

# KIT CARCHIVES

kitcar@petersenpub.com

By Harold Pace



## MERA, MERA ON THE WALL... WHICH WAS THE LOVELIEST FIERO OF ALL?

At least part of the success of the Ferrari 308 GTB/GTS can be laid at the feet of an imaginary private investigator named Thomas Magnum. *Magnum PI* starred the affable Tom Selleck and ruled the airwaves from 1980 to 1988. In the minds of many impressionable young viewers, Magnum had it all...rugged good looks, an ideal tropical location, a bevy of drop-dead gorgeous costars and a bright-red Ferrari that he didn't even have to pay for!

The Ferrari 308 GTB was introduced in 1975 as a companion to the competent but visually unexciting four-seat Dino 308 GT4. Ironically, when first introduced, the 308 GTB had a fiberglass body! In mid-'77, this was replaced by steel, and the lighter (by about 200 pounds) and more rare fiberglass 308s became instant collector's items. The convertible 308 GTS followed in '77, but was offered only in steel. Early 308s were powered by a DOHC 3L 255hp V-8 mounted transversely behind the seats—remarkably similar in concept to the later Pontiac Fiero's 2.8L V-6 arrangement.

The popularity of the Ferrari shape and the Magnum image was not lost on Bob Bracey at Corporate Concepts in Capac, Michigan. Corporate Concepts had been making motor homes, earth movers, and snowmobiles so they knew what was involved in building and marketing limited-production-run vehicles. When Bracey noticed similarities between the Fiero and the Ferrari in 1985, the wheels began to turn. It took two years to put the concept into production. The basic Ferrari shape was reworked and shortened to fit the stock Fiero platform.

The resulting replica was named the Mera, and was sold only in turnkey form through Pontiac dealers. New Fieros were shipped to Corporate Concepts where the factory bodies were removed and the Mera skins applied. Starting in 1987, they were sold with V-6 engines and manual four-speed, five-speed, or automatic transmissions. Pontiac dealers sold Meras with the standard Pontiac warranty on mechanical parts, while

Corporate Concepts stood behind the Mera parts for a year. Although the Mera was not an official Pontiac product, dealers were allowed to carry conversions on standard vehicles like custom vans. Prices started at about \$24,900 which, in 1987, was very close to Corvette money, but a lot less than a new \$63,000 Ferrari 328 (which had replaced the visually similar 308 in 1985).

Pontiac dealers were proud to park the newcomer in their showrooms, as it brought in gawkers and gave an exotic aura even to the plain-Jane Fieros. Most were sold in Florida and California. The '87 models were built on Fiero GT chassis. Pontiac wheels with plastic centers mounted 245/50VR-15 Goodyear tires, although alloy wheels from Hayashi were optional at the dealer level. There were a number of options, including a sunroof or T-top, cruise control, air conditioning, leather interior, a tilt wheel, and power windows and door locks. According to Corporate Concepts, a total of 85 '87 models were sold.

For 1988, the Mera remained much the same, except that the Pontiac wheels were replaced by Cromodora 7x5-inch wheels. Cromodora was an Italian wheel company that had made wheels for Ferrari at one point, and the new wheels resembled the star-pattern wheels that came on Ferraris. The Fiero Formula became the starting point for the new cars, as it was a better value than the GT. Another 153 cars were sold in 1988.

Several magazines tried the Mera on for size. After a certain amount of snickering about the sheep-in-wolf's-clothing concept, they found the cars were very well made, with high-quality ripple-free bodywork and reasonable fit and finish. Performance was, well, very Fiero-like and (like all Fieros) would have benefited from more oomph than the 135hp mill provided. However, the Mera was not aimed at high-performance fans, but at those who wanted a distinctive and practical touring car with competent handling and a high standard of finish.

Corporate Concepts had intended to sell about 1,000 Meras, but this number was not reached for two reasons. In 1987, Ferrari filed suit against them in court for trade-

mark infringement. Although Corporate Concepts repeatedly stated in its literature that "The Mera is not represented to be nor meant to be a replica or look-alike to any other vehicle," it could not possibly have been mistaken for anything but a Ferrari replica. In 1988, Corporate Concepts agreed not to build any more Meras, and Ferrari dropped all charges.

However, the reason this was settled so amicably was that Pontiac, not Ferrari, had fired the fatal shot into the Mera project. When the Fiero was axed by myopic mismanagement, the Mera project was dead. Corporate Concepts' contract with its dealers stated that they would not offer the Mera in kit form or assemble them on used platforms. So Corporate Concepts could not simply switch the Mera to kit form.

In 1990, Corporate Concepts sold the Mera molds to American Fiberglass in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, which sold it in kit form as the 308AF/GT. Dozens of other companies built similar replicas using molds pulled off Meras or Mera copies, but few held to the fit-and-finish standards of the originals. In 1991, Corporate Concepts showed a prototype for a special-bodied Ford Probe that was to be sold through Ford dealers, but it does not appear to have made it into production.

With under 250 cars produced, the Mera, like the original fiberglass-bodied Ferrari 308, has become a collector's item. Although many cars were altered by their owners with Ferrari emblems both inside and out, the originals had Mera logos. Meras tend to be maintained or restored to original condition rather than modified with flares or spoilers (which would lower their value). There is also a Mera Registry run by Rodney Dickman (414/762-9244) who maintains a list of lucky owners of these well-made replicas. The Mera shown below in side view is serial no. 8110, an '88 model owned by Dickman, and the other is the pride and joy of Greg Amundson, who brought it to the Northeast Replica Challenge this year.

KC

