


The time keepers

GENEVA'S LUXURY WATCH SALONS ARE HOME TO SOME OF THE MOST COMPLICATED INVENTIONS EVER CREATED BY HAND. BUT WHO ARE THE WATCHMAKERS WORKING AT THE HEART OF THIS BILLION SWISS FRANC EMPIRE?



From behind his watchmaker's magnifying loupe, Paul Buclin inspects his latest masterpiece. Known as the Star Caliber 2000, it has 21 complications, 1,118 working parts and is a double-faced white gold pocket watch. "I was working for one whole year to make this," he whispers in soft Genevois French. "But first I had to create the complications." Turning the timepiece over in a pair of silk signature gloves like a toy store magician, he delicately places it back into a velvet-lined case on the workshop table in front of him. "Isn't it beautiful?" he asks. To complete the watch, Buclin had to invent six new patents – one of which makes it the world's first pocket watch capable of playing the Westminster chime melody as it peals from Big Ben – and he will spend the next 12 months working on a duplicate time piece in rose gold. "It will cost around CHF3.6 million," he admits. "But a watch like this just can't be bought. It is also about trust."

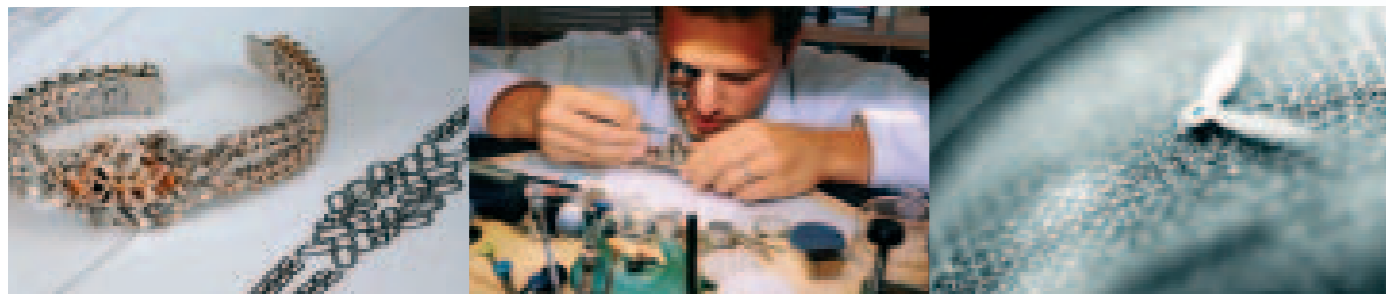
Groomed like Pinocchio's Geppetto – he sports twinkling pince-nez spectacles and a snow white beard and whiskers – Buclin studiously pieces together complications and cogs, screws and springs, finishing every movement within the traditions of haute horology. He works for Patek Philippe, one of Switzerland's most luxurious brands, and he creates the most complicated watches since – excuse the analogy – time began. Records show he is the best watchmaker in the world.

Downstairs, on the factory floor, Stefan Wagoun, a micro-mechanic is doing things with microscopes that defy logic. His workshop is part Frankenstein's laboratory, part teutonic automobile factory. There are wires, cables and machines that look capable of resetting the beat of a human heart. It is a menagerie of engineering and oil pipes, a place where microscopic teeth are cut on pinions, components are chamfered, Geneva stripes are smoothed, and Patek Philippe's seal of approval is printed like a kiss. Today's challenge is to make holes on the bridge of a CHF500,000 watch. "The line between success and failure is much finer than a strand of hair," he says with thermonuclear enthusiasm. Comparably, a hair is 70 microns, but the holes he crafts can be as small as 15 microns and are invisible to the human eye. "Thankfully, we have the luxury of taking our time to get it right." 

In Geneva, the Swiss luxury watch industry is at breaking point. After private banking, watchmaking is the richest industry in the city. Switzerland may tick and tock to the beat of 70,000 resident workers, who labour at one of the country's numerous watch brands, but Geneva is its regulating valve. Looking westwards, chocolate box houses line the waterfront of Lake Geneva bearing the weight and history of every watch manufacturer under the sun. Billboard postings rest on every rooftop: there is Omega, Piaget, Raymond Weil, Tissot, Breitling, Franck Muller, Rolex, Jaeger-LeCoultre – all are present. But that is just the beginning: the city has the world's largest floral clock, *l'horloge fleurie*, and every 20 metres there is a watch boutique. Even romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau drew on the very soul of time in the city for inspiration. This is Geneva: a place where there is no limit to the most expensive timepiece – only imagination. "Watchmakers are simple people," confesses Veronique Briand of Vacheron Constantin, the oldest watch manufacturer in the world with an uninterrupted history. "But they make exquisitely complicated products. These are not watchmakers. They are more artists, engravers, jewel setters and linguists. They have even invented their own dictionary."

But the times, due to economic necessity, are changing. Time is money in Geneva, and not since the quartz crisis in the 1970s, when the advent of quartz wristwatches overtook mechanical watches in popularity, has the watch industry been plunged into such a critical hour. Shadows cast from nearby Mont Blanc stretch out over the manufacturers in Vallée de Joux and a precipitous drop is expected.

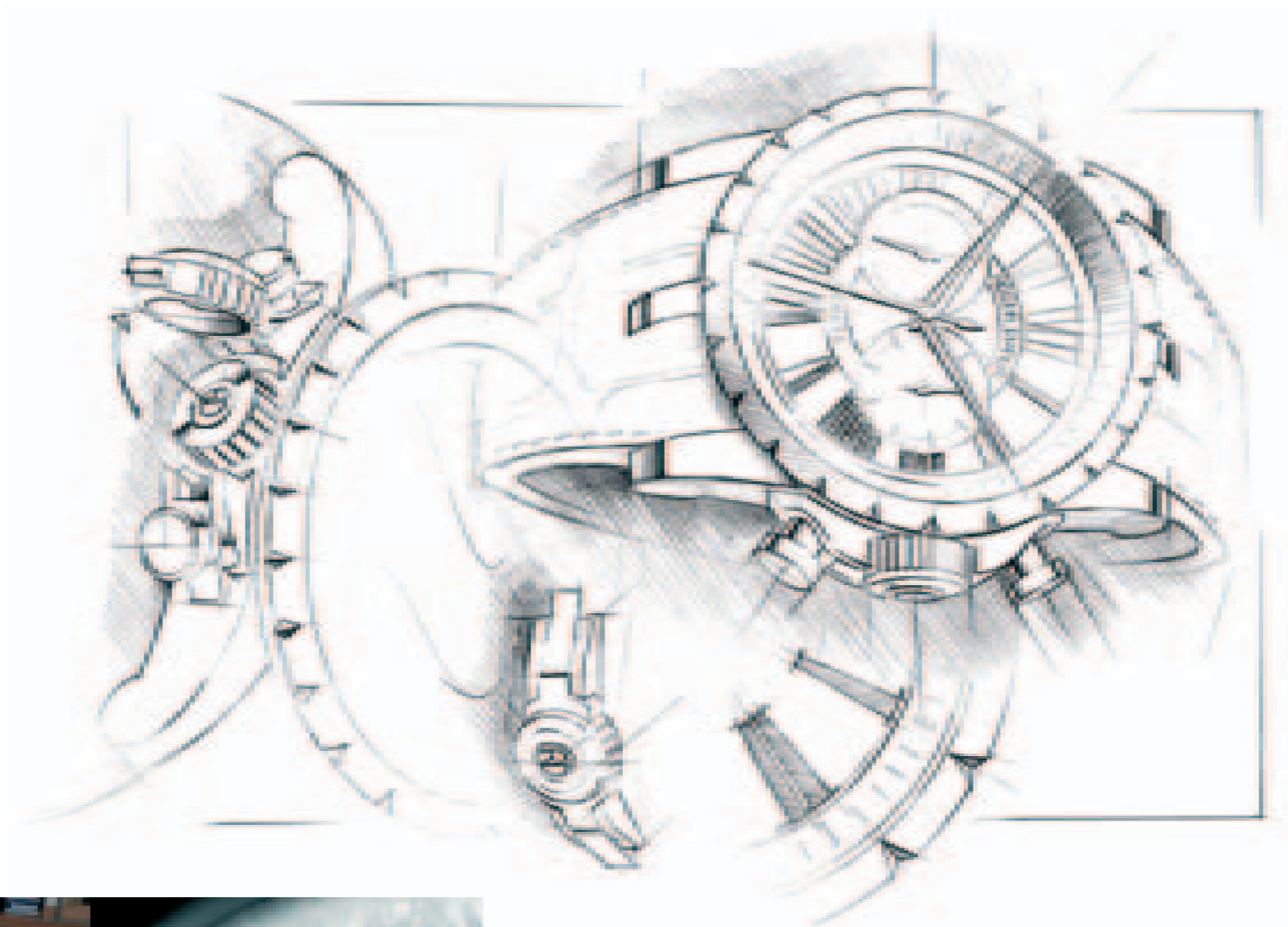
Two hundred jobs have gone at Franck Muller because of a downturn in the luxury sector, Cartier has cut back on staff hours and Romain



Previous page: Patek Philippe's priceless Sky Moon Tourbillon. Above, left to right: a Kalla Haute Couture à Secreta work in progress; a Vacheron Constantin watchmaker in the manufacture; a luxurious Geneva watch dial; and a Roger Dubuis sketch design

Jerome has parted ways with its enigmatic CEO Yvan Arpa. Russia, which was a red-hot market for tourbillon and other high-complication watches with six-figure price tags just a year ago, was down a staggering 61.5 percent for January to April sales. Yet turn the clocks back and it was all so different: in 2006, export levels were steady at 13.7 billion, rising to 16 billion in 2007; growth rates hit unprecedented highs at 16.2 percent in 2007 and 6.7 percent nine months ago; and last year, the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry registered another record year when Swiss bank vaults began to overflow with more than CHF17 billion in revenue. However, a dramatic 25 percent decline is anticipated by 2010, making it the worst year on record for more than two decades. A tangible sense of this is that it's now okay to ask the price of a watch again. Previously, if one had to ask the price of an Audrey Piaget or a Baume et Mercier one shouldn't even have bothered. Understandably, in the canton of Geneva, retailers simply can't ignore the numbers on the dials.

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"Figures aren't good at the moment because of the recession," admits Jasmina Steele, Patek Philippe's international communications director. "Even though thousands of tourists come to Geneva specifically to buy a watch, exports remain the most important market and the industry is suffering. We anticipate there will be a drop of up to minus 12 percent and if we achieve that then it will be a good year."

On the corner of Rue du Rhône and Place du Molard, sits Gübelin, Switzerland's most famous watch boutique and an inescapable junction when wandering the city. Pictures of George Clooney and Nicole Kidman, for Omega, Leonardo DiCaprio and Maria Sharapova, for TAG Heuer, and a boulevard of starlets and watch straps decorate its glass interiors. "A difficulty is that there are too many brands and too many new watchmakers," suggests deputy director Gregory Lutz. "This creates a problem with the quality. Ralph Lauren decides to make a brand of watch or Gucci too. They're not real watchmakers – it's not the real manufacture and the prestige is disappearing because of it. In Switzerland, the family is the most important element of business and this spirit needs to remain today." It is this value that strikes at the heart of the matter. What will keep Geneva's minute repeater ticking from inside a crafted Breguet Tourbillon will be its sense of history.

In order to safeguard the city's watchmaking heritage, the Geneva School of Horology introduced the Geneva seal in 1994, a stringent set

LAST YEAR, THE FEDERATION OF THE SWISS WATCH INDUSTRY REGISTERED A RECORD YEAR, MAKING CHF17 BILLION IN REVENUE

of 12 criteria, which has become the nucleus for exclusive watchmakers. "The Geneva seal requires a watch to pass 12 strict criteria, six conceptual and six developmental," explains Matthias Schuler, CEO of Roger Dubuis, an innovative young brand where electric orange and art deco purple rectangular frames are *de rigeur*. "Each watch needs to be made within a certain geographic distance to Geneva to qualify. Creating one is like the construction of a Ferrari engine: if it isn't perfect then people won't buy it – it makes it a class apart."

Yet there is still an ongoing need for brands to further protect this legacy of craftsmanship and differentiate themselves from their competition more than ever before. Recently, Patek Philippe created waves at Baselworld 2009 with its introduction of a new, more demanding in-house Patek Philippe Seal. Understandably, prestigious hallmarks have been gaining more cachet as the high-end brands desire an association with more than 300 years of illustrious time making.

On the outskirts of Geneva, the industrial area of Plan-les-Quates revolves as the ticking heart of the watch business. Home to the manufacture for Piaget, Harry Winston, Patek Philippe and Vacheron Constantin, it is known locally as Plan-les-watches. It is also home to Rolex, which remains something of an enigma. Swathed in black zirconia, Rolex's manufacture appears like an impenetrable fortress – no one ever sees anyone go in or come out. But insiders do know a few facts: Rolex produces more than 800,000 watches a year and has a notorious copycatting market to deal with. In terms of profit, however, no one knows how much Rolex makes – or is brave enough to say so. This is another facet of Geneva: despite the irony, no one likes to talk about the figures. 

“What Rolex makes is very different from what other brands produce,” explains Veronique Briand at the Vacheron Constantin manufacture. “A watchmaker from Rolex will make 200 watches per year. One at Vacheron, on the other hand, will make only 20. We don’t want to produce too many – we want to keep the brand exclusive.”

On the Vacheron Constantin factory floor, even though the workers are clearing up their workstations because of the annual *le heurological vacance*, a historical tradition that is still celebrated throughout the nearby valleys, it is clear that the original spirit from 1755 remains. The minute repeater for its Skeleton Tourbillon model requires 380 components and takes 250 man hours to complete. Of course, its historical patrons wouldn’t have settled for anything less. Who would have wanted to get on the bad side of Napoleon Bonaparte?

Next door is the Patek Philippe manufacture, a family-owned company ran by the affable Henri Stern and his son Thierry, the incumbent CEO. To this day, the Sterns listen to every minute repeater in every watch produced to make sure it has the right tick. “Patek Philippe is not famous for decorating its time pieces with hundreds of diamonds or gems,” says Sylvia Graa on a tour of its factory. “It’s a far simpler kind of attraction, to do with accuracy and the heritage we are renowned for. One cannot put a price on a Patek because it’s priceless – it is a heritage that can’t be bought.” In operation since 1839, it is some history: Queen Victoria bought a watch in 1851 for the princely sum of CHF612.50 and set it just in time to conquer the world.

“Our marketing strategy is about watches that have lasting value that people will keep in their family and pass from one generation to the other,” summarises Patek’s Steele. “These watches will have a life that will far outlast your own life. The difference for us – compared to other manufactures – is that we have a long term established client base who do not have financial problems. We’re seeing a demand for more complications and more expensive watches because the client segment that is still investing is the connoisseur and collector.”

Whilst the Swatch Group, Rolex and other watch brands may find themselves tightening their buckles and straps over the coming months, 2009 is providing an opportunity for Geneva’s most famous, more bespoke brands to focus on what they do best. Whilst some rival producers assemble watches by the factory second, Geneva’s exclusive manufacturers are focusing on innovative design, family values and what made Geneva the centre of horology in the first place. Vacheron Constantin will maintain its production of 20,000 watches and is increasingly focusing on bespoke designs for markets in the Far East and Russia; Roger Dubuis will concentrate on 3,000 expertly crafted design-led complicated wristwatches, a duality of technical achievement and extravagant design; and Patek Philippe will handcraft 40,000 time pieces and put each one through 15 days of strict technical and aesthetic movement tests. They know it is not a time for complacency yet every piece will still get sold. It is a further endorsement, if any were still needed, that the ultimate luxury in life is time itself.

Back at Lake Geneva, the history of time continues to bear down upon the city. Behind a bank

PATEK PHILIPPE’S
GENEVA MANUFACTURE
HANDCRAFTS 40,000 TIME-
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STRICT MOVEMENT TESTS



The components inside one of Vacheron Constantin’s luxurious watches made onsite in its Geneva manufacture

vault door at the Patek Philippe Museum hides more than 500 years of watch making history. There are watches made of wood, chronographs, chronometers, watches for the Chinese market enamelled with Taoist temples and pagodas, watches for the Turkish market decorated with Islamic motifs, watches shaped like harps and Spanish guitars and watches designed to let one “feel” the time.

Upstairs, 8,000 books on the history of watchmaking and navigation are housed in a Dickensian library. There are tomes by Newton and Galileo, the travels of Captain Cook and manuscripts dating back to 1531. It is a watchmaker’s revelation, a place where manufacturers, meridian lines and the co-harmonious relationship between time, exploration and science join forces behind wood panelling and polished glass. It evokes a naval officer’s mess but acts only as a grace note muted by the centrepiece attraction.

Amongst the thick volumes sits the *Livres d’establishissement*, a logbook of every watch bought and sold. From the earliest days of its existence, its factory kept a repertory of his horological productions bound in a heavyweight watch register noting – in alphabetical order – the people who bought watches despite revolutions, world wars, great depressions and those who didn’t even pay. In the midst of a global recession, it is reassuring at least to know that the prudent human spirit too has survived the ultimate test – the test of time.

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WORDS Mike MacEacheran