vallelunga

For the warm sunny days, I take the Miata. Cool crisp evenings, I take the Vallelunga. Whenever I want to go fast, I take the RX-7. The Lancia is more or less stationary at our front

patio.

**PI:** You were quoted assaying, "From the very beginning of the Miata project the Miata club is an integral part of the Miata culture. Without healthy club activities, the Miata would have been just another car. But with a strong club body, it put us in the class of other legendary cars." Wasn't this difficult to achieve with a brand new car?

**Matano:** In fact, I joined Pantera International to learn about a club operation. This was where I was impressed with a high quality club magazine and a wide selection of club merchandise program. I also attended several other car club events as well at that time. I wanted to reverse engineer the legend by setting a vision, I wrote a scenario and acted upon each of those stories to make it become a legend.

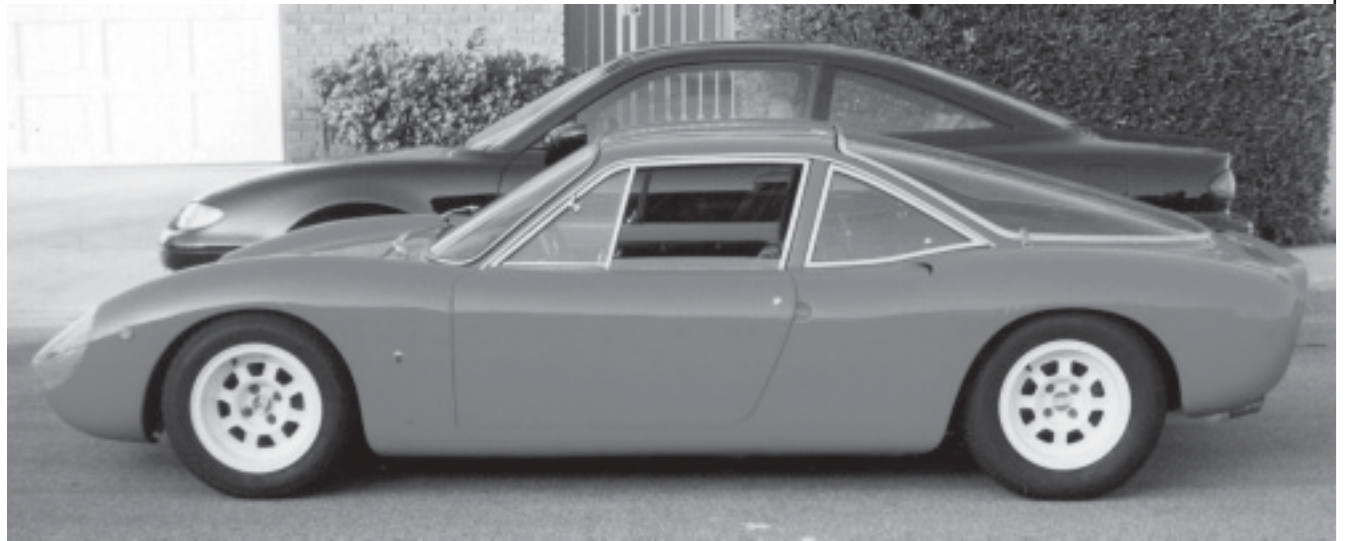
**PI:** We know you love car designs more than worrying if there is a club to support the car. For instance there is no Vallelunga club or Lancia Scorpion club. However do you feel that the lack of a club indicates that the car has no soul? For instance I think the Fiero club died and the BMW M1 club just announced it's folding.

**Matano:** If a car has a soul or other unique characters and there is enough volume to sustain a club, there will be one.

**PI:** You have no doubt talked to tiny niche companies like DeTomaso. We try to throw advice at them. For instance we did an editorial advising them to build an SUV but one of our contributors thinks it ought to be a Rambo Lambo, an all out super-exotic, limited edition and the rest of us think it ought to be a rebodied Navigator. Do you think a tiny niche



*We think the face of the Vallelunga is still fresh and vibrant. Who really designed it?*



carmaker should stick to making niche expensive cars for the rich and forget about even thinking of mass marketing?

**Matano:** It is simply impossible to make a ground up vehicle for any sizeable volume today. Cost is the biggest prohibiting factor.

**PI:** For years, the Italians always were looked to for the most svelte new designs. But now, the Japanese have several good looking cars. Do you think that the Italians will always

be ahead in terms of form and subtlety or do you think they are being challenged from several fronts now?

**Matano:** The world is getting smaller. Car design has become an integral part of corporate strategy. The car business became global based. Design is a result of teamwork. Therefore, it is not easy to label a nationality to any particular design today.

**Above:** Mr. Matano's prized Vallenga has white-painted wheels that make his red car very distinctive. Tom has told us that he has used his Vallenga for inspiration when designing new cars. This photo demonstrates how the side view of both cars are remarkably similar. The Matano Vallenga has been shown at the Concorso Italiano. We appreciate Mr. Matano taking time from his busy schedule to grant PI this interview.

