

I S O T T A F R A S C H I N I



Running board with toolbox from the Hooper/McEwan 1929 Type 8A Castagna Limousine.

Italy's most aristocratic motorcar was the result of the partnership of Cesare Isotta and three brothers named Frascchini—Vincenzo, Antonio and Oreste. Shared interest was a trait of this partnership, Cesare, Vincenzo and Antonio marrying one each of the three daughters of Bianchi Anderloni. Oreste remained resolutely a bachelor and, the most mechanically inclined of the quartet, worked closely with technical director Giustino Cattaneo on development of the Isotta Frascchini product. In 1909, at the Paris Salon, the Milanese company introduced four-wheel brakes, practically a generation before same would enjoy general adoption in the industry. In 1919 Isotta Frascchini introduced the Tipo 8 with the first straight-eight engine put into series production anywhere in the world. The Tipo 8 also introduced a new policy for the company: one model only with an emphasis on unabashed luxury. Oreste Frascchini reasoned that because of the devastation of World War I only the rich on the Continent would be able to afford cars, and in the United States there was only room at the top as well since Henry Ford had the mass market sewn up and middle-class automobiles were legion. Oreste's death in 1921 changed the

Milanese firm dramatically, his brothers and brother-in-law bowing out soon after. Count Lodovico Mazzotti acquired Isotta Frascchini. Fortunately, Giustino Cattaneo stayed on, the one-model policy continued and export remained a priority. . . .

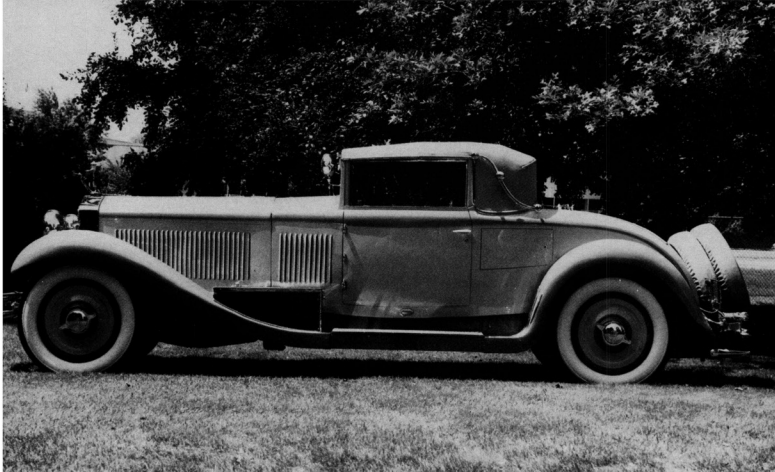


1925 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8 Torpedo, Sala
Owner: Clive Cussler of Golden, Colorado



Retrospectively, historians have liked to have fun at the Isotta's expense, critically reviewing its straight-eight engine as showing "little evidence of a desperate search for efficiency" and the car as "almost as big as a hotel." Granted, the 360 cubic inches (5901 cc) of the Tipo 8 developed just 80 hp at a languorous 2200 rpm, the wheelbase was a long 145 inches, and the car weighed in at over two tons. With light coachwork, 80 mph was possible; more formal bodies sacrificed about ten miles an hour. Blistering performance wasn't the car's reason for being, however, elite grandeur for the motoring pleasure of the grandly elite was. By the mid-twenties the roster of Isotta Fraschini owners included the Kings of Italy and Iraq, the Queen of Romania, the Empress of Abyssinia, Prince Louis of Monaco, two Maharajahs, the Aga Khan and the Gaekwar of Baroda, amidst a galaxy of untitled folk with plenty of money.

An Argentine rancher was the original owner of the Tipo 8 Torpedo by Sala that has been Clive Cussler's for a decade. "Steers like hell," says Clive, "but rolls along like a supercharged tank."



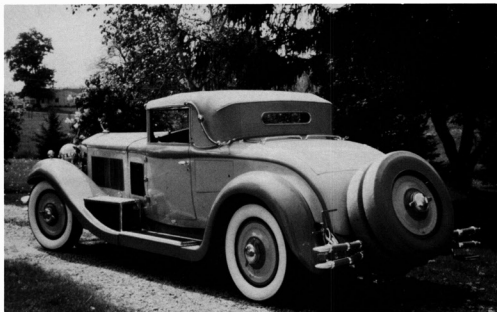
1929 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A Convertible Coupe, Castagna
 Owner: Francesca Ferrara of Gates Mills, Ohio Photos: Torque

Nearly a third of the Classic Era Isottas were imported into the United States. The renowned Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio was an enthusiastic supporter of the marque and had encouraged his son Ugo to set himself up in New York City as the U.S. distributor. Despite a \$9,750 chassis price that was twice the cost of a complete American luxury car, Ugo's business was brisk. Clara Bow, Jack Dempsey and William Randolph Hearst joined Rudolph Valentino in adding Isottas to their star-studded garages. The car became America's darling among luxury imports.

The D'Annunzio agency delivered Francesca Ferrara's Tipo 8A Castagna Convertible Coupe new to Cleveland, Ohio in 1930. Comments Al Ferrara: "The car had been ordered by Mrs. Sterling of the Sterling, Linder, Davis Department Store in Cleveland. There can be no doubt that the store was a roaring success! The very high price of an Isotta Fraschini bought excellent engineering and a body that is perfection in workmanship. This car has resided in Cleveland all these years, same as myself. Subsequently the Sterling family lived on Old Mill Road where we have lived for the last thirty years."

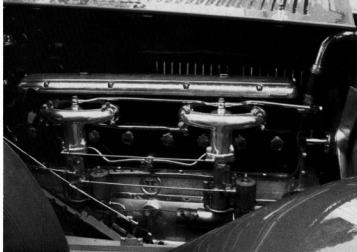
With its long straight-eight engine dictating an equally long expanse of hood, the Isotta Fraschini was the darling of coachbuilders as well. An ungainly Classic Isotta seems almost a contradiction in terms. Fleetwood and LeBaron bodied some of the cars on this side of the Atlantic, but the vast preponderance of Isottas carried coachwork by such Italian houses as Sala, Farina, Touring—and most especially Castagna, as witness the

Hooper/McEwan Tipo 8A Limousine: "Castagna coachwork is particularly appealing due to the high level of interesting detail. This particular car is unique in being significantly lower than other formal Castagna bodies of the period. Among its interesting details are the two-tone paint scheme which is highly unusual and the one-foot-square-opening glass roof vent that is in the rear compartment."

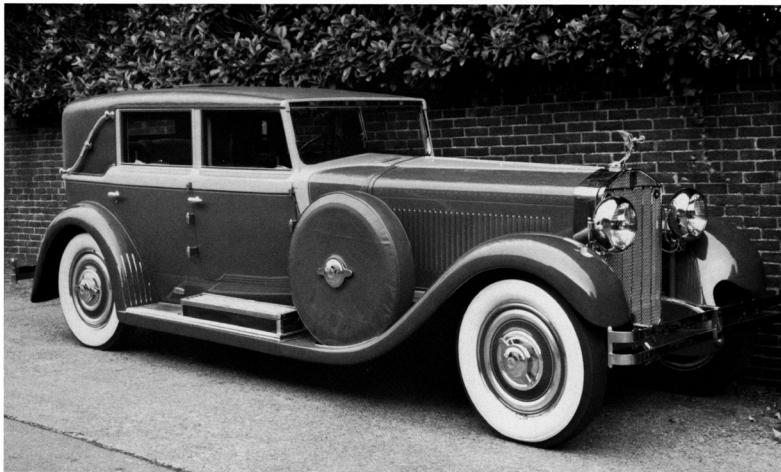




1929 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A Limousine, Castagna



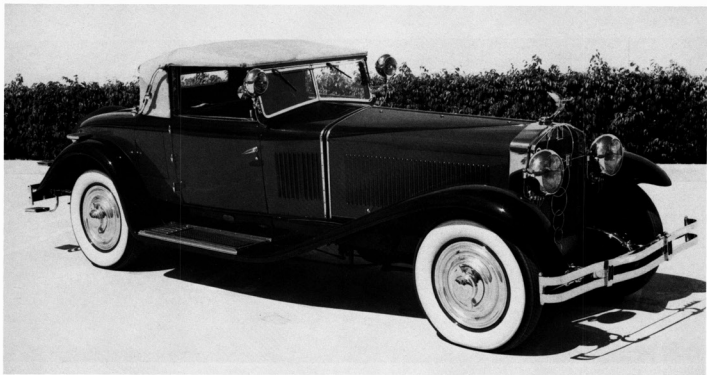
Owners: R. B. Hooper & A. W. McEwan of Bellevue, Washington





1929 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A S Roadster Cabriolet, Castagna

Owner: Bob Bahre of Oxford, Maine



1929 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A SS Roadster Cabriolet, Castagna

Owner: W. G. Lassiter, Jr. of West Palm Beach, Florida

The mid-twenties had seen the original post-Armistice Tipo 8 evolve into the 8A. Refinements to the overhead valve straight-eight engine brought cubic inches numbering 449.5 (7.4 liters) available *normale* delivering 110 hp at 2400 rpm or in a *spinto* (sports) version known as the Tipo 8A S which produced 135 hp at 2600 rpm. In the 8A SS (or Super

Spinto), like Bill Lassiter's car, the horsepower claimed was a rousing 155/160—and 100 mph was guaranteed. This nicely quieted any critics who suggested an Isotta Fraschini was all show and no go.

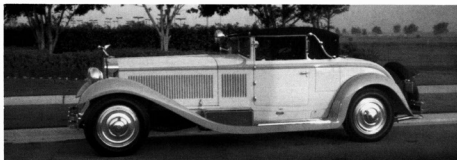
Still, beauty could have remained an Isotta's sole *raison d'être*, as indicated by Bob Bahre's Castagna

Roadster Cabriolet: "The long hood, vertical windshield, short convertible top with landau irons and dual rear spares give this car a truly Classic look. The full set of Stephen Grebel lights and the Cobra hood ornament complement the design, and both the driver's compartment and rumble seat are finished in beautiful decorative woodwork."



1930 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A SS Dual Cowl Phaeton, Castagna

Owner: William Lyon of Trabuco Canyon, California



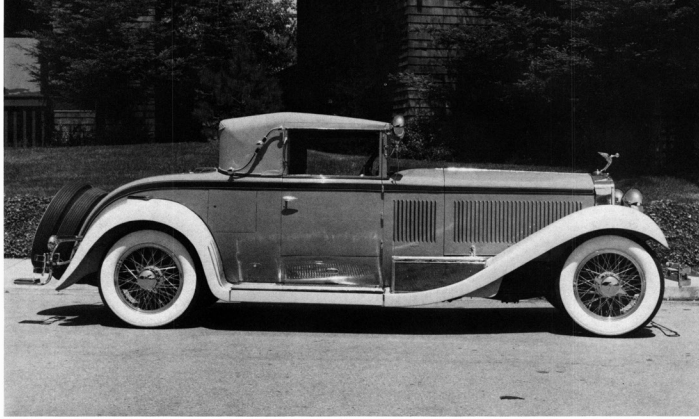
1930 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A SS Convertible Coupe, Castagna

It might be said that Isotta Fraschini was a teacher in the 1-o-n-g hood school of design with apt pupils on both sides of the Atlantic. William Lyon's car exemplifies how an unusual two-door dual-cowl style dramatically accented the concept.

Noel Thompson's Castagna 8A SS, which enjoyed a loving twenty-year restoration by John Nagel, accents the attention to detail that was an Isotta hallmark.

Owner: Noel Thompson of New Vernon, New Jersey





1930 Isotta Fraschini Tipo 8A Commodore Cabriolet, Castagna

Owner: Blackhawk Classic Auto Collection, Danville, California

The Castagna Commodore Cabriolet in the Blackhawk Classic Auto Collection made its sensational debut at the New York Automobile Salon in December 1929. Named for the luxurious Manhattan hotel in which the salon was staged each year, the Commodore Cabriolet spanned 17½ feet and was priced at \$12,000. The Blackhawk car was originally purchased in February 1930 by Connecticut sportsman Eugene Maxwell Moore, who died five weeks later. When rediscovered decades after that, the odometer showed only 8,000 miles. Probably less than a dozen Commodore Cabriolets, no two of them identical, were produced.

But the numbers for Isotta, with its one-model/all-out-luxury policy, were small throughout the Classic Era. And they tell their own story of what happened to the company when the Great Depression set in. Tipo 8A production (in all versions) was 950 cars from 1925 to 1931; just 20 examples of the Tipo 8B (a refinement of its predecessor) would be built from 1931 until the mid-thirties when the big factory in the Via Monterosa began producing only aero engines. By then Count Mazzotti and Giustino Cattaneo had left the company. But glorious legends never fade. Years later an Isotta Fraschini would be as much a star—certainly to Cecil B. DeMille—as Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*.

