

Moto Guzzi Museum - Conservation of 180 Motorcycles

MAY 2021

“History” often appears to us as an abstract concept: the exposition of interconnected human facts and events of the past. Moto Guzzi, however, produces motorbikes. It has done so without interruption since 1921, and the history of its 100 years is anything but abstract: it’s made up of people, technicians and motorcyclists like us, but also of technical drawings, heavy machinery, metal, bolts, motor oil and above all motorbikes.

The heart of the history of the Eagle is in the collection of the Moto Guzzi Museum at Via Parodi 57 in Mandello del Lario. Iconic, winning, revolutionary, one-of-a-kind or super popular models stand just a few metres from the production lines where the new Moto Guzzi bikes – those belonging to us members of the community – are made, giving us a glimpse of the evolution of a century of motorcycling.

We Guzzisti have this privilege, to be able to see, appreciate and understand history just inches away. Some of these motorbikes, however, have turned 50, 70, 90, 100 years old or even more (like the 1919 G.P.), and for them time has not stood still.

In anticipation of the Centennial, a team of three highly qualified and passionate technicians of the Eagle has been commissioned to bring back the splendour of 180 precious Moto Guzzi bikes in the collection, using all their experience and skill to mitigate the signs of age and give them at least another hundred years of life.

Nadir Bortoluzzi, Luca Francioso and Fabrizio Zucchi have been feverishly at work for over a year now. We caught up with Nadir, head of the team, to get his thoughts on how the process is going and what challenges they are facing.

Nadir, tell us about your team and the goal of your work.

“My journey began in Gilera between ‘80 and ‘95. I was in charge, among other things, of the restoration of some of the most iconic and important Gileras ever produced, including the 4-cylinder Grand Prix bikes like the Rondine 500: one-of-a-kind in the world. In 2001 I came to Moto Guzzi, working in the Experimental Department, after which, in 2012, we began taking a census of all the historical motorbikes of the group. This led, as a first goal, to the preparation and exhibition of the motorbike collections, starting in 2018, in the Piaggio Museum in Pontedera: including Gilera, Laverda, Aprilia and some important examples of Moto Guzzi.

Since the end of the next year, in anticipation of the Centennial of the Eagle, I’ve dedicated myself to the bikes at the Museum in Mandello del Lario. The goal is the conservation and preparation for the exhibition of 180 motorbikes by GMG 2021, with various levels of challenges ranging from combatting the simple passage of time to the recreation of components from scratch, or almost, for bikes that are incomplete.

The team consists of Fabrizio, who’s been at Guzzi for 25 years, with experience in the Experimental Department and a great interest in vintage bikes, and Luca, also a technician of Mandello since 1995 and a true Guzzi aficionado, who was drawn into the project by his personal passion for all vintage vehicles.”

Explain your process to us.

“The first steps were to set up a small ad hoc workshop, here in the historic factory, and to create a work sheet for each bike, so that we could estimate the time needed for the work; although with these things you never really know how long it’ll take until you’re done.

Our goal is not restoration. 99% of our work has to do with conservation. We start from an analysis of the vehicle to determine the correspondence and conformity of all the details, and a lot of time passes before we even touch the bike, while doing the work of documentation and cross-checks in books, magazines of the era, technical drawings and archives that are often not easy to navigate.

Back in the day, there was no culture of conservation from a museum point of view, and even models that were known to be of particular importance, such as winning sports bikes, were maintained but without the care they deserved. There’s no fault in this, there are very few brands with a history as long as Moto Guzzi’s and even fewer that have shown more far-sightedness in terms of conservation.

These range from details that are correct but painted the wrong colour, to tyres – we’re changing a lot of them because they don’t match the periods –, to searching for original spare parts of the epoch through the network of collectors.

Sometimes, unfortunately, we’re forced to carry out small restorations for exhibition purposes. I say unfortunately because restoration is by definition invasive: you can maintain the utmost fidelity, use the tools, methods and materials of the time, but if you start sandblasting and repainting, you lose something in any case.

It would be a bit like taking the Mona Lisa and repainting it because it’s slowly deteriorating beautiful, but Da Vinci’s colours are the ones underneath.

Restoration and conservation, however, are not exact sciences, and very often it’s a matter of making difficult choices. But if we want to draw the line, here it is: on a motorbike on display in a museum, there must never be rust or oxidation, under any circumstances.”

What are the most difficult challenges you’ve faced so far?

“With bikes of this calibre and age, every day is a challenge, and every step poses doubts that you wouldn’t even have imagined before starting.

There are different opinions, we discuss them together and choose the path that best corresponds to the philosophy of our project, but in the end, I assume the responsibility. Let’s take the 500 twin-cylinder that Omobono Tenni raced with. It had a tank with peeling paint, a physiological problem related to aging, not to poor conservation. We could have repainted it and brought it back to its original condition, but why disturb the consistency of a racing bike whose paintwork is 99% original?

Instead, we opted for a treatment on the tank that stopped the deterioration in its present state, and we’re going to exhibit the bike together with Tenni’s original suit, donated by his nephew. So in my opinion, this is an example of conservation.

Sometimes you run the risk of over-thinking things. At the moment, we’re working on the famous G.P. (Guzzi Parodi), the “Guzzi” before they were branded Moto Guzzi. At a certain point, we asked ourselves: What do we do with the oil halo on the crankcase? Do we leave it? By now it’s been there for who knows how many years. In any case, we have to keep our feet on the ground and always ask ourselves what does and doesn’t belong to the conservation process. In this case, all we had to do

was ask ourselves one question: What would Carlo Guzzi have wanted for his G.P.? Even if that oil is 80 years old, maybe even 100, would he have wanted his bike to be smeared with it? It's like finding a relic in Giza, in Egypt, and leaving it embedded in a block of earth without being able to see it just because it has been in that state for 4,000 years.

Then, other times it happens that we make small discoveries, sensational in their own way. For example, we've always thought that the advance/retard and throttle handles of the G.P. were made of painted iron, but today, cleaning off the rust, we discovered that they're made of brass-plated metal. Without cleaning them, we would never have known.

But the most challenging work we have underway is definitely the completion of the 500 three-cylinder racing bike built in 1940, when the World Championship did not yet exist. A technologically unique bike with cylinders inclined at 30° and supercharged with a compressor, which unfortunately, for reasons unknown, was missing 40% of its components. In the melting pot of Guzzi history, this bike is not particularly relevant, but it deserves to be exhibited in all its splendour. We haven't finished it yet, but it will be stupendous. We're drawing on documents of the time to make the missing parts from scratch, like the compass damping system and castings to recreate the oil and fuel tank caps."

Is there one bike in the collection that you love the best?

"I admit there is, although we haven't started working on it yet. I like the 250 twin-cylinder Grand Prix. It fascinates me because the engine was very advanced for that era, both in performance and design. It doesn't belong to the category of celebrated bikes that won so much, or to that of the icons that left their mark; it's simply a very modern bike, with a crankcase conformation that would only be seen many years later. I'm really curious, and when its time comes, I want to work on it myself.

Speaking of icons, we've also worked on her majesty the Otto Cilindri. The bike was perfectly complete and functional. What we did was aimed at making it more authentic: we eliminated the now yellowed transparent varnish on the metal of the tank – so now you can once again appreciate the hand-beaten sheet metal – and we did the painstaking job of tuning the 8 carburettors. Finally, we restored the colours of the hubs, which, like some parts of the engine, are made of electron and had lost the original colour given by the product that was used at the time to protect this magnesium alloy.

The "Otto" is known all over the world, but Moto Guzzi in its history can count many engines. The twin-cylinder of Tenni's 250, the three-cylinder compressor, the four-cylinder longitudinal twin-shaft engine designed by Giannini in Rome in '52: they are all engines that for their time show a refinement equal to that of the 8-cylinder."

What is it like to work on these iconic bikes?

Why are these bikes important for the younger generation of Guzzi enthusiasts?

Nadir: "What's special is the history. There's the thought that you're working on an object that was handled by Carlo Guzzi and by who knows how many other hands after his, while the latest ones are ours. There's the aura and the fascination of these machines that have raced and won world titles, produced 40 years before I was born, that paved the way for a legend celebrated all over the world.

Perhaps this is what differentiates Guzzi from so many other brands. Coming from my first love Gilera, Moto Guzzi's eternal racing rival, it was strange and challenging at first for me to deal with this collection. Then I had to recognise for myself that the depth of the Mandello brand is much greater than the Arcore brand. There's still a lively interest behind it that Gilera lost over time. There's the cult of history that led the Eagle to become what we know and that can be appreciated in the bikes that left the production lines in the past, as in the present, just as they will be in another hundred years.

Certain examples of Moto Guzzi bikes that rival in prestige with those of the museum are in the hands of collectors who still ride them around Mandello. Those bikes, like ours, are in very good hands and will live forever. There's no jealousy, because Moto Guzzi is Mandello del Lario and Mandello del Lario is Moto Guzzi."

Luca: "It's an emotion, a pride, it's a totally different world, and yet, it's somehow interconnected with the world of Moto Guzzi series production that I come from. It's also a personal satisfaction that Nadir chose me for the team, considering that my passion for vintage bikes was born of restoring Vespas and vintage cars in my garage along with my wife several years ago."

Fabrizio: "I joined Moto Guzzi in 1995, the third generation of Moto Guzzi workers in the family, following my grandfather, uncle and father. When you grow up in the midst of this passion, your path is marked out. To go back over it now, working on bikes built and appreciated by generations of technicians and motorcyclists, is both a gratification and a huge responsibility, to be faced not only with the spirit of a technician but also of a Guzzista: treating them with the same attention and the same love that I reserve for my own bikes.

Guzzisti friends and bikers from all over the world: we're giving you a great gift! Learn, get to know, come, and discover the history here at the Museum. It is important, it's an act of love and respect for what we do, for what the Eagle has always done and will always do. Believe me, in another hundred years the factory will still be here in Mandello del Lario... only the Moto Guzzi Museum will be much bigger!"