



SKY'S THE LIMIT.

Cars are a reflection of the time in which they're built. Convertibles, in particular, are firmly rooted in our cultural memory. In an interview, design professor Paolo Tumminelli talks about form, colour and the thrill of the wind in an open-top MINI.

Professor Tumminelli, When you close your eyes and imagine yourself at the wheel of a convertible, what road are you on?

In my imagination, I'm driving along the Gardesana, a road that runs along the western side of Lake Garda in Italy. It's a very picturesque route that was built around 1930, and it's my favourite one because I spent my childhood near there. But driving a convertible is always a pleasure, wherever you happen to be – even in Germany in winter.

What's so special about driving a convertible?

Firstly, a convertible is a very special type of car in and of itself. After all, the history of the automobile began with the convertible. None of the early cars had a roof. Today, driving a convertible also comes with a certain attitude to life: an open-top car is a symbol of freedom and getting "back to the roots". The kind of people who drive a convertible are at one with nature and the elements, feel the wind and sun on their face and have a far more acute experience – sight, sound or smell – of speed and the traffic around them. You could even say that driving a convertible heightens the senses. Feeling the wind whistle past your ears when driving at speed is very similar to being out sailing.

The MINI was originally built in England where, according to the cliché, it rains almost all of the time. How does an open-top car fit into that scenario?

There's a bit of a contradiction, you're right. But in my opinion, the best roadsters and drophead coupés, another word for convertibles, originated in England. If there's a nation with a roadster culture, it's the British. Drivers there share a certain romanticism, a relaxed attitude to things and a connection with nature, more than in other countries. And the climate is perfect for driving a convertible: not too hot and not too cold – apart from the rain, of course. But then, rain is something the British are basically inured to.

What's the general perception of open-top drivers? In a convertible, they are essentially presenting themselves on a silver platter, so to speak.

That's true. Being in such direct contact with their surroundings, drivers of convertibles usually tend to be more considerate and more alert than other people on the road; they drive more carefully and cause fewer accidents. Driving along with the roof down is the opposite of enclosing yourself in a capsule. Drivers of convertibles are better at communicating by eye contact, not just with other motorists, but also with the pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists and scooter drivers with whom they share the road. This increases everyone's sense of community – and that's priceless.

The new MINI Sidewalk edition is meant to embody freedom and openness. When you look at this car, what strikes you about its design?

Designing a beautiful car with an open top is actually not very difficult, but making it look good when the roof is up, that's an art. However you look at it, open or closed, the MINI Convertible's proportions and its overall design are perfect. Then there are cute features like the Union Jack, the pattern of the British flag, gracing the tail lights. But what I like best is the lovely light-blue colour Deep Laguna, which MINI developed especially for this edition, once again adding a splash of modern colour to the otherwise grey automobile landscape.

Is that why new editions are designed and built, to call attention to themselves on the road?

As a matter of fact, drivers of convertibles do tend to want their cars to stand out from the crowd and underscore their personality. These days, individuality is a highly sought-after attribute anyway. With a large selection of colours available and so many different features to choose from, it's relatively easy to personalise your car. And an iconic vehicle like the MINI is the perfect car for that. On the street, you notice the MINI immediately.

THE MINI'S RECOGNITION FACTOR IS VERY HIGH. AND THEN THERE'S THE NAME, BOTH SMALL AND LARGE AT ONCE – PURE POETRY.

What makes the MINI an iconic car?

Like all icons, the MINI has an unmistakeable look. It also comes with some very specific associations attached. More than any other car, the original MINI was a symbol of London in the Swinging Sixties – a glittering city where fashion and design dominated the scene. With its small wheels and short overhang, its surprisingly spacious interior and headlamps reminiscent of teddy-bear eyes, as well as the contrasting colours of its roof and body, the MINI looks completely different from other cars. There's something both whimsical and endearing about it. The car's high recognition factor plays an important role today, as well. Then there's the name, MINI – pure poetry. It makes me think of something both small and large, transforming a perceived weakness into a strength. That's what makes the MINI so irresistible.

Is it possible to plan an icon like the MINI?

Not really. Luck was also part of the equation when it came to the MINI. It was a very innovative car but its success didn't take off until Princess Margaret and the future Lord Snowdon had their MINI tuned by John Cooper and drove it to the high-society London parties they attended. From then on, driving a fast, small, practical and cute little car became the smart thing to do. Cool cars for driving around town were a novelty in 1960s, which is how the MINI came to be a bestseller first in the British capital and later, all over the world.

Does this mean that the MINI still benefits from its past glory?

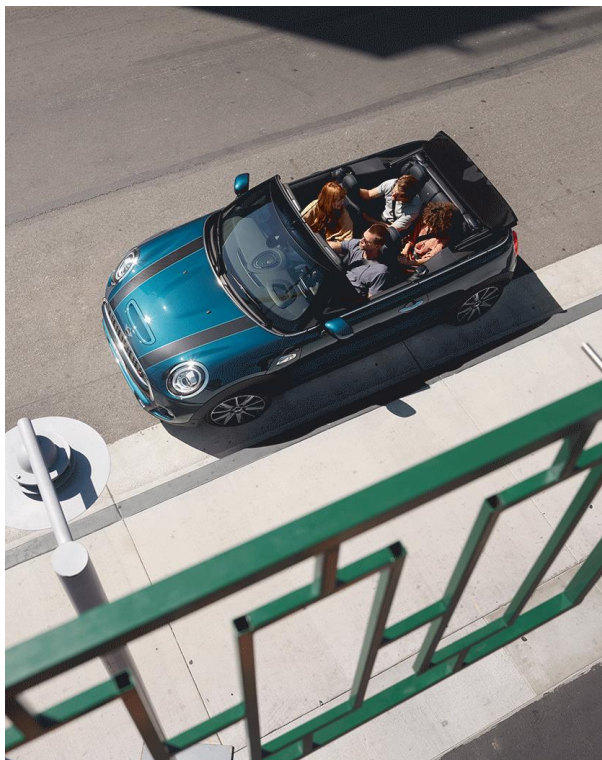
There have been many variations of the MINI in the ensuing 60 years. The current models very consciously hark back to the aesthetic DNA of the original. They still have striking headlights, a steep windscreen and round dials on the dashboard. But although they incorporate aspects of their predecessor, the new MINIs have not made the mistake of falling into the retro trap. Their design is simply timeless. That's also why every model since the 2001 relaunch still looks so fresh.

Has its fresh look altered what the MINI stands for in people's minds?

The new MINI takes its legendary status from its predecessor but at the same time embodies postmodern design. The MINI is neither viewed as a purely British car nor as a German one. To a far greater extent, the brand reflects the lifestyles to be found in any number of European countries and big cities, and it signifies something to people of many different cultures. That being so, the new MINI has more or less created its own mythology.

Is there any room left in the world for new icons?

There isn't very much left at all, as a matter of fact. The excessive variety of cars on offer and the speed with which new models keep appearing on the market will make things very difficult for new icons in the future, and if one does appear, it will naturally have to be electric. The MINI is definitely one of the last great icons on the road today.



THE MINI IS ONE OF THE LAST GREAT ICONS ON THE ROAD TODAY.

The new MINI Countryman will take you to interesting places, some even off the beaten track. Offering comfort, practicality and space for both the every day and for every escape, it's designed to handle whatever your journey throws at you. And thanks to the elevated seats, you'll always have an excellent view of the road ahead.