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Dream Job as Tuning Designer

Michele Viandante has been Chief Designer at AC Schnitzer for 21 years

Italian **Michele Viandante** has led the Design Department of **AC Schnitzer** since the company's foundation in 1987, and is responsible for all design - whether for wheels, bodystyling components or interior accessories. We interviewed him.

?: Mr. Viandante, in practical terms you are responsible for all designs which have ever left the AC Schnitzer production halls. Many of your designs have caused a furore in the automotive press, most recently the GP3.10. GAS POWERED. But you didn't acquire all your knowledge from a Design Course. Tell us how you, with your varied background, came to be Chief Designer at AC Schnitzer.

From my youth, I've always been interested in engineering and of course design. Even as a young boy, I was designing and making things to make everyday life easier and above all more beautiful. But to explain in detail would sidetrack this conversation. By training as an engraver, I learned the skills to design small, beautiful, valuable and unique products; I added my own ideas and used the whole as a symbiosis for later development. After my training, I spent 6 years restoring classic cars to earn money. There I learned the "secrets" of bodywork construction and various painting techniques. In the meantime, my enthusiasm for painting and car design came further into focus. And the result was a fusion of artist and car-freak. At AC Schnitzer, this fusion has been fully exploited, and the challenge of the tasks facing me, the autodidactic development and training in the fields of computing, aerodynamics, clay modelling, working with carbon fibre etc. led to the present fortunate and successful collaboration.

?: Can you remember your very first product for AC Schnitzer, and where you gained your inspiration?

After 21 years this is a difficult question to answer. I believe it was a 3-series – E30. I wanted to combine something from motorsport with a touch of elegance.

?: Was it difficult to establish a particular direction for the first designs? First of all you had to create a specific AC Schnitzer style to cover a variety of products: wheels as much as spoiler skirts and exhaust systems. And a red thread had to run through them all.

Naturally establishing a design direction is not easy, but through talks, opinions, suggestions and a little "craziness", you reach a consensus. This must then be implemented, tested and supported with studies, and throughout the red thread must be retained and perfected every time.

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?: How would you say the AC Schnitzer style had developed over the last 20 years. Has it adapted to the new BMW lines, or does it have its own independent development?

In the last 20 years, a lot has changed. Previously the emphasis lay 80 percent on performance and aerodynamic efficiency. Today the aspects of design and exclusivity play a far greater role. In the course of the years, we have adapted our products accordingly. The BMW style is of course the "basic model", otherwise you'd have to build a whole new vehicle body. The real art lies in placing accents: you have to make the car more attractive, more sporting and above all more unique. Only then can we maintain our claim to be trendsetters. Our concept cars play a special role, with their unusual paintwork or extravagant design elements which sometimes polarise opinions, but above all are intended to show - and have shown - what can be improved and how. One factor common to all our products: AC Schnitzer models must provoke emotions in our customers, they must never be inconspicuous or boring.

?: Where do you draw your inspiration for new designs? Are there particular rituals for getting in a creating mood?

As I've said, inspiration is an indefinable concept which is difficult to explain, but you "train" it over the course of time. Naturally you cannot force inspiration. It comes unexpectedly, at any time of the day or night, when you're playing sport, anywhere - you see something, observe, think about it and then an idea is born which can be used in a new project. And as a classics enthusiast, you are always "updating" accents. The mood comes from internal satisfaction with what has been created, and recognition in the press, from customers etc. You "improve", or rather "sate" the hunger for innovation, that is *my* stimulus for mood.

?: What do people who order a vehicle from AC Schnitzer really expect from design? Have there been developments here too?

A customer who buys an AC Schnitzer model expects something special. A premium product which is anything but standard. What people expect from us is quite easy to explain: clear lines, clean, subtle but imaginative and unique. Often copied, but - thank God - never equalled; and above all, the highest quality. They want more performance, exclusivity and love of detail. Developments always move on, otherwise we would not be so successful. Stagnation and resting on your laurels are no stimulus for successful futuristic design. We have to keep on the ball.

?: Which of your designs is your absolute favourite?

That's a hard one. All new models are a new challenge, but the Topster must be one of my all time favourites.

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?: Imagine you had a one-off opportunity to design a completely different product. What would it be?

I've got many ideas, but life just isn't long enough to experience everything. Ideally I'd like to design a modern and attractive train which would give people a totally different feeling of travelling by rail.

?: What designs of everyday products or vehicles in automobile history do you think are particularly successful, or what are your personal favourites?

In reality, all design products are sources of motivation and ideas. But to apply all of them would take forever. My favourites are of course cars by Ferrari, Porsche, Aston Martin and Lamborghini as classic models.

?: How long does it take to develop a design, e.g. a wheel, through to production readiness, and what are the individual steps?

Design – as we've already said – is a combination of ideas, suggestions and reality. You have to visualise an idea, depict it and make it reality. Sometimes it's quick, sometimes it takes an "eternity" to achieve the right result. Production-readiness is a factor which is difficult to specify, as it doesn't just depend on us. Different tests have to be passed, and only then can production begin.

?: You do it all yourself, from the first pencil sketches through to the clay modelling on the vehicle. How do you become so multi-talented? You can also paint very well, as the pictures in your office confirm.

As I've said: In life you have to help yourself! But joking aside, it comes from learning different professions from the bottom, and the endless challenge to yourself to make everything perfectly as you imagined. And of course you can only achieve that objective yourself. Naturally you can learn a great deal, but you have to have some talent. Painting could be described as the internal expression which reveals the soul, not only technically but also surrealistically and stylistically.

?: What advice would you give young people who want to be designers? Can you offer practical tips?

What would I advise? I would recommend any young person wanting to be a designer, to gain practical experience in as many fields as possible. This is the key for rapid and flexible achievement. You have to implement your own ideas systematically, where possible without external influence. Only in this way can you guarantee that the designer can bring new ideas or changes into any phase of the development.

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Although it might sound rather unorthodox for a creative profession, I always recommend remaining realistic, offering products and solutions which are technically feasible. It is important to develop a feeling for beauty and the harmony of lines and colours. Questioning yourself all the time is also important, as is the ability to prove yourself, to fight, to learn and simply absorb like a sponge the impressions of nature and its infinitely beautiful forms and colours, and finally apply these. Without diligence, it's worthless.

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AC Schnitzer is certified to DIN EN ISO 9001:2000
Further information on AC Schnitzer and high-resolution
images are available on the internet at the address
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