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CITROËN MASERATI

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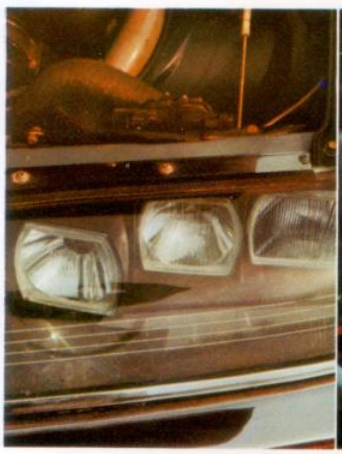
modern living **by ken w. purdy**

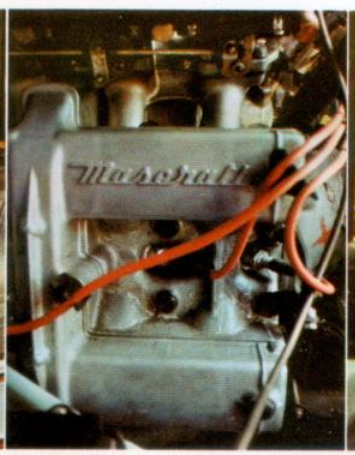
the fiscal marriage of citroën to maserati has produced a highly attractive, wondrously innovative and enjoyably swift offspring—the citroën sm

WHEN ANDRE CITROEN RAN THE COMPANY he founded in 1919, his cars carried no identifying name plates. A Citroën automobile was a Citroën because it looked like one and, if that wasn't enough, it mounted the double-chevron/herringbone emblem (⩓) suggesting, if only to those who knew, the gear-cutting business on which Citroën's fortunes—he was not a one-fortune man—were founded. André Citroën had little in common with a 1971 chairman of the board, who is vulnerable, wary, ever in danger of finding himself unfleeced under the steely stare of a Congressional committee chairman forensically armed to the teeth by Nader's Raiders. Citroën was an old-style tycoon. Bucking the odds at roulette in the legendary Deauville casino, he blew $500,000 in ten hours without a blink. He was of the original company of movers and shakers—Ford, Austin, Opel, Agnelli—who loosed the automobile on the planet, grew great and passed on, full of years and honors, their ears innocent of the doom word ecology. Citroën was not a wealthy man when he died, but he had run a merry course, and it may be that the path of ultimate wisdom is to live rich and die poor.

It's unlikely that Citroën, forward-peering as he certainly was, could have imagined the shape of the current top of the company's line, a simple little $11,482 four-place coupe called the SM—S for Sport, M for Maserati—an Italian-French amalgam combining a chassis that may be light-years ahead of its contemporaries with

The $11,000-plus SM provides plush comfort in an incredibly engineered, high-performance auto. Below, left to right: Headlight system, which includes inboard lights that turn with the front wheels, will not be in U. S.-bound models because of archaic state regulations. Maserati V6 occupies rear of an engine compartment crammed with hydraulic gear. With front seats in reclining position, the SM has a living-room look.





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a four-cam V6 engine. It's probable, though, that Citroën would have scribbled his permissive initials on the plans, because he did like to be ahead of the pack, and that's where the SM is, far out: a *gran turismo* motorcar that takes 140 miles per hour out of an under-3-liter engine driving the front wheels and delivers this stunning performance in a ride that's incontestably the most comfortable, over any kind of surface, available in a wheeled vehicle. And on top of the basics, the SM piles other small wonders: hydropneumatic suspension (plus, of course, hydraulic-powered brakes and steering), height adjustment that keeps the car level under any load condition and allows wheel changing without jacking, and six quartz-halogen headlights, two of which peer around corners as the front wheels turn. (It appears that the Stone Age idiocy that allows each of the 50 states to legislate its own traffic laws will for the present deprive the American market of the SM's advanced lighting system.) Turning those front wheels, by the way, is done in a fashion unique to the SM: The steering ratio is two turns, lock to lock. Obviously, it would be impossible to park such a manually steered car carrying 1985 pounds on the front wheels, and ordinary power steering, at that ratio, would be so twitchy as to be dangerous, even for an expert. The Citroën solution is variable power: The battalions of gremlins that run the over-all hydraulic system—a true plumber's nightmare, but it works and keeps on working—pour in full assistance at low speeds and take almost all of it away when the car is running fast. Parking and maneuvering are effortless, but at speed, when quick *and* soft steering can put you into the boonies in a flash, the car's tendency is to run dead straight, and reasonable effort is needed to make it do anything else. Further, self-centering of the steering is also hydraulically aided. The total effect may not build to a perfect solution, but it's close, very close. Some testers have entered dissents, on the ground that this power steering, like almost every other, deprives the driver of the "feel" at the steering-wheel rim, the subliminal vibrations—Stirling Moss used to say that he could hear them—that telegraph the behavior of the front wheels, warning, for example, when they are about to lose their grip on the road in a corner. But the governing fact is that very few drivers ever push a car to the cornering limits that produce these signals, or could read them if they did, while low-effort low-speed steering is in universal demand.

The days of the great automobiles—exotic, individualistic, high-performance—are surely numbered; the trend toward governed uniformity has been for years as visible and as predictable as the flow of lava down a mountainside. The more to be marked and enjoyed, then, are those few originals, the ones that resist the bureaucratic crunch and come, as the SM does, of proven lineage. Maserati and Citroën both draw from long books of experience—nearly 60 years long. Citroën began as a gear maker in 1913. The Officine Alfieri Maserati, a Bologna repair shop, took its first lire across the counter a year later.

André Citroën was the fifth and last son of a Dutch father, a diamond merchant, and a Polish mother; there were six Maserati brothers—Carlo, Bindo, Alfieri, Mario, Ettore, Ernesto—whose father was a locomotive engineer. Except for Mario, an artist, they all gravitated, as if by instinct, to the emerging world of the automobile. Carlo, the oldest, built a motorcycle before he was out of his teens and raced it for the Italian bike maker Carcano. At 20 he was head of Fiat's test department and in the next six years he was tester and team driver for Bianchi, Isotta-Fraschini and Junior of Turin, where he became managing director. He died when he was 30.

Bindo Maserati was chief tester for Isotta, Alfieri a race driver. Ernesto flew with the Italian air force during World War One. Afterward, the Officine Maserati picked up an order to build a race car for Isotta and in 1921–1922, with Alfieri driving and Ernesto riding mechanic, it won a lot of races for Isotta, although it was solid Maserati—the first, in fact. In 1923 they went to auto maker Diatto, stayed until 1925 and a year later built the first car to bear their name and their trademark, the trident Maseratis still carry (they took it from the statue of Neptune in Bologna's city square). They called the car the Tipo 26 (for 1926). It was a two-seater race car with a 125-horsepower 1491-c.c. engine. They ran it for the first time on April 25, 1926, in the Targa Florio, the classic Sicilian road race. It won its class, Alfieri driving and Guerrino Bertocchi in the second seat. Bertocchi was Maserati's first employee and is still with the firm—as chief mechanic and test driver.

By 1928 the name Maserati rang loudly enough in European racing to bring in drivers who were coming to the top of the first rank: Luigi Fagioli, the first of a long line that would include Achille Varzi, Tazio Nuvolari, Wilbur Shaw, René Dreyfus, Alberto Ascari, Juan Mañuel Fangio, Jean Behra, Stirling Moss, Masten Gregory and Dan Gurney. The firm by then had a staff of about 30 mechanics and was off and running. Maserati turned out a 4-liter supercharged V16 race car in 1929 and took the world ten-kilometer record during a race, without really trying. Later, they laid two V16 engines together to make a 32-cylinder monster, which proved something of a Pyrrhic victory: It had too much twist (700 hp) for any chassis the state of the art could then produce. It went into a record-breaking unlimited-class boat. Nuvolari won the Grands Prix of Belgium and Nice for Maserati in 1933, but by the next year, the Germans were in charge, with the almost unbeatable government-backed Auto-Unions and Mercedes single-seaters, and three years later, the Maserati brothers, Ernesto, Bindo and Ettore—Alfieri had died in 1932—sold out to the Modena industrialists Orsi. The contract was to run for ten years and the three Maseratis went with it. The first Orsi-Maserati was the great Tipo 8CTF with

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which Wilbur Shaw took it all at Indianapolis in 1939 and 1940. (Under the hallowed Indy custom, the car ran under its sponsor's name as the Boyle Special.) The 8CTF was a supercharged straight-8 3-liter that could pump out 350 hp at 6000 rpm. As late as 1947, it was still competitive: Louis Unser won the Pikes Peak hill climb with an 8CTF that year.

When the Orsi-Maserati contract ran out in 1947, the brothers packed up, went back to Bologna and founded Osca. Under the terms of the deal, they had to leave their name behind in Modena. Orsi pressed on with other engineers—Massimino, Colombo, Bellentani. Ascari won the 1948 Grand Prix of San Remo for Maserati, Fangio repeated the next year and took the Albi G. P. as well, but Alfa Romeo and Ferrari, trying harder and running newer designs, got away with most of the money. Things began to look up in 1952, when Omer Orsi took personal charge of the Maserati operation, which had become something of an orphan in the Orsi complex. A new model—the A6GCM—won the G. P. of Italy in 1953, Fangio won the Argentine and Belgian G. P.s in 1954, Moss the Italian again in 1956. The following year, Fangio led three other Masers across the finish line in the Argentine G. P., a 4.5 sports model won the Sebring 12-hour race and the firm announced that it was retiring from competition as a house, although it would continue to back private entrants. And Maser engines powered the British Cooper Grand Prix machines that foreshadowed, in 1959, the rear-engine revolution of the Sixties.

The Maserati brothers were race-car builders all the way; unlike some of their contemporaries—Alfa Romeo and Bugatti, for example—they had no interest in the more profitable passenger-car field. Production sports-model Maseratis didn't appear until 1948, the first one a 1.5-liter 6-cylinder of modest output: 65 hp. It came up to 2 liters the next year, still nothing extraordinary. But the direction had been marked, and in 1953 Pinin Farina built three *grans turismos* for Scuderia Centro Sud. Another, the two-seater A6G 2000, came in 1954, bodied by Frua, Zagato and Allemano. Maserati sports cars won the 1000-kilometer races at Buenos Aires and the Nürburgring in 1956. The chassisless "Birdcage" Maserati appeared in 1960, a tangle of small-diameter tubing so complex it seemed a marvel that an engine could be fitted into it, and won the Nürburgring twice—Gurney/Moss in 1960, Casner/Gregory in 1961. The birdcage was effectively the end of the line in Maserati competition cars. The firm moved on to *gran turismo*, 140-plus over-the-road machines, and they are its main concern today: the Quattroporte of 1963, a stunning departure from ordinary *g.t.* practice—a 150-mph four-door sedan, the Mistral and the Sebring, the Mexico, the Ghibli, the Indy. Maserati, Ferrari and Lamborghini of Italy and Aston Martin of England are the four paramount names in the *gran turismo* world. These are superlatively constructed road cars, deluxe to the level of air conditioning, electric windows, power steering, and so on, and capable of an easy, unstressed 150–175 mph with acceleration—on the order of 0–100 mph in 12 seconds—to match. They're not cheap: The Maserati Ghibli is ticketed at $21,000–$22,000 in the United States.

Choice of a Maserati engine for the SM was a matter of economic as well as engineering logic: Maserati has been controlled by Citroën since 1968—as Citroën has been part of the Michelin tire complex since 1934.

The Maserati brothers' beginnings in mechanics tended toward the empirical and mechanical, but André Citroën was a scholarly sort of youth, a brilliant graduate, in 1900, of the famed Ecole Polytechnique in Paris. Ten years later, he was in charge of production for Mors, where he boosted the output ten times, from 120 cars a year to 1200. His career really began in Poland, on a vacation trip, when he acquired from a member of his mother's family—or, according to another story, from a country blacksmith—the idea of silent-running helical gears. He set up a small factory of a dozen people to make these gears, licensed the rights to Skoda of Czechoslovakia and began to make serious money.

World War One stopped him; he was a lieutenant in the reserve artillery. At the front, he found the duty frustrating —and perilous: The German guns were outshooting the French five to one. French artillerists had been, since Napoleon, among the best in the world, but in 1914, although they had excellent guns, they were short of shells. The standards of the French armaments industry suggested that 5000 rounds was a good day's work. Citroën thought 50,000 might be more reasonable and told the brass he could make that many. Oddly enough, instead of busting him to private for his temerity, the war ministry gave him a chance—and sent word to the banks ahead of him. He built a factory in six weeks and within a year was producing shells at a 55,000 daily rate. Before the war was over, Citroën was suzerain of the French war industry, his reputation that of an innovator who got things done.

By war's end, he had a paid-for factory, lots of machinery and thousands of trained workers. He would make something else. He thought about it. Stoves? Boats? Farm equipment? He couldn't see much future in such mundane stuff. But the automobile—that was a device of the future, he decided, a growth industry if ever there was one. Citroën was no Bugatti, no Maserati, no lover of the motorcar for its own sake. He was an industrialist, a rational man, at least in business. He knew about mass production and he knew that the Americans knew more about it. So he took a trip to the United States and studied with the master, Henry Ford. Indeed, Citroën took back to Paris a framed photograph of Ford and it stood on his desk as long as he sat behind it. Before Citroën, European design practice tended to be one-man. He changed all that. His cars were designed by specialists responsible only for components, with final decisions at the top, as in the American system.

So it came to pass that in May 1919, Europe's first mass-produced automobile came off the line, the simple, sturdy, 18-hp Type A open touring car. It was cheap and solid and welcome. By 1924 the factory was cranking out 300 cars a day, to the astonishment of veteran industrialists who had assured Citroën that even if he *could* build 100 *voitures* a day, he couldn't hope to unload them on a skeptical populace. In 1922 he had modified the design a bit, put a full sedan body on it and practically cornered the French taxicab market.

A Citroën classic, the C3 Trèfle (Cloverleaf)—a three-passenger touring car, two seats in front, a narrow slot between them to allow access to the third, sited dead in the middle of the rounded-off stern—was a smash in 1923. The Cloverleaf had a marked elfin appeal—it still does—and Citroën flogged off 20,000 of them a year until 1926.

André Citroën was a notable innovator and one of the first tycoons really to understand publicity. In his time, the phonograph was as much a fixture in every bourgeois home as the dining-room table, yet no one before him had thought of distributing records on which living voices told of the wonders of the product. The Eiffel Tower had been standing in Paris since 1889, but it was Citroën who bought the advertising rights to the structure, all 984 feet, and screwed 250,000 bulbs into it to spell out his name, in letters ten feet high, the whole array so visible so many miles away that aviators homed in on it, Lindbergh among them (it wasn't until he saw the tower that Lindy really knew he had made it). Skywriting was another of Citroën's notions and, in those airplane-mad days, a very good one. It foundered, however, on the flinty face of French bureaucracy, which was willing enough to let Citroën put his name across the sky in letters a mile high—providing he paid

for the air he used, per cubic meter. It happened after his death, but Citroën would have appreciated the mad stunt of the restaurateur François Lecot, who lived halfway between Paris and Monte Carlo. Every day, for 365 consecutive days, Lecot drove his Citroën to Paris, then to Monaco, then home, a neat total of 400,000 kilometers, say 248,000 miles, a record no one has since broken.

A Franco-Russian half-track system called Kégresse had come to Citroën's attention. He acquired the rights and built half-track Citroën trucks for Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil, who were planning the first trans-Sahara crossing by automobile. The expedition ran from December 1922 to March 1923, was a tremendous *succès d'estime*. Between 1923 and 1934, three more Citroën-Kégresse expeditions were made, across Africa, across Asia and into the arctic. They brought to Citroën both publicity that drove his competitors to despair and recognition as a benefactor to science and technology of the first order.

Really rolling now, Citroën pulled off, in 1934, the coup that was to assure his place among the immortals of automobilism: the Traction Avant Citroën, the front-wheel-drive car. Front-wheel drive was no new thing. Indeed, the first vehicle to move under its own power, Cugnot's steam carriage of 1769, ran on front-wheel power; the American Christie and the Frenchman Grégoire had made demonstrable use of it, too. But in Citroën's first front-wheel-drive automobile, the drive system was only part of an over-all design so farseeing and so well integrated that it stayed in production without basic change for 23 years, a record that ranks it with the Model T Ford and the Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce —properly so, for the Series 11 Citroën was years ahead of its time: The body and chassis were unitized, the suspension was torsion bar, the steering rack-and-pinion, the 4-cylinder engine running overhead valves. The vehicle was so low it needed no running boards and the pedals were suspended, a system thought sophisticated 20 years later. The Traction Avant's road holding, springing out of a low center of gravity, torsion bars and front-wheel drive, was, for 1934, extraordinary, even revelatory, and early professional testers made no attempt to bury their enthusiasms. Fifteen years later, it was still thought exemplary.

The Traction Avant was Citroën's greatest triumph—and his downfall. Development and tooling costs had run into millions of francs and the company was deep into the banks. There must have been days when Citroën thought bitterly of the piles of 1000-franc plaques he had thrown across the tables of Deauville. He was desperately ill, too, with cancer of the stomach. For a time, tossing money from one account to another like a virtuoso juggler, he managed to survive, but the wolves were on the watch and the secret didn't keep. A major supplier panicked and called a demand note. That tore it. The money wasn't in the box. For Citroën, the alternatives were to sell out or to go bankrupt. Michelin took 57 percent of the stock. The following year, in July of 1935, Citroën died, but the thrust he had put into his enterprise followed on like a jet stream. The original 4-cylinder Traction Avant, the 11, was increased in power from the original 45 hp to 59 and a 6-cylinder version, the 15, ran to 76 hp. In the last of the 15s, Series H, the rear was sprung by a hydropneumatic system presaging the notably far-out suspension of today's SM. Innovation pressed on innovation. In 1937, the Citroën works had on the road a vehicle—it was a little much to call it an automobile, although technically it certainly was—called the 2CV, for *cheval-vapeur*, or steam horse, the French horsepower unit. The 2CV was basic transport of an ilk the world hadn't seen since the Model T Ford: a cheap, indestructible, go-anywhere device. It didn't appear in quantity until 1948, when it was in such frantic demand that for a long time, a good used *deux chevaux* brought as much on the market as the list price of a new one, and sometimes more. The 2CV ranks in a dead heat with the Chrysler Airflow and the "tank" Bugatti race car as the ugliest motor vehicle ever built, but its virtues soared far above mere aesthetic values. The 2-cylinder air-cooled engine churned out just enough power to produce 50 mph downhill and 40 on the level, but it was well made of premium-grade materials. The ride was surprisingly comfortable, almost indifferent to road surface; the seats were quickly removable and the cloth roof rolled back, accommodating the 2CV to almost any odd-shaped load—a farmer could stuff a half-grown calf into it, for example. The *deux chevaux* was primitive but well thought out. If a half ton of something in back pointed the headlights to the sky, a wheel under the dash would crank them down—useful in fog, too. The windshield wipers were economically driven off the speedometer, so that they went fastest at high speeds, but if the rate was too slow for traffic, a hand crank could be cut in. Eventually, there was a two-engine, four-wheel-drive 2CV, the Sahara, highly regarded by desert travelers.

As big a noise as the original Traction Avant had made came out of the 1955 Paris salon. The Citroën company, always a bear for preannouncement security of new models, had an obvious sensation—obvious because, by nightfall on opening day, there were 12,000 orders for it on the books. This was the DS 19, a superlatively refined treatment of the 1934 groundbreaker. Power came out of a 73-hp version of the 1934 4-cylinder engine, but everything else was startlingly new: the stretched, shark-nose shape, much glassed, the sensuously comfortable and roomy interior, the first disk brakes on a production touring car and a multipurpose hydraulic system that provided suspension, shock absorption, level ride, jacking, power steering, power brakes and actuation of clutch and transmission. Early onlookers of a technical turn of mind were doubters. They thought it most unlikely that nitrogen gas and hydraulic fluid, in such a welter of reservoirs, lines and valves, could successfully be combined into the kind of genie Citroën was claiming. They were wrong. The system is into its 16th year now and even under the heavy demands of Paris taxi service, it has soldiered on. And as for comfort and roadability, a second generation of test drivers had to go to the thesaurus for new superlatives. One respected technician claimed that at 50 miles an hour, he couldn't detect a foot-wide, six-inch-deep pothole. A cheaper version of the DS 19, the ID, came along a year later; it had a simpler interior and manual controls. The DS 19 got an all-new engine—with a displacement of 2.2 liters—in 1966, when the model designation went to DS 21.

The Light 11 and the DS 19 were father and mother of the Citroën SM, the engine aside, that being a direct descendant of the 1929 V16 Maserati. It's a mark of the white-water rush of technology that the V16, thundering and shaking, would push a race car 150-odd mph and the 1971 V6, a bit over 12 inches long and 300 pounds in weight, will move a full four-seater coupe at 140 in near silence. The SM's fishlike slipperiness offers part of the answer. The Citroën body designers lay down their base lines on air-tunnel data, not on their concept of projected public taste. (The car is eight inches wider in front than in the rear.) The driver commands this power from a seat adjustable seven ways, single-spoke oval wheel in hand, through a 5-speed gearbox on which fourth *and* fifth are overdrive. The French like to call a fast car a *bolide*, a thunderbolt, but the SM is more than that, really a sports/limousine, a motorcarriage that makes one think of the characterization commonly tagged to the great 320-hp SJ Duesenberg of the Thirties: either the fastest luxury car or the most luxurious fast car that money can buy.