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Citroën
the chamber orchestra

"The dolphin, the leopard, the swift, they each move at a speed consistent with their environment, each using a minimum of energy. What a great lesson for a stylist."

tasto solo



The run-up

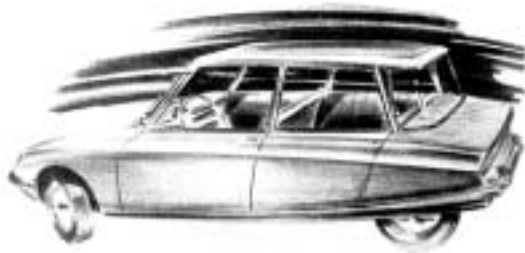
Where Simca was a well laid-out, modern company full of light and air, equipped with modern workshops, the ambience Opron found when he entered Citroën's Bureau d'Études in the Rue du Théâtre in Paris in 1962 could not have been more different. This chapter will offer a detailed description of the methods of the Bureau d'Études and the circumstances Opron worked under, because his career at Citroën has been an essential influence on his later work in the car industry. How did he get on with Bertoni, who he considered to be his 'maître'? To which degree was the thirty-year old Opron influenced by Bertoni and the Bureau d'Études? To quote Opron, Citroën at the time was an "orchestre de chambre", a small number of musicians that performed minutely rehearsed music for a select audience.

1962. Geneviève Opron-Mercier read a mysterious advert in the newspaper Le Monde: "Important industrial group is looking for a designer who has already proven his creative abilities. Applications can be submitted via the offices of this newspaper." Geneviève showed the advert to Opron, much to their mutual excitement, because they both suspected that the advertiser might be Citroën, a position that any stylist at the time would give his right arm for.

Opron in AutoHebdo: "Together with a couple of friends I replied to the advert of course, and we were invited to come to the Quai André Citroën (then the Quai de Javel). It was near lunchtime, I remember it very well, and we went to show our portfolios. The personnel manager insisted I meet Bertoni the same day. He was away, working at the test track of La Ferté, and I was given an appointment with him at four o'clock. I checked with the doorman in the Rue du Théâtre somewhat early and found the building to be rather gloomy and dirty. The doorman resided in a small cubicle. Behind it was a bare room, 'furnished' with one rickety table and two old chairs where I was made to wait, I swear! Just before four, an old 2CV pulled up and out jumped Bertoni, wearing shorts and bathed in sweat. He asked me what my business was, and I replied that I had come about the advert. He seemed to be informed. He then asked me to show what I had done so far so I opened my portfolio with drawings of Simca models. He threw them on the floor, poking them with his cane and stated that he did not think much of them. He angrily bounced his cane off my portfolio once more, sending my drawings flying across the room! I found his behaviour unacceptable and I did not hesitate to tell him so. He picked up my drawings for me, smiled and said: 'I do find you interesting though!' I told him the feeling was not mutual, and left.

When I came home I told my wife that I would never work with a man like that. After some three weeks I suddenly received a letter of appointment from Citroën. Later, I confronted Bertoni with his behaviour. He insisted he did it on purpose to test my response, which I thought was a dangerous game. Bertoni seemed to be a cold man, but in actual fact he was a bit of a rough diamond. I have always considered his sudden death in 1964 to be wholly unfair. He was probably one of the greatest artists the world has ever known and so far nobody has bothered to produce a book that does justice to his immense talent."





The introduction

The almost mystical reputation of the Bureau d'Études amongst engineers could not be further removed from the state of the building in the Rue de Théâtre that housed Citroën's innovative heart. In 1962 it is dirty, neglected, dark, divided up into dark little rooms where people worked under poor light on antiquated drawing tables. The building itself had become far too small. Robert Opron would later be involved in the preparations to move to the hypermodern Vélizy in 1968.

During the first three months he was employed at the 'Méthodes' section of the Bureau d'Études, an efficient way to get to know his colleagues and for the company to ascertain the true qualities of their new employee. During that time, Opron did not get to meet Bertoni once, but later became his assistant, completing a small group of workers that includes Latté, Dargent and a number of craftsmen. Bertoni assigns him to the development of the estate version of the AMI6. Although Opron's work is up to standard and the result is entirely consistent with the style of the AMI6, he later disclosed that he did not quite appreciate the AMI6 design: "The AMI6 is too baroque, in fact, it is a typical example of Bertoni's style. I like his Deity and the Traction, but I find the lines of the AMI 6 too complicated."



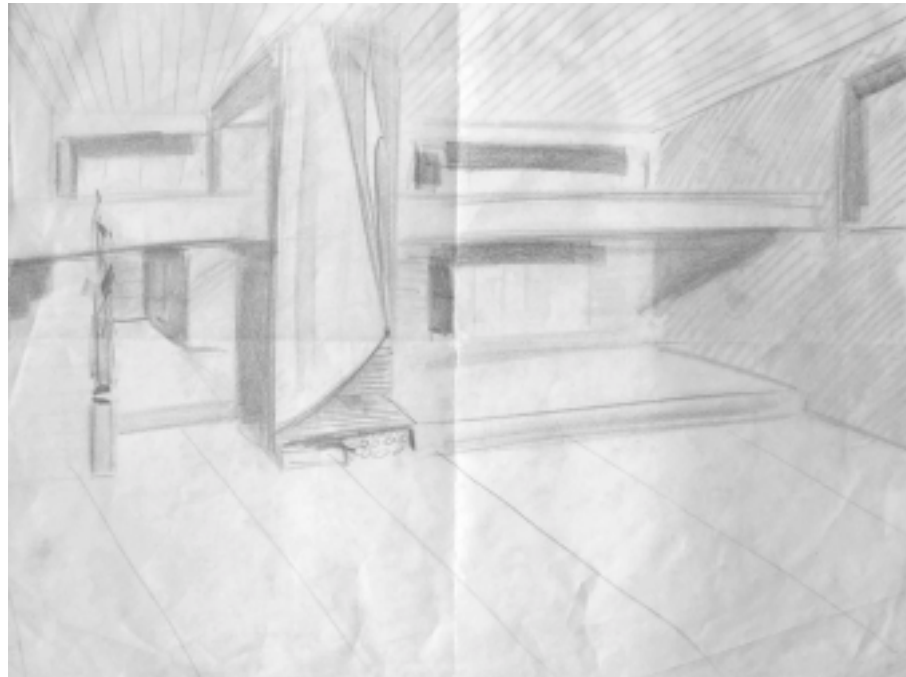




The master and his successor, Opron's memories of Bertoni

Bertoni's character and qualities

Opron: "We would have lunch regularly in a restaurant near where we worked. He was very partial to sardines with a touch of vinegar. I like them too. He would mash the sardines to a pulp. I enjoyed it too, always have done, it was not him who introduced me to this particular dish. We both loved sardines, in fact we discovered that we enjoyed a similar culinary taste, which brought us even closer. We used to exchange books and did not really speak of our work and cars all that often. He was a nice fellow, a personality, very artistic. I believe he was a man who never bore a grudge, which is rare, this made him a very interesting personality! I once did a drawing while sitting in front of the open fireplace of his house in Antony."



Opron: "One day we went to an exhibition in Paris together in his car. When we stopped at a red light, a DS pulled up next to us with a lady at the wheel. She rolled down the window to ask Bertoni for directions, as he was closest to her. She was a magnificent woman, wearing a lovely hat and Bertoni appeared suitably impressed. He was like putty in her hands, smiling his most charming smile while they chatted away. This lady and I were on either side of Bertoni. Afterwards I put it to him that this nice lady would never know that she had asked directions from the very man who had designed her car! Bertoni did not reply, just smiled, with eyes half closed. This was a rare moment, for he was possessed by such incredible rage, throwing things, insulting people, breaking everything..."

Robert Opron: "He was a great personality, with unusual talents. A sculptor, an architect and a great technician. He was a very proud person, with a warm character, although he was a master at hiding it. For instance, he would not hesitate to share out his Christmas bonus amongst his five best workers. His oeuvre is ambiguous and is marked by numerous different facets. He was very alert. I like his sculptures for their obvious academic character, but I am not that fond of his drawings. He disliked Le Corbusier and modern art."

Opron: "When we went to the Musée d'Art Décoratif, where some car designs were on display, I pointed out to him that they all resembled dinosaurs. I went on to explain that it was probably necessary to add some force to the shapes. Such an approach is now a thing of the past. Nowadays we use textiles and synthetic materials that are light and spacious. They ventilate well, absorb perspiration and are comfortable to the touch. The time of dinosaurs and models like your Traction are well and truly over! Bertoni didn't take very kindly to my comments."

Bertoni's methods

Opron: "Bertoni had created a most unusual working method: the 'direct' sculpture in 1:1 scale. He worked like a true sculptor in actual size to establish the flaws in light and shadow, to see the dynamics without needing a 'cahier des charges'. Bertoni's smaller models were always made in plastiline, which has the added advantage that it stays pliable for a long time. I worked with plaster, as it was more cost-effective and quick to work with. Bertoni considered the shape of the bodywork to be more important than technology. In his view the placing of the engine and suspension should be adapted to the designed shape. I do not quite agree, but I can understand Bertoni from a sculptor's point of view. Bertoni's attitude was often the cause of a certain animosity and irritation between him and the engineers."

Bertoni, Bercot and their relationship with the 2CV

Opron: "Murattet once told me that Bertoni had wanted a far more traditional bodywork for the 2CV (!). Pierre Boulanger however wanted a purely technical vehicle, no stylist was allowed to touch it, and cost effectiveness was the keyword. Bertoni didn't care much for the 2CV and was hardly involved in its development. Bercot was too much of an aesthician, a poet and a musician to appreciate the 2CV. In the later development stages Bertoni was allowed to put the finishing touches on the 2CV's bodywork, the shape of which had already been determined by the engineers. Cadiou was an intermediary between Boulanger's successor, and Bercot and Bertoni. Bercot said to me that he considered the 2CV to be a kind of Quasimodo, a designers' freak. Bercot loved piano music, Rubenstein belonged to his circle of friends, and he appreciated Chopin, a perfect language, well-articulated, a pleasure to listen to."





Bertoni, the DS and the AMI6

Opron: "The car of the century, without any doubt, is the Deity. I consider it to be his masterpiece. It was the Golden Age of Bertoni. Basically he was a baroque artist, just look at the AMI6, which he was very pleased with: it does not originate from the same era. Bertoni developed increasingly baroque and complicated shapes. I find that incredible and I suspect that Lefèvre had a major influence on the design of the Traction and the DS as he sketched the contours of the Traction. Many of Bertoni's earlier drawings of the DS have baroque, rounded shapes that were highly fashionable in the United States at the time. It is not surprising that initially the car was nicknamed 'the rhinoceros'. It was not until Lefèvre and Cadiou indicated how they wanted the DS's nose to look, that the real shape of the DS emerged."

"When I started work there, I didn't recognise the spirit of the present. I consider his DS to be a sublime creation, but I did not like the AMI. It had not evolved, it was too baroque and old-fashioned and I missed the aerodynamic aspect."



cher Peter

En ce qui concerne les nouveaux phares de la DS,
il n'y a aucune ambiguïté, l'idée de Base
est de Bertoni.

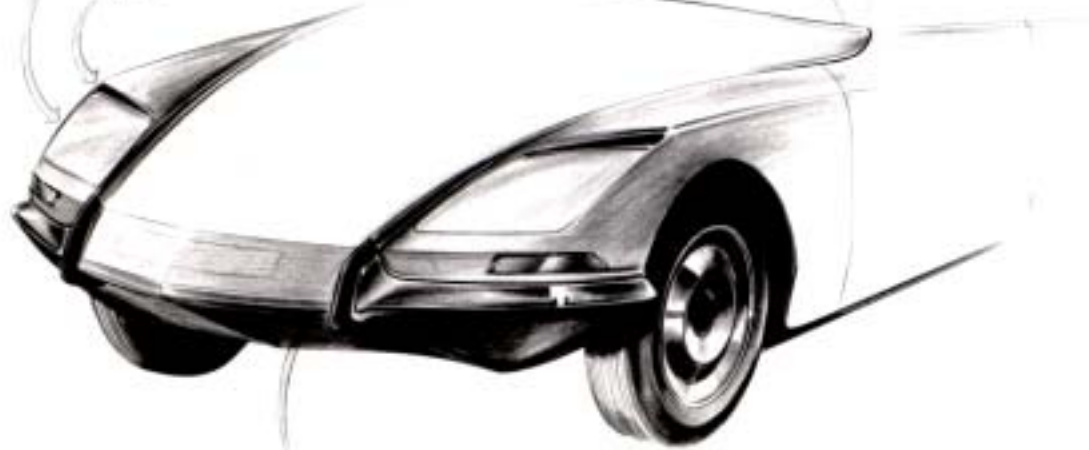
J'ai vécu cette période, j'étais présent
quand Bertoni a réalisé en plâtre, à l'échelle
grandeur la seule esquisse en volume.
Après la mort de Bertoni, j'ai finalisé ce
projet afin qu'il devienne réalisable.
Je voudrais ajouter que le monde de la
création industrielle est souvent perturbé
par des collaborateurs qui s'identifient aux
réalisations qu'ils admirent, sans y avoir
participé. Le travail des historiens devient
alors difficile.

J. P. Pirelli

"There cannot be any doubt about the headlights of the DS. The basic idea was Bertoni's. I was there during that period, and watched Bertoni produce the first full-size plaster model. After Bertoni passed away, I finished the project, so it was ready for production. I would like to add that the world of industrial design is often confused by workers who have identified themselves with creations that they greatly admire, although they played no part whatsoever in their conception. This makes the work of historians more difficult."



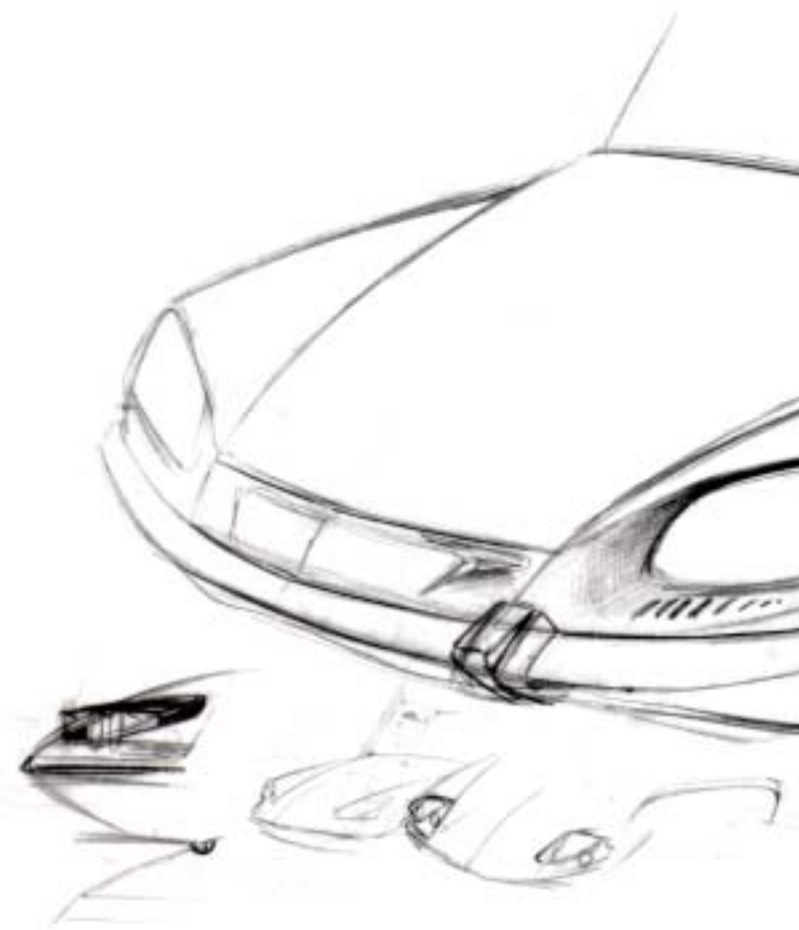
Front view sketch
and model

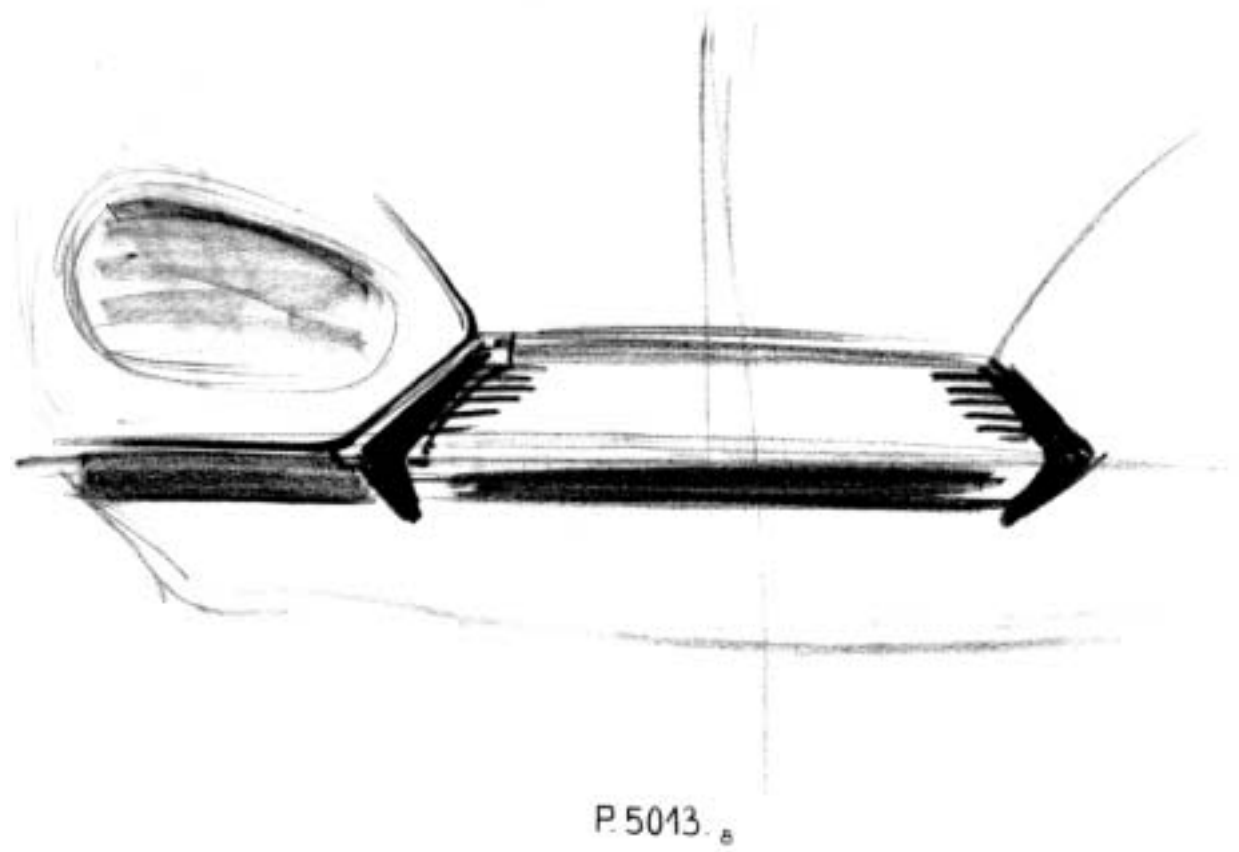


Front view sketch
and model

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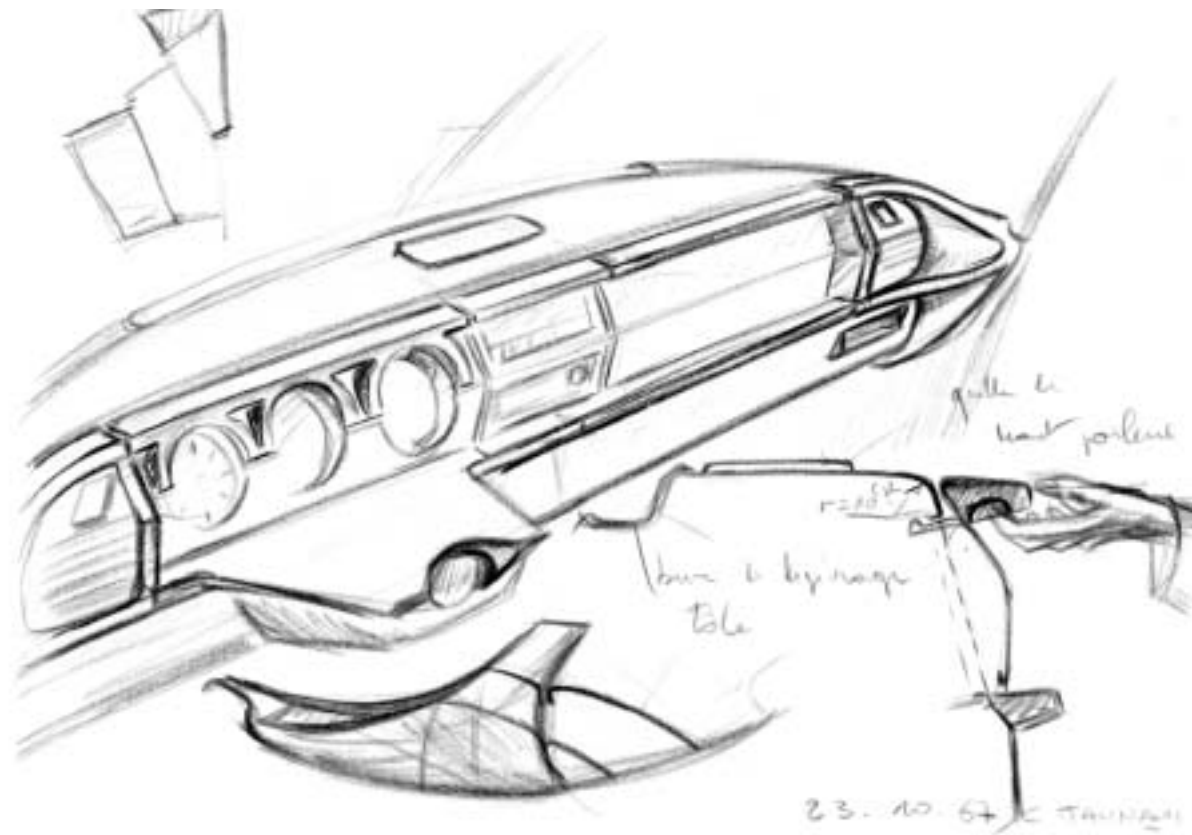
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Styles

Opron: "He hated modern artists that did not believe in what they produced. He did not like Le Corbusier, in fact he hated his ideas as well as his work. Bertoni and I had discussions about the definition of baroque and classic. Something is baroque when no more can be added, and something is classic when no more can be removed. Something classic is never old, baroque is old. I think I have to agree with him there. I do agree with him on that."

Robert Opron: "We never clashed, on the contrary, we often saw each other privately and there was a degree of mutual respect. He often remarked on my differing views on the subject of bodywork, art and culture, but that did not stop us from discussing them. In actual fact, we worked along parallel lines and I was given ample space for my own ideas. It was a glorious era! Freedom, researching shapes in such freedom. It was very reassuring to work with a superior like him. Reassuring because he was so skilled, and possessed such a degree of intelligence that he just knew what needed to be done. That was new to me, such natural talent. I considered Bertoni to be my tutor and mentor, which was a great privilege."

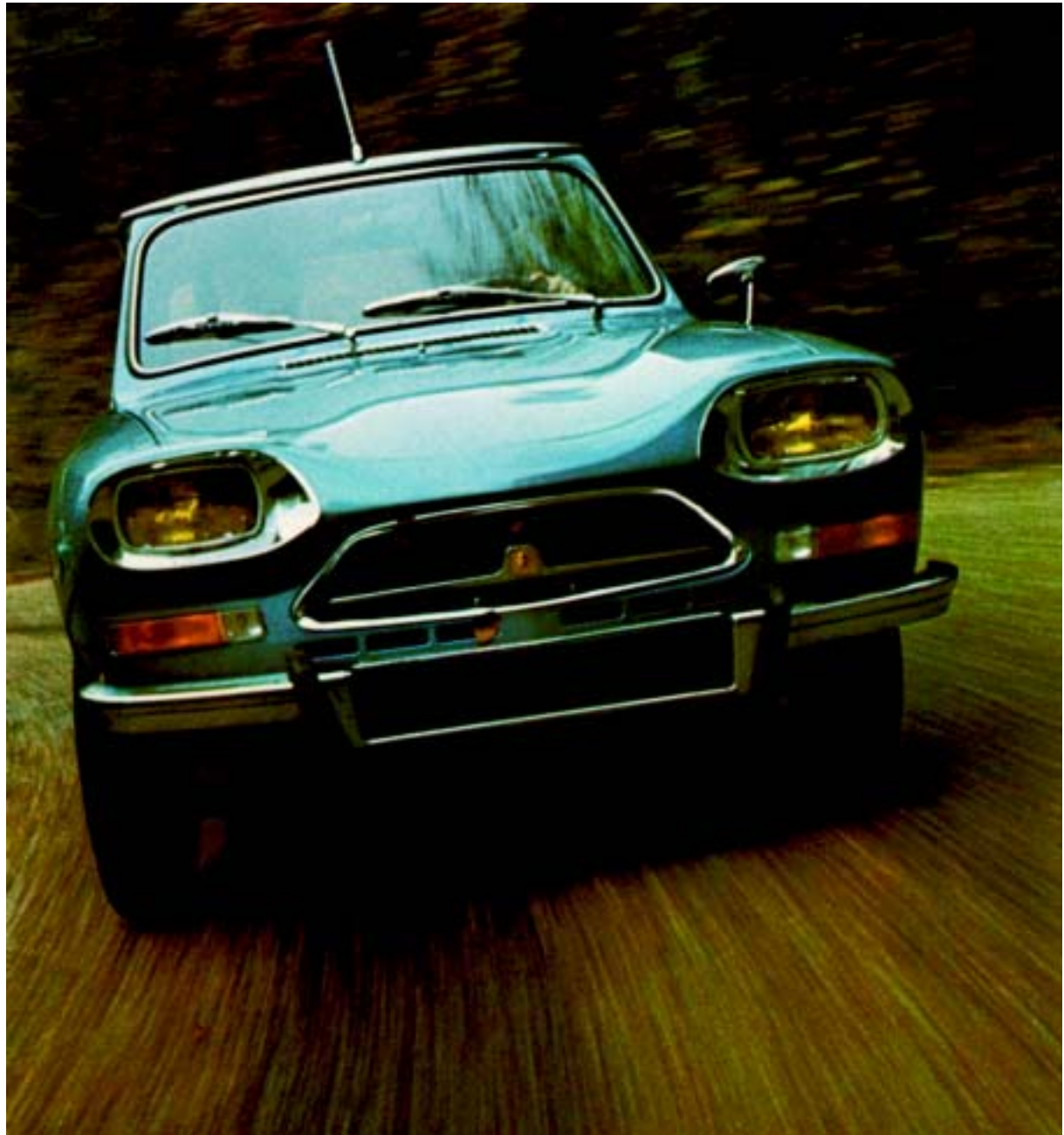
A journey to Frankfurt

Opron: "One day, Bertoni and I travelled to the Auto Salon in Frankfurt. When we arrived, he said: 'You can go in if you like, I won't. The board of directors wanted me to go to the Salon, but I'm not going. It is not worth the trouble to look at how things should NOT be done.' He went to the Zoo instead, and returned with sketches of monkeys in motion. I stayed at the Salon briefly, as I had agreed to meet Bertoni at the Zoo. I just put in an appearance at the Salon to say hello to the Citroën people. Bertoni liked drawing animals. Now and again he would give some of his drawings away to people at the Bureau d'Études."

Other views on Bertoni

Opron: "Bertoni was a solo artist. He undoubtedly possessed great talents but he did not communicate them very well. Many technicians would not speak to him, and his direct colleagues Latté and Dargent avoided him because of his brute, blunt and insulting attitude. He was highly strung, with a choleric character. He was outspoken, lacked subtlety, and at the same time he was very expressive, flamboyant even. Latté and Dargent suffered a lot while Bertoni was in charge. I can understand that, but deep down he was a man with a warm heart. He was a true artist and a genius. His appearance resembled that of Quasimodo, which didn't stop him from successfully courting one of the most beautiful dancers of the Paris Opera."





Naming the AMI6

Robert Opron: "One year after I started working with him, Bertoni was trying to come up with a name for a car. From a list he had composed, I chose 'la Dauphine'. Bertoni replied: of course you would choose that name. 'La Dauphine' for 'le Dauphin' (literally: the Crown Princess for the Crown Prince).' As it turned out, the name was not an option, as it had already been registered by Renault. From then on though, I understood that he had accepted me and that I had become part of his work. We had lunch together sometimes and worked together in the studio every evening."

Bertoni's succession

Opron: "The day Bertoni died, 7 February 1964, I remember as if it were yesterday, we were assembled by Cadiou and Bercot. We all stood in Bertoni's studio, feeling a profound sense of loss. His death to me seemed to be a great injustice as he was probably one of the most gifted designers in the world. Cadiou and Bercot asked me to be acting manager of the Style department. Cadiou said literally: 'Opron, you should elaborate on Bertoni's work'. He explicitly did not mention 'continue'. A few months later I was appointed 'Responsable de Style'. Becoming his successor was not an assignment, it was a test and a tall order! Apart from that I was the junior employee, the youngest of them all."

