

The MB&F M.A.D. Gallery in Geneva presents a “penny-farthing” bicycle based on traditional designs of the 19th century, hand-crafted by Czech artisan, Zdenek Mesicek.

The penny-farthing is one of the most iconic bicycles ever created, and yet with the most idiosyncratic design. Looking back, it is hard to imagine how somebody once thought that perching a rider on top of a giant wheel, with their feet incapable of touching the ground, could be an effective means of transport – but, for a few years at least, it was!

When penny-farthings first emerged in the 1870s they were seen as an improvement on forerunners such as the iron-framed, wooden-wheeled ‘boneshaker’. However, its popularity didn’t last long. By 1885, the ‘safety bike’ – the precursor of the ubiquitous bicycle we know now – had become commercially available and by 1893 the production of penny-farthing high-bikes had virtually ceased.

The story of Mesicek high bikes does not begin back in the 1880s when bicycling was the preserve of top-hatted men wearing monocles and morning coats; it starts a century later in communist Czechoslovakia, as it was then called. The penny-farthing’s large front wheel not only enabled higher speeds, but it also rolled more comfortably over cobbled roads. In the small town of Kyjov, 200km from Prague, Josef Mesicek found an old battered penny-farthing and had a life-changing idea.

Personal liberties were very restricted under the 1980s communist regime – religion was frowned upon, there was little private property and limited travel abroad. However in Czechoslovakia, sport was one thing people were allowed to do, even fervently were encouraged to do.

In Kyjov, there was a local cycling club, boasting 64 members but with just two bicycles, provided by the government. Josef saw his antique penny-farthing as an opportunity to increase the club’s bike collection by one, as well as introduce young riders to this classic form of cycling. He took the high-wheeler apart and successfully rebuilt it. But one new solitary bike didn’t go far among all those club members, so he decided to create all by hand another. And then another up until high bicycles went from being a casual hobby to an extreme passion. A passion Josef passed on to his son Zdenek.

“I have never done anything else than manufacturing bicycles,” says Zdenek, now 36 years old and the current owner and creative force behind Mesicek bicycles. “When I was at school we were already producing bikes at home. I started with my father from a young age. We collected everything bike-related but after a while began specialising in high bikes. We never intended to do it as a business, we just wanted to restore bikes. But our friends were interested in the bikes, so we began making more and more of our own pieces. Through time it became our work and our lifestyle.”

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of communism across the Soviet Bloc, the people of Czechoslovakia had to slowly and unsurely acclimatise themselves to the notion of private enterprise. Zdenek Mesicek was attending secondary ‘traffic’ school wanting to become a railway engineer; however, when he learned that his father wanted to turn their production of high wheelers into a business he changed his studies to mechanics – learning to weld and use lathes and milling machines.

At the beginning the Mesiceks didn’t know if people would be interested in the creations moreover if they would be able to manage production. They had no business plan and sometimes lived on the breadline with Josef paying everything for the bike production and Zdenek’s mother paying everything for the household from her salary.

“We started without money, without any loan, without any space for production,” remembers Zdenek. “We produced the penny-farthings in our garage. I remember that people sometimes laughed at us for what we were doing. It was a difficult period for us but it was a great learning curve.”

The Mesiceks are now amused with their traditionally designed and crafted high wheelers revered the world over by cycling aficionados. In the last five years Zdenek has taken over the running of the company from his father and now employs a team of four in their workshop in Čeložnice, next to Kyjov. A metal turner, two polishers (including a burnisher) and someone for the milling work are precious help to Zdenek who oversees the whole production process including sourcing the material, welding and polishing the trickier parts, to final assembly.

Every component is hand-fashioned to his very exacting standards. Nothing is rushed. For Zdenek, Mesicek bicycles reflect the design principles of the early high bicycle and Mesicek craftsmanship is a homage to the brave pioneers of cycling and to those who made the early high bicycles, such as Frenchman Eugene Meyer and Englishman James Starley.

“We have absolute respect for tradition in terms of design and materials,” he says. “We try to produce the best mixture of parts that were of good quality in the past but we have incorporated a few modern twists such as dustproof bearings and lighter rims, for example.”

Mesicek bikes are all hand-fashioned with just scores made every year – in total, only 770 have been made to date in the two decades since they have turned their penny-farthing passion into a full-time business.

“When I am making a bike, I have a feeling of responsibility,” says Zdenek. “The bike must look good, be well finished, but also function well and be safe. And when the bike is ready for delivery it is a bit like when your child becomes an adult and flies the nest.”

Surprisingly some owners ride these high wheelers on a daily basis – in the very best tradition of the 1870s! *“Yes, one or two do ride them every day!” says Zdenek. “However, most owners display the bikes at home and ride them in their free time.”*

It is a long way from 1980s communist Czechoslovakia to the MB&F M.A.D. Gallery in Geneva in 2013, but Mesicek penny-farthing bicycles have made it. We invite you to come and admire their splendour and discover just what it is about penny-farthings that generate so much passion.

Specificities

- *Handlebars, brake levers, hubs, pedals and cranks are all nickel-plated.*
- *Handlebar grips are made of cherry wood.*
- *The backbone is seamless Mannesmann tubing, powder-coated forks are made of 2.5mm bent sheet metal.*
- *The rims are powder-coated.*
- *The cowhide saddle is ‘preseated’ for a couple of weeks before installation.*
- *The colours are many and varied with the choice of 89 shades for the backbone, while the pedal and tyre rubber can be either black or red.*
- *Additional accessories include a battery-operated replica of an oil lamp, a bell, a horn, a handlebar-mounted luggage holder and a tool kit.*
- *And the wheels? This is a penny-farthing after all: the wheels range from 28” (71cm) to 56” (143cm) for the front one. The largest-size bike, even fully equipped, weighs less than 14kg.*

Origin of the term “penny-farthing”

The unusual name comes from British coins: the larger “penny” and the small “farthing”, which was worth a quarter of a penny. The large front wheel and smaller back wheel of high-bicycles look like a penny and farthing placed next to each other – hence the name.