

*Audio Guide Excerpt: Corradino D'Ascanio: Vespa 125
from the Italian Arts & Design: The 20th Century exhibition*

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[Audio ROM sound sting]

"*Sembra una Vespa!*", "It looks like a wasp!" is what Enrico Piaggio exclaimed when he first saw what would become a symbol of fun and freedom for several generations as well as an icon of Italian design. The Piaggio company had been founded in 1884 by Enrico's father Rinaldo. It specialized in the transportation industry, producing ship fittings, rail carriages, luxury coaches and, after the First World War, airplanes and seaplanes. Enrico, who took over the company after the Second World War, found a mission in addressing the need for a simple, sturdy and inexpensive vehicle to solve the problem of transportation that was so current in Italy at the time.

The first Vespa was produced in 1946 and was designed by aeronautical engineer Corradino D'Ascanio. D'Ascanio, who found motorcycles to be awkward and uncomfortable, wished to create a vehicle that was at once comfortable, safe and clean. The first prototype had a single shell chassis, protecting the rider from dirt and debris, and a wide central section with a narrow "waist". This profile and its characteristic buzzing sound made the "vespa" or wasp appellation highly appropriate. 2,000 units of the Vespa 98 were produced in 1946. By 1949, 35,000 Vespas had been produced. Within ten years, one million were on the road, being produced not only in Italy but also in Germany, Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Spain.

In years to come, the Vespa's "with-it" image was further enhanced by the film industry: picture Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn riding one in "Roman Holiday" and Anita Eckberg escaping the paparazzi in Fellini's "La Dolce Vita." Combining Italian design sophistication with an image of youthfulness, it became a symbol for the "mod scene" in Britain in the 1960s. The Vespa, as cute and friendly as it is, was a major player in putting Italian design on a world-wide stage.

[Audio ends with ROM sound sting]