

MAN AND MACHINE

CELEBRATION OF AN ERA OF BEAUTIFUL DESIGN

There was a man outside on the sidewalk in front of a high-end piece of commercial real estate on Madison Avenue in Manhattan. He was dressed in the stylish ease exhibited by brunchers on Sundays in the city, and he had a gigantic, floppy yellow Labradoodle on a leash. No one noticed him until his voice could be heard drifting in through the open front doors. “Just my leetle puppy?” he intoned.

His Italian accent pricked up all the ears of the occupants in the retail space, which just so happens to be the temporary home to the Stuart Parr Collection of 1960s and '70s motorcycles: 26 examples of streetbikes from Ducati, MV Agusta, Laverda, and Magni. Stuart is showing the bikes, which he accumulated more as a commuter than a collector, in an exhibit he’s calling *Art of the Italian Two Wheel*, most likely a name cribbed from a book by Ducati authority and writer of the exhibit’s catalog, Ian Falloon, *The Art of Ducati*.

“He can come in,” Stuart said, zooming to the front door to call off the guards. Of course he could. The guy looked like Valentino Rossi, and his pleading facial expression resembled that of a kid locked outside the roller-coaster gates.

These bikes were the most delicious eye candy to the visiting Italian, who Stuart found out grew up coveting them as the rare equivalent to Lamborghinis that they were and still are, and that his name is Lorenzo from Napoli. Walking through the space with Stuart, who, when speaking about the bikes, gradually let it slip that he rides them, and, in fact, they were all his, the Italian exclaimed “These are all yours?” And he then took Stuart’s hand, lifted it, and bowed his head to it as if Stuart were royalty.

This is bike passion. And what better place to exhibit it than in a stylishly disheveled barren piece of prime real estate, where bikes are placed on pedestals and suspended like artwork from the walls? Even the shadows of the bikes elicit “oohs” and “aahs” with their multicolored light refractions and sleek shapes.

Stuart has more in common with the giddy Italian passerby than some sort of stuffy completist bike collector, and if you try to get facts out of him, he quickly

digresses into giddy stories about where and when he’s ridden the bike, and how it sounds and how it’s different from the other commuters he selects from in his garage each morning.

The guy bought the bikes because they’re beautifully crafted, very limited edition machines that demonstrate the phenomenal Italian ability to merge performance with aesthetics. Intertwined with the square cases and the round cases and the rotary discs and cylinders are exquisitely crafted bevels encased in glass, tailpipes carefully protected by perforated chrome, and cables and hoses that are color-coordinated to accent the bikes’ designs.

The era of Italian design represented in Stuart’s collection is one fraught with competition from a new obsession with automobiles and subsequent challenges that are overcome with the stylish élan of Lorenzo and his Labradoodle. In MV Agusta’s case, financial woes created conflict about whether the manufacturer should drop its racing program, which it didn’t, and instead hangs on with a hamstrung racing team and a



reduction of production models to just two: the 350 and the 750.

Across the Art of the Italian Two Wheel shop in Ducativille, a 1974 Ducati 750 Super Sport Desmo represents the dawn of a new era for that manufacturer. A relatively unknown fact, Ducati found its racing legs when Paul Smart won the 1972 Imola 200 riding the Ducati 750 Imola Desmo. Stuart just happens to have the ultimate trophy from that race, a 750 SS “green frame” production bike built to commemorate Ducati’s winning appearance on the grid, featuring the “round case” engine that makes so many collectors drool with envy. “There were only 430 of these made, and 1,500 survived,” Stuart quips. “Everybody copied them, but this one is real. I have all the documentation.”

Elsewhere in the exhibit are other bikes with delicious pedigrees. One of Ian’s own bikes was procured by Stuart, a 1977 Ducati Darmah that has never been started. Across the aisle from that bike is a 1988 Ducati 750 F1, which Stuart bought from fellow Manhattan socialite Christopher Brooks, whose better half is former fashion editor Amanda Brooks. His hand affectionately placed on the bike’s tail, Stuart waxes nostalgic about the infamous Ghost Motorcycles shop in Port Washington on Long Island, New York, where Christopher bought the bike out of the crate in 1988.

Stuart first visited Ghost Motorcycles when he was 21 years old. “I couldn’t afford a carburetor. They had a green frame for sale for \$9,000.” Now, all these years later, he’s got his green frame and also the bike Christopher bought at the shop.

A semicircle of red, white, and blue 1970s MV Agustas freeze-framed in roaring start from the grid behind the windows at the front of the exhibition space looks like a paddock full of anxious horses, chomping at the bit to hit the streets. And no wonder, Stuart exercises



The 1974 Laverda 750 SFC.

them regularly as he travels from his architectural marvel of an apartment in SoHo (with Italian marble prominently featured) to meetings that range from design consults for his management client — the internationally renowned designer Marc Newson — to production talks for his new film about Nina Simone. Stuart is famous for a wide range of things, but maybe most famous for critically acclaimed *8 Mile*, the film he co-produced for another client, Eminem.

Stuart is the human equivalent of the bikes he collects, epitomizing design and cultural relevance, but also just ready to ride. Getting around on the wild streets of New York City presents its challenges, but “even just going out for lunch, riding for 15 minutes, it sort of calms you down,” Stuart says.

As far as any fears about having his bikes stolen when he rides them and parks them on city sidewalks, Stuart says he doesn’t worry about it. “Most people are interested in stealing new bikes, just like new cars,” he says. “There’s not a lot of vintage cars being stolen; they’re not shipped and broken up for parts. It’s easier to sell a stolen new bike than it is a stolen vintage one. It’s not going to be as valuable without a serial number on it.”

Worry is anathema to bike collecting, for Stuart, “I have the bike to take away stress, not to create stress.” Comparing himself to those who have great collections and “don’t ride a thing,” Stuart is emphatic. “It’s important to enjoy these motorcycles or don’t have them.”

Walking through the exhibit with his new friend Lorenzo, Stuart points out that everyone says you have to be gentle with vintage Ducatis “like they’re delicate pieces of jewelry, but they were designed to rev high and go like stink! The bikes run better at a higher rpm.”

In terms of maintenance, Stuart notes “You can get



The 1981 900 SS beauty shot and cockpit view.

any part or have it made,” but other than new electronic systems, most of his bikes have all original parts.

He turns to Lorenzo. “When you were a kid, what did you do?” And they mime the international rev gesture, opening the throttle wide. “The bikes were built for that.”

Stuart was one of those rev-happy kids. Asked when he first became interested in motorcycles, he takes a scrap of paper off the table in front of him and starts to “drive” it around all the surfaces in front of him, making the motor noises we all made as kids.

He’d been riding “from the first minute my parents weren’t looking,” starting out on minibikes and then making the leap, literally, to a Yamaha RD400. “I let out the clutch and jumped about 3’,” he laughs.

Stuart’s childhood friends in Northern California came from a family with a whole lot of bikes in the garage, and maybe that’s where he got the ideas that more is more and bikes should always be ridden. That family would load a bunch of bikes into a trailer and head out to the woods for adventure.

“I just started acquiring bikes and riding them,” Stuart says. “I didn’t set out to own every one of some kind of bike, and there’s not a chance that I have even close to a favorite. I love riding them all. They have different personalities, and they drive differently.”

Picture Stuart’s morning routine: he goes to his garage and smiles as he chooses the style and speed that he’ll use that day. In fact, he recently rode one of his MV Agustas to the Metropolitan Museum’s Costume Institute Gala. So now picture a guy in a tux riding a vintage bike and picture the smile on his face.

It’s easy to find that smile online. When you Google the “Stuart Parr Collection,” all sorts of videos show him riding the bikes around the gallery or heading out after the exhibit closes. Always, he’s got the same grin on his face. The same one that shows up on the visages of passersby even after the exhibit closes. The doors might be locked, but the windows are tall, and the lighting is set up so the exhibit stays awake in the city that never sleeps.

A few moments after Stuart rides away on “the only German bike in my collection” (a fabulous ’70s-era BMW R80 airhead), a cluster of tourists finishes taking photos and clears the way for a young dad and his toddler son. At first, the man takes pictures of his boy in front of the exhibit windows. But then he hands the camera over to the little man and becomes the grinning boy in the photo himself. That’s what the exhibit is for, and that’s what bikes are for: daydreams of speed and opening that throttle and riding. **M**

SOURCES

Stuart Parr Collection
285 Madison Ave.
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