

road bicycles

Sleek, slim creations that exude the panache of old-school racing legends are coveted for their superior ride “feel”, says Max Leonard



Clockwise from left: Michael Embacher's attic collection. An overhauled 1936 Allegro No 7 Tour de Suisse, worth about €3,000, and a 1953 Bianchi Campione del Mondo, sold for about €2,300 in found condition, both on Speedbicycles. A 1988 Sablière, worth about €15,000

Those who happened to be strolling across the Tuscan hills last October might have been ambushed by hordes of old-fashioned racers with period-perfect bicycles and goggles covered in white dust from the unsurfaced tracks beneath them. This was not a slip in time or a film shoot: they were taking part in L'Eroica, an annual amateur event for pre-1987 bikes, just one sign of the booming popularity of vintage cycles.

These road-bike lovers are perhaps hoping to appropriate some of the panache of legends such as five-time Tour de France winner Jacques Anquetil, one of the many stars who elegantly pedalled these slim-tubed machines through the golden age of cycling (from the end of the second world war until the mid-1970s). He once said: “To prepare for a race there is nothing better than a good pheasant, some champagne and a woman.” Until the early 1990s, top-end road bicycles were almost always made in steel, and though new carbon bikes might have electronic gear shifting and borrow R&D from Formula One to make them go faster, they don't have the ride “feel” that steel aficionados love.

Wherever there has been bicycle racing over the past century, frame-builders in tiny workshops – sometimes literally their garden sheds – have crafted cycles for locals by hand. The best of them made Tour-winning examples, and achieved renown for the beauty and skill of their work. There have been master builders worldwide – working for marques such as Hetchins from the UK, Cherubim and Nagasawa from Japan, and Rih from Holland – but the Italians, who sign their frames as a painter does a masterpiece, are often considered top of the league.

Take Faliero Masi from Milan, the heartland of the Italian bicycle industry, whose son still keeps a workshop in the bowels of the city's Vigorelli velodrome. He was nicknamed “the Tailor” for his fine work and vintage models bearing his name can easily fetch £3,000. His company's most innovative model was arguably the Masi 3 Volumetrica in the 1980s, one of the first bikes to use oversized tubing.

Another Milanese company, Cinelli, still produces the sought-after Supercorsa model first built by its founder Cino, a former racer, in 1947. Current proprietor Antonio Colombo



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also runs an art gallery and in 1987 persuaded graffiti artist Keith Haring to use a Cinelli Laser as his canvas. That one, which sits in the company's private museum, is emphatically not for sale. When others with the same flowing, aerodynamic lines come on the market, they're quickly snapped up.

As well as the beauty of its design, the Laser has that other collectors' favourite: sporting pedigree. The majority of Lasers were produced for Olympians, national federations and professional teams, so they're almost

entirely traceable to one athletic feat or another. Cinelli managing director Paolo Erzegovesi delights in answering provenance emails from restorers and obsessives, chuckling as he scrutinises the fuzzy photos attached.

When buying a bicycle with racing history, prices can rocket. A bike ridden in the 1970s by Eddy “The Cannibal” Merckx, made by celebrated Italians Ernesto Colnago or Ugo de Rosa, could be worth £19,000 or more. And original features count, even if that means chipped paint and perished tyres.

“More and more I prefer bicycles in original condition,” says Stefan Schaefer, a collector and dealer with a penchant for designs from the 1950s to 1970s. “I love it when a bike shows its life.” Schaefer once owned a bicycle messenger company in Basel and now maintains the online gallery and “museum” Speedbicycles. He is currently working on a 1950s German track bike, which is likely to go up for sale next. “I've

been interested in all sorts of bicycles, but the road bike has the finest art and craft in it,” he says. “If you have a vintage one, you can put it on the wall like a beautiful painting.” Viennese architect Michael Embacher is also passionate about aesthetics. “A bike is so minimal. That's what I like in both architecture and design,” he says. He owns around 220 bicycles, mostly vintage road bikes, and until recently kept them in the attic above his offices. His current favourite is a Sablière, a 1980s French time-trial bike made from aluminium. “For me the fun is in the riding, and the curiosity about how the different constructions feel.”

When sourcing a vintage cycle, bike jumbles – specialist sales held regularly by cycling clubs and at gatherings such as L'Eroica – are a good place to start. Ebay, too, is a treasure trove, since bicycles are so ubiquitous that people sell valuable vintage ones online. And so-called “barn finds”, where a forgotten beauty is unearthed in someone's bric-a-brac, do happen.

An excellent steel bike from the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s, from a good builder and with appropriate components, can be had for less than £1,000. That would buy a beautiful bike to cherish riding, but for something collectable, the traditional cycling heartlands of the Continent – Italy, Belgium, France – are the natural hunting ground for European brands. (Keirin Cycle Culture Café in Berlin might also be a good stopoff.) For a British machine, try Sargent & Co in London, a vintage bike shop recently used for 1960s-themed photoshoots featuring Bradley Wiggins.

Wiggins, whose respect for the sport's history is well known, may be at the vanguard of a new golden age of British cycling, but the heroes of past eras have a lot of miles in them yet. A vintage bicycle can be a way, however small, of connecting with them. ♦

WHERE TO BUY L'EROICA, WWW.EROICA-CICLISMO.IT; OCTOBER 6 2013, KEIRIN CYCLE CULTURE CAFE, OBERBAUMSTRASSE 5, 10997 BERLIN (+4930-8485 7666; WWW.KEIRINBERLIN.DE), SARGENT & CO, 74 MOUNTGROVE RD, LONDON N5 (020-7359 7642; WWW.SARGENTANDCO.COM), SPEEDBIKES, +4161-322 0642; WWW.SPEEDBIKES.CH. **WHERE TO SEE** MADONNA DEL GHISALLO MUSEO DEL CICLISMO, VIA GINO BARTALI 4, 22030 MAGREGGIO, COMO (+39031-965 885; WWW.MUSEODELGHISALLO.IT), MUSEE DU VELO ET DE LA MOTO, 30390 DOMAZAN, NEAR AVIGNON (+334-6657 6511). **WHAT TO READ** CYCLEPEDIA: A TOUR OF ICONIC BICYCLE DESIGNS BY MICHAEL EMBACHER (THAMES & HUDSON, 2011). THE COMPETITION BICYCLE: THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF SPEED: A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY BY JAN HEINE (RIZZOLI, 2012).