

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ALFA ROMEO BADGE

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Flag of Milan



House of Visconti Crest

Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili, or "Lombard Automobile Factory, Public Company" in Italian, (A.L.F.A. to us) was founded on June 24, 1910, and shortly thereafter selected a logo that looks a lot like the one in use today. So, what's with the man-eating snake, and what is the meaning behind the Alfa Romeo symbol?

A.L.F.A. was formed when a group of business entrepreneurs snapped up the workshops of the failing Italian branch of the French car maker Darracq, but that snaky move has nothing to do with it. The idea for the logo struck designer Romano Cattaneo in the Piazza Castello in central Milan while awaiting his number 14 tram. High on the wall of the Filarete Tower were several heraldic interpretations of the Biscione Visconteo, the coat of arms of the city of Milan and of the Visconti family that ruled it in medieval times.

Biscione basically means "grass snake," and the icon's association with Milan may stem from a bronzed serpent souvenir brought to the city from Constantinople by Arnolf II of Arsago, who served as archbishop of Milan from 998-1018. That image plus a representation of Milan's official flag—a red cross on a white background—are the elements that have defined all nine Alfa logos.



1910-1915

The simplest, purest interpretation of any design is usually the first. We clearly see the Biscione devouring a human that is believed to be a child or possibly a Moor or Ottoman Turk. The crown worn on the snake's head distinguishes this official Milanese symbol from that of the private Visconti family. The words ALFA at the top and MILANO at the bottom are separated by two figure-eight "Savoy Knots," a symbol of the royal House of Savoy, a branch of which unified Italy in 1861.



1918-1925

As World War I was erupting, the banks holding A.L.F.A.'s debt entrusted the running of the company to Nicola Romeo, an entrepreneur from Naples. The company's Portello (ex-Darracq) factory produced compressors, ammunition, and aircraft engines. When automotive production resumed, the company was renamed Alfa-Romeo and the logo was updated accordingly, and with a more linear font.



1925-1945

The logo was set in a golden laurel-leaf crown to celebrate the Alfa P2's victory in the first World Racing Car Championship, taking victory in two of the four championship races with Antonio Ascari driving in the European Grand Prix at Spa and Gastone Brilli-Peri cinching the Italian Grand Prix at Monza after Ascari's fatal crash while leading the French Grand Prix at Montlhéry in between.



1946-1950

With the fall of the Italian monarchy, the Imperial knots were swapped for two wavy lines. But more significant to this revision is the fact that wartime bombing severely damaged the entire Italian industrial base, including the supplier of Alfa's multicolored logo badges. This greatly simplified design was easier to manufacture in two-tone gold on red, with its less elaborate golden laurel wreath frame and its fatter, smoother serpent featuring fewer coils. The person he's devouring was also set on an angle. This most dramatic redesign in Alfa history was also its shortest lived.



1950-1960

The full-color logo returned with a silver surround in the year that Alfa Romeo took the inaugural Formula 1 World Championship title with Giuseppe "Nino" Farina claiming the title in a Tipo 158, aka "Alfetta." Alfa won again in 1951 with Juan Manuel Fangio in a Tipo 159 powered by a 1.5-liter 425-hp supercharged straight-eight engine capable of hitting 190 mph. (It was a methanol-guzzler, though, achieving 1.2 mpg!) Alfa withdrew from Formula 1 in 1952 to concentrate on profitable mass-production cars like the 1900.



1960-1972

This simplification of the design retained gold outlining of all lettering and of the cross and serpent, but the elaborate scale texture of the serpent's body, the human's musculature, the wavy texture in the blue surround, and the vertical line texture in the red cross were all smoothed out.



1972-1982

Of greatest significance in this redesign is the dropping of the wavy lines and the word "Milano," in recognition of Alfa's corporate expansion beyond the Milan environs. There was a big new plant in Pomigliano d'Arco near Naples built to construct the new Alfasud compact, and a new prototype test track at Balocco in the Piedmont region.



1982-2014

This revision continued the trend toward graphic simplification of the design that had started with the previous design losing the snake's knot or coil just beneath the human and one less back-and-forth zigzag in his body. This time around, the remnants of the laurel-wreath frame were eliminated and the typeface was switched to a simpler Futura font. To date this stands as Alfa's longest-lived logo design.



2015-Present

This final redesign by Robilant Associati of Milan tweaks the font again and eliminates the division bar separating the cross and the man-eating snake, which allows the snake to expand. The fatter snake features one less zigzag and the former blue and white backgrounds give way to a single silver textured field.

Appendix-1

Excerpted from "Alfa Romeo, All Cars from 1910" (1978) Milan / Fusi, Luigi

Giuseppe Merosi, first designer of A.L.F.A. cars, had at last completed, in the first months of 1910, all the drawings regarding the particulars of the 24 HP model. The Managing Director cav. Ugo Stella, in the June of the same year, took care in modifying the legal name of the Factory of the "Portello" from "S.I.A. Darracq-Milano" with the new one Anonima Lombarda Fabbrica Automobili-Milano. On that occasion, the Board of Directors charged Merosi to study also the badge to be applied on the radiator of the new car and immediately he talked about it with his direct collaborators.

On the next day, the youngest draftsman of the technical department, Mr. Romano Cattaneo (brother of the Isotta Fraschini designer engineer Giustino Cattaneo) went to Mr. Merosi and related to him that while, at the Castello square terminus, he was waiting for the tramway would have taken him to the factory, looking up at whole historical stronghold, it flashed across his mind that the visconteous adder could figure well on the badge for the milanese car.

Merosi judged Mr. Cattaneo's idea very good and together they began to make a sketch adding the cross of Milan town surrounded by the inscriptions: ALFA MILANO separated by two Savoia's knots.

The Managing Director liked the idea begun in this way by Mr. Merosi and Mr. Cattaneo was charged to make the definitive drawing for the preparation of the suggestive many-colored badge of the milanese trade.

The badge which had been chosen as trade mark for the Alfa cars and that Alfa Romeo went on placing on the car grill is a combination of the two symbols forming the emblem of the Milan city. In the 1st half of the badge the red cross on white ground recalls the heroic deed of the Milanese Giovanni da Rho who was the first to climb Jerusalem walls and place there the cross symbol during the first Crusade in the Holy Land.

In the right half the 4 fold snake represents the Visconti's family badge. In fact, to Ottone Visconti, founder of the noble milanese family, is ascribed the legend of the killing in duel, in the course the first Crusade, of a Saracen who had on the shield, as blazon, a picture representing a snake devouring a man; the visconteus badge should be derived just from this blazon.

The use of the badge of Milan and Visconti's snake, symbols of initiative and power, chosen by the milanese Factory, represents a wish for its success in the world.

The outside diameter of the badge was 2.56 in both on the Alfa cars from 1910 to 1915 and from 1920 to 1925. When adding the wreath of laurel the outside diameter was increased from 2.56 to 2.99 in. From 1930 on the badge as well as the wreath were reduced; the outside diameter of the latter was of 2.36 in. In 1932, on the cars bound to France, badges reading ALFA ROMEO PARIS were applied; later on for the different foreign countries only the writing ALFA ROMEO with three figure-of-eight knots was used.

Appendix-1 (cont'd)

Since 1945 the badge outside diameter was reduced to 2.12 in; both for the pressed metal and the enameled metal one, and later on also for the plastic one.

In 1972, with the start of production of the new “Alfasud” model at the new industrial plant expressly made at Pomigliano d’ Arco (Naples) the writing in the blue circle of the badge was reduced to the only name Alfa Romeo.

Appendix-2

Excerpted from “Alfa Romeo Owner’s Bible” (1994), Braden, Pat

It was stylish in the early days of automobile to use the company’s initials to name the car (Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino was already well established making F.I.A.T.s in Turin) and the acronym A.L.F.A. was a natural choice for the new Milanese company. The name of the car is in no way related to the first letter of the Greek alphabet. (which Vincenzo Lancia’s company had already appropriated in 1907 for its product line).

The Alfa badge is arguably the most remarkable emblem associated with any marque. For it, the owners combined two symbols that had been associated with the city of Milan since the Crusades: a red cross and a serpent swallowing a man. The red cross is an obvious Christian symbol of medieval heraldry. The man in the serpent’s mouth is a Saracen (a Muslim), so the serpent motif recalls the Christian Crusaders’ defeat of the infidels, a fact that is probably not detailed in certain of Alfa’s current marketing areas. The serpent motif became an honorary sign awarded to a prominent Milanese family. It was eventually permanently attached to the Sforza family.

Originally, the acronym ALFA and the word MILANO appeared on the badge separated with two square knots. The knots were associated with the di Savoia family; they and the blue encircling field symbolize royalty. The company was purchased by Niccola Romeo in 1915, and in 1920, his name was appended to ALFA by hyphenation. It is only on the badge that the name has ever been hyphenated.

The wreath around the badge commemorates Alfa’s World Championship of 1925. During the early 1930s, a few Alfas were assembled in France and “PARIS” replaced “MILANO” on about two hundred badges. “MILANO” was deleted when the Alfasud factory went on-line in 1971 (while “PARIS” fit, “POMIGLIANO DEL’ ARCO” would have been a bit much).