

watchmaking



> OPPOSITE, ABOVE: H. MOSER & CIE INCARNATES TODAY'S CLASSICISM. OPPOSITE, BELOW: BLACKSAND GENÈVE AND ITS UNIFORMITY MODEL. BELOW: VACHERON CONSTANTIN: THE ART OF THE SLIMLINE.

> CI-CONTRE, HAUT: H. MOSER & CIE INCARNE LE CLASSICISME D'AUJOURD'HUI. CI-CONTRE, BAS: BLACKSAND GENÈVE ET SON MODÈLE UNIFORMITY. CI-DESSOUS: VACHERON CONSTANTIN, L'ART DES EXTRAPLATES.

THE BIG COMEBACK OF THE CLASSIC

HAVING EATEN ITS FILL OF THE UNUSUAL AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL, AND RECOVERED FROM AN UNCOMFORTABLE CRISIS IN 2009, WATCHMAKING HAS COME BACK TO ITS FUNDAMENTALS. A RETURN TO THE SAFE VALUES, TO WATCHES THAT FINALLY JUST TELL THE TIME!

The time is on display everywhere, and there's no need to wear a mechanical timekeeper on one's wrist, equipped with many complications, each no doubt more justifiable than the other. Said more simply, the smartphone, touch screens and computers, all synchronized via their operating systems, take it upon themselves to record how precisely the time is passing, and sometimes without being asked to. Before the nth crisis that shook the watch industry at the beginning of 2009, a certain sector of luxury watchmaking that was different began to reinterpret the reactions to the reading of time, with a stream of bold innovations, often so visible that they made the dial redundant. This niche phenomenon, born thanks to the arrival of independent watchmakers who were bursting with creativity and an impressive mastery of the art of manufacturing, even attracted the large brands, for whom a rich heritage and historic background should have already been enough.

All phenomena are heralded by precursors. To put it in terms that country people would understand, watchmaker Roger Dubuis calls them "snowploughs". Thus, in the world of those producers of watchmaking UFOs, who are to watchmaking what strip cartoons or caricatures are to literature, the Urwerk brand played the role of the precursor. Finally, if the worst deviations were allowed to surface, it was because the highly skilled watchmaker, Felix Baumgartner, and the designer, Martin Frei, had already opened the way in 1995. They were followed by brands such as Ladoire, Hautlence—an anagram of Neuchâtel—, AK Genève, no longer in existence today, Cabestan, Les Maîtres du Temps, Manufacture Royale and, another of the most creative and timeless snowploughs, the MB&F brand, alias Maximilian Büsser & Friends. Through his Horological Machines, this man, whom history will record as being the author of the Opus saga at Harry Winston—in



> PATEK PHILIPPE OR FUNCTIONAL AESTHETICS...

> PATEK PHILIPPE OU L'ESTHÉTIQUE FONCTIONNELLE...



other words, the conversion of a brand hitherto seen exclusively as a jewelry maker into a watchmaker of complications—, managed to bring under one banner a collection of manufacturers representing the

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cream of watchmaking, including all the trades involved.

Whether he agrees himself or not, Max remains the classic example that deserves to be held up to the gurus of global marketing to demonstrate that the most indisputable rules only exist to be broken or circumvented. At the level of “mechanical toys” for the wealthiest, his timekeepers incorporate the most advanced knowledge, whether in matters of scientific chronometry or of Tinguely designs, or of the resonance of materials. The same applies in the distribution field, where he stands out through his opening of the MAD Gallery, a short distance from the Bourg de Four Square, in the old City of Geneva. This is an art gallery deliberately opened to display the heterogeneous array of objects

that he would bring back from his compulsive travels. On the side, this meeting place also served as his first single brand boutique. Even better, it seemed that the watches being sold there quite simply financed the curiosity of this friendly aesthete and talent scout.

All of a sudden, this captor of the trends was illustrating the phenomenon of the return to basics, and MB&F launched a round watch, the Legacy Machine. Of course, it was equipped with the most innovative of watch complications, but it was in fact a round one that simply told the time. It was an instant success and, above all, a demonstration that an important U-turn can happen in consumer tastes. In brief, watchmakers were reproached for lowering their bonnets again and for covering over their manufacturing indecency that had even removed the need for the dial. In this mindset, the successful arrival of H. Moser & Cie, a Schaffhausen brand following in Patek Philippe’s footsteps, remains purely symptomatic. While a François Paul Journe, who might have seemed a little lost, celebrating the functional aesthetics he was producing without discontinuing the watchmaking genius, was joined by newcomers, whose apparent classicism in fact masked a profound mastery of both the most modern techniques and a more than 200-year-old watchmaking know-how. In this context, Laurent Ferrier, one of Patek Philippe’s former “gold fingers”, launches his model with a concealed tourbillon, only visible through its case back. This was the

> 1_ GIRARD-PERREGAUX RÉPÉTITION MINUTES, A COMPLICATED MECHANISM BENEATH A SOBER DIAL. 2_ ALTIPLANO BY PIAGET ILLUSTRATES THE RETURNO TO FUNDAMENTALS.

> 1_ GIRARD-PERREGAUX RÉPÉTITION MINUTES, MÉCANISME COMPLIQUÉ SOUS UN CADRAN SOBRE. 2_ L'ALTIPLANO DE PIAGET ILLUSTRE LE RETOUR AUX FONDAMENTAUX.

ultimate in elegance, the kind that doesn't reveal the detail of a complicated timekeeper. If the initiative symbolized the return to innovative models that don't need an instruction manual to tell the time, it was not new, because it was typical of Patek Philippe. Already in 1997, this practice was reintroduced at Robergé, under the influence of a grand collector and fine connoisseur, Alain Mouawad. It was therefore not a surprise to learn that, being particularly sensitive to this watchmaking penitence, he had just created BlackSand, his own brand, which has manufactured a simple watch. A formidable concentrate of manufacturing niceties and meticulous finishing. Underneath its appearance that didn't look very appetizing, it was in fact a timekeeper that appealed to lovers of a well made articles, to the connoisseurs, to those who, having tasted all the available pleasures of watchmaking, still turn inexorably towards something "different". Doesn't post-ostentation lead inevitably to the thirst for

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something sincere, to the absence of exuberance?

Just before the crisis of 2009, on the wave of its successes and its record sales, watchmaking was busy allowing itself its distractions. Right in the middle of the tourment, it realized that it was the safe values that were surviving the best. So it was not surprising that brands such as Rolex or Patek Philippe, both helped by their indescribable performances in the universe of the auctions, were nourished by the collapse all around. The historical brands had plenty to get on with. Piaget saw its Altiplano and Polo models boom, together with its inevitable extra-thin watches, Jaeger-LeCoultre had never seen better days with its Reversos, or Chopard with its L.U.C models. The list is endless: Vacheron Constantin, Jaquet Droz, Omega, Cartier... All those holders of unbeatable models, even TAG Heuer with its Monaco, took advantage of the crisis. Even better, their consistent performance

during this period of upheaval led to the return to the basics.

Thus, after a decade of technical overstatements, where complications abounded, sometimes even going as far as to replace the watch dial, and where case sizes were never less than XXL, watch brands came back to more classic models and more reasonable diameters. Timekeepers with three hands, flat, refined and round. But don't think the industry had suddenly become visionary. It was something else that determined this trend: quite simply the small proportions of the Asian wrist. Their significance in market terms was more important in the expression of these rediscovered tastes than a sort of Calvinist spirit, purporting to conceal under a model of sobriety its desire for the beautiful or the complicated, to which watchmaking owes much more than it is prepared to admit. ■

JOËL A. GRANDJEAN



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LE GRAND RETOUR DU CLASSIQUE

Avant la énième crise qui secoua l'horlogerie à l'orée de 2009, une certaine haute horlogerie différente s'est mise à réinterpréter les réflexes de lectures horaires au fil d'inventivités audacieuses et souvent tellement visibles qu'elles occasionnèrent des dénis de cadran. Ce phénomène de niche, né grâce à l'arrivée d'horlogers indépendants bardés de créativité et d'une grande maîtrise des arts manufacturiers, a même séduit les grandes

enseignes, celles pour qui passé riche et assises historiques auraient dû suffire.

Si les pires errances ont pu voir le jour, c'est peut-être que l'horloger émérite Felix Baumgartner et le designer Martin Frei ont ouvert la voie, en 1995, suivis par les marques Ladoire, Hautlence, AK Genève – aujourd'hui disparue –, Cabestan, Les Maîtres du Temps, Manufacture Royale et MB&F, alias Maximilian Büsser & Friends. Cet homme, que l'histoire horlogère conservera comme étant l'auteur de la saga des Opus chez Harry Winston – la conversion à l'horlogerie compliquée d'une marque perçue jusque-là exclusivement comme joaillière –, est parvenu, par ses Horological Machines, à fédérer un collectif représentatif de la crème horlogère, tous métiers confondus.

Maximilian Büsser reste un cas d'école. Ses garde-temps cristallisent, sur le mode joujoux mécaniques, les savoirs les plus pointus, tant en matière de science chronométrique que du côté de designs à la Tinguely ou de celui des matériaux mis en résonance. Soudain, MB&F sort une montre ronde, la Legacy Machine. Certes, bardée d'une complication horlogère des plus innovantes, mais une ronde qui donne l'heure, tout simplement. Une réussite. Surtout, une démonstration qu'un net revirement s'opère dans les goûts des consommateurs. Dans cet ordre d'idées, le succès de l'arrivée de H. Moser & Cie, une marque de Schaffhouse qui marche sur les traces d'une Patek Philippe,

➤ PROFILE OF THE ULTRA-SLIM, HISTORIQUES COLLECTION, BY VACHERON CONSTANTIN.

➤ PROFIL DE L'ULTRA-FINE, COLLECTION HISTORIQUES, DE VACHERON CONSTANTIN.

reste symptomatique. Tandis qu'un François Paul Journe, qui aurait pu paraître un peu largué à célébrer sans discontinue le génie horloger dans ce qu'il produit d'esthétiques fonctionnelles, se voit rejoint par des nouveaux venus dont le classicisme apparent dissimule, en fait, une infinité de maîtrises, tant des techniques les plus modernes que des savoir-faire horlogers vieux de plus de deux cents ans.

Dans cette mouvance, Laurent Ferrier, un ancien doigt d'or de Patek Philippe, se lance avec son Tourbillon caché, visible uniquement en son fond. L'élégance ultime de ne pas montrer la spécificité d'un garde-temps compliqué. Si la démarche symbolise ce retour à des modèles innovants qui font l'économie d'un mode d'emploi pour lire l'heure, elle n'est pas nouvelle puisque c'est la règle chez Patek Philippe. En 1997, cette pratique est remise en selle chez Robergé, sous l'impulsion d'Alain Mouawad. Aujourd'hui, il vient de créer Blacksand, sa propre marque, qui fabrique une montre tout simplement!

Juste avant la crise de 2009, portée par ses succès, l'horlogerie se donnait les moyens de ses égarements. En plein cœur de la tourmente, elle s'est aperçue que ceux qui s'en sortaient le mieux restaient les valeurs sûres. Pas étonnant donc que des marques comme Rolex ou Patek Philippe se soient nourries des déconfitures alentour. Les enseignes historiques avaient donc de quoi faire. Piaget a connu l'essor de ses modèles Altiplano ou Polo, de ses incontournables extraplates, Jaeger-LeCoultre n'aura jamais autant percuté qu'avec ses Reverso, Chopard avec ses modèles L.U.C... La liste est longue. Vacheron Constantin, Jaquet Droz, Omega, Cartier... Tous ces détenteurs de modèles indétrônable, même TAG Heuer avec sa Monaco, ont profité de la crise. Mieux, leurs constances, durant cette période perturbée, ont dicté le retour aux fondamentaux. ■

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