



BALANCE AND TENSION

How Eric Giroud made himself the most sought-after designer in contemporary watchmaking

By Richard Benson
Portrait by François Schaer

Introducing Eric Giroud is difficult, because no one is allowed to discuss most of the things that make him so interesting and important. We can tell you that he's an independent watch designer, and we can mention his greatest hits like the retro-futurist Winston Opus 9, the gothy Swarovski Crystallium Automatic and the X-shaped MCT Sequential One S110. We can tell you about his prizes, which include the Geneva Watchmaking Grand Prix, and his work with Max Büsser at the futuristic, unconventional MB&F that has yielded some of the greatest pieces in contemporary horology, and done more than anything else to make his name. And we can reference a few other brands with whom he has a long-standing relationship, like Vacheron Constantin, Van Cleef & Arpels and Tissot.

What we can't do is list the many international brands and companies — there have been around 60 so far — who employ him to create new lines and remake, remodel and revive their icons. In these cases, the arrangement is secret, and the credit taken by the brand itself. A trained architect and classical musician who came late to watches, where designers mostly come up through the industry, Giroud has won a reputation for making models look contemporary and striking, while still on-brand. It has made him into arguably the most in-demand designer of his generation; in Switzerland in 2019, if you have a big brand that needs a new look, see Eric Giroud.

Hoping to discover his secrets, I go to see him at his house in Geneva, which sits in a row of identical, immaculate, three-storey, modernist cuboids. Given his avant-gardism and cultured reputation, one might expect an earnest, black-clad, aesthete clutching a book of Baudrillard essays, but in fact he resembles more a genial French uncle in an Enid Blyton book (“Allo Richard! Let us first drink a coffee, with milk for you because you are an Englishman, yes? Ho ho!”) A Generation X-er, he has that classic Fifties French look (side-parting, horn-rim specs, Breton shirt, vintage indigo jeans) adopted by trendy indie kids, and could be the lost Swiss member of Stereolab. His conversation is garrulous, self-deprecating and philosophical, and enlivened by the odd theatrical facial expression.

For example, when I kick off the interview by asking about the watch he's wearing (an FP Journe Octa Réserve), he does a

thoughtful frown and says: “I don't have a collection of watches, because I like to wear the same ones, so I don't need many. Some watches I find so perfect that, I dream about them for a long time and think, ‘I need it! I need it!’ But then I buy it and then, when you own it, it's boring. I think everyone has had this experience, no? I was crazy about my favourite watch — the 38mm platinum FP Journe Résonance — for a long time, and I would see one and be (breathily, excited voice) ‘Ohhh!’ I would go to the web and say, ‘OK I'll buy it!’ But then I decide it is better as a dream. Maybe sometimes it is more interesting to have a dream of something than to own it.”

Giroud once said, rather controversially, that he thought 80 per cent of watches were designed “wrong”. He does a sort of mock gulp (“Did I?”) when I ask about this, but says he stands by it. The watches he was talking about, he explains, were not “iconic models from 50 years ago, like Rolex, Patek Philippe, Audemars Piguet and so on” but “followers”.

OPPOSITE: ERIC GIROUD
PHOTOGRAPHED FOR THE BIG WATCH
BOOK AT HOME IN GENEVA, JUNE 2019

A watch design needs a foundation, which should be the key, distinctive elements that communicate the brand DNA. “If you don't have that, the design does not have coherence. If you just follow trends, you are following other brands so you can lose what is unique about your brand, you cannot tell from a distance what the brand is. You should be able to tell! This year at Baselworld, you could see many brands arriving with copper cases. OK, it's the trend, but afterwards I sat around tables with some brands saying, ‘Guys! You are unique! But now you're following other brands!’”

Following trends — which he says most brands want to do, one way or another — doesn't have to be a bad thing. Most people want to work the vintage angle and that can be a huge positive if the ranges are structured so they tell a good story about the brand. “Panerai are interesting because they have different models based around just two

lines,” he says. “It's good for Omega; they are perhaps the most interesting brand of all because of the story and the approach of the different models.”

He clearly strives to avoid being judgmental, but if a note of weariness does ever affect his voice, it is while talking about diameter. “Right now we have an evolution of the size. I remember 38mm being the collector size, and then it became 40. Now some brands make the 39, some the 38, and some have 34 and 36 for women. Sometimes I'll design one in 40mm and then they say, ‘Eric! We have had a big meeting with the group! It's 39!’ And I redesign it, and then six months pass and they call again. ‘Eric! Redesign everything, the market has changed, it's 41!’”

“It's all fine,” he says, smiling, “though if you make two models of the same watch, say one in 38 and in 42, you need to redesign everything, not just shrink one down because the distances and proportions change. Sometimes the movements will stay the same and you only change the diameter. That's when the nightmares start.”

One reason for Giroud's success in the industry is his ability to deal with such nightmares, plus the low-level hassle and differences of opinion, that come with working in teams. “Eric is very, very talented, and perhaps his number one strength is his collaboration and teamwork,” says Max Büsser, founder of MB&F. “Most high-profile designers will impose their style on a brand. Eric is not like that. He will adapt to the requests of the people he is helping. He has no ego... well, no, of course he does have a big ego, because any really creative designer has to have one, but he is very calm and honest. He'll say when he thinks something really doesn't work, and I can tell him when I think something's wrong, and he's always ready to start again, and again and again if necessary.”

This diplomacy and teamwork are probably more important now than they were, say 20 years ago. Independent watch designers tended to be more numerous and higher profile back then, with CEOs rarely making the sort of personal input in the look that many do now. As houses were enfolded into conglomerates, CEOs looking to build brands became less willing to share credit for their brands' product. Most big brands began to bring design in-house, and as Büsser observes, “it's easy to see how this drives out risk-taking. Your career depends on pleasing your boss, no CEO wants to be associated with a failure, and yet you can't innovate without the risk of failure.

BELOW, FROM LEFT: A GIROUD SKETCH FOR THE WATCH BRAND LEROY;
THE FLYING TOURBILLON FOR MANUFACTURE ROYALE 1770, DRAWN BY GIROUD



In this context it becomes appealing to reissue classics, and to raid your back catalogue.”

In recent years, two problems have challenged that approach. First, the Chinese market appears to place increasing value on innovative designs. Second, smartwatch technology is changing what watches can look like, and there is a big design challenge in replacing a traditional dial with a screen (“I am ready for it, Giroud has said, “but I don’t think the Swiss watch industry is.”) In this context, you can easily see why CEOs get excited about a talented designer who can

collaborate calmly, while bringing new ideas about adapting established brand looks with contemporary trends.

Bisser puts it more forcefully: “Remember that 80 per cent of people in the current Swiss watch industry are not interested in watches, they’re interested in money, so they do things that have been done profitably in the past. Eric brings something that used to be common in our industry but that we have been losing: the perspective of a curious, cultured human being, who thinks about music, art, architecture, culture. Most modern watch

designers just try to design shapes, but watch design isn’t just about shapes! It’s also about a story and history.”

The design process itself has also changed with, essentially, fewer risky punts on guesses and more collaboration and turning research data into sellable 3D forms. “The link between the product and communications and marketing is very close now. If you’re in a meeting with young people now, after 10 minutes they’re on Instagram saying, ‘Eric, look at this!’ The link between decision-makers and marketing is very close now. Marketing

used to come in after the product was made. Now they’re around the table from the start.”

Basically, they’re saying make us a watch that looks good on Instagram. (Brief pause, smile, twinkly laugh.) “Yes. The people in companies think more like the consumer now. Before we talked about the target markets it was like, ‘People who are 25–30, living in the city’. Today it’s very sharp and detailed, which is good, because it helps to have a lot of information. The discussions in briefings are very deep and important, and the conversation is about the people who buy the watch.”

Giroud got his own first watch aged 12. He had “no special relation” with it, and can’t recall the brand (“maybe a Tissot”) though he does remember feeling proud to have a watch, “like a man. A watch is like a jewel for a man, it has big emotion. And it is a tribe; if you dress Patek Philippe you are in some tribe, you dress Swatch you are in a tribe. Men love clubs. Although you do have different customers: some buy the mechanics, some buy for security, some use it as a tool.”

For some years now, he adds, he has suspected that “the women have bought the

watches” (of course he might well say that; his wife, an art teacher, is Jack Heuer’s — of Tag Heuer — niece). “I know some men receive watches as gifts, but also the woman often decides the spending, it’s like the family car, that’s the woman’s decision. And now I think ladies are buying watches [for themselves] so maybe the next step is to buy for the man. It is good news! It could mean that watch companies can sell more colourful watches, because men do not dress [with] a colourful watch, but if the wife says, ‘Hey, the green is good on you’, then maybe they will make an exception.

I think most men are still making their own choice, but women's feelings about watches are interesting now."

In fact, he adds, women's watches have become one of the more contentious subject at watchmakers, because nowadays the commissioning process includes more young women who are confident about voicing their opinions, and many of them don't like men's ideas of what women's watches should look like. "I used to say," (hopeful, optimistic face) "Guys! Maybe we need a lady around the table?" And they'd say, "I don't know, Eric..."

This all sounds like the designer has less scope for realising a personal vision, and more responsibility for turning multiple needs and data into an attractive 3D object, and that is indeed the case. That's how he works, though; he incorporates the ideas "and then the project becomes the project of the brand, not of me. It's about the brand. If you want to be a star, become an artist." A lot of designers would struggle with this but he insists that he doesn't: "I mean, yes, sometimes if they say, 'Make it a square, Eric', you may say," (mock outrage) "No!" But tuning is good. I enjoy the relationships."

"It is like an arranger working with music. I studied music when I was younger, and the relations of different elements in the music fascinated me. If you have a good or bad arrangement, it makes a totally different piece of music. So for me, the melody is the DNA of the brand, you arrange the other elements around it. It's that Nineties principle of the remix."

That, I say, is almost certainly the first time anyone has compared designing Swiss watches to remixing a song.

"Yes, I work like a DJ," he says, laughing but entirely serious. "I take maybe the crown from a legacy model and the numbers from a watch from the Forties, and if you turn the watch you [have] the movement like the 19th century. And I make the balance between all the elements a good mix. Because you know it's very difficult now to create new versions of some things. For example, hands: it's very difficult to design a new pair of hands. Sometimes you will try, and round the table someone will say, 'Eric! These are the hands from the model in 1945!'"

Does he have the equivalent of a DJ's trademark beats, or tracks to fall back on to fill floors? If he has, he isn't telling. What he will say is that it's difficult to stop yourself repeating looks and styles when you work for so many different clients. It's not a prob-

lem they are unaware of, either. "Ah, it's a nightmare! People ask to meet me, and they ask me to design a watch, and then the contract... now it's a big part of the process. All say, 'Don't be too inspired by another brand', and sometimes you forget it. You design things for another brand and..." (he mimes moment of horrific recognition), "Oh, shit! The crown! Ah no... Avoiding things like that is a big part of the research."

The research he does is meticulous, all his ideas and inspirations collected in an A4 sketchbook for each project, so that the team has a focal point and can look back at ideas as they progress. "People love the sketches. When I sketch in meetings, nobody speaks. The young people are..." (mimes amazement, takes theatrical sharp intake of breath) "It's the magic part."

Eric Giroud was born 53 years ago in Valais, a canton in the mountainous south west of Switzerland that is home to Verbier, Zermatt and the Matterhorn. He remembers being brought up among culture and values of open mindedness, spending most of his free time drawing, and wanting to be a musician or composer. After studying music in the hope of becoming a professional musician — he still plays the guitar — he eventually retrained as an architect and opened his own small practice in the late Eighties. The early Nineties, recession finished that off and after spending a year in Africa he took a job in a design agency in Lausanne, specialising in watches after working on one when a brief came into the office. He eventually left to set up his own company, Through The Looking Glass.

His home (concrete-walled, tending towards the minimal, one single, large contemporary painting, piles of design books, turntable/amp with vintage movie soundtrack LPs), has the precise elegance of an architect's interior. It's generally said by people who know him that Giroud's architectural experience gives him his distinctive edge, because it taught him to think in three dimensions, and to work within tight limits.

"It's very important for us," says Büsser, "that he is an architect by training. We make 3D watchmaking sculptures, and it is very difficult to find a designer who can do that, because most are trained in 2D."

Giroud agrees it's "lucky" he studied architecture. It taught him to think in terms of the cut (or cross section). "I work all the time in the cut before I move to the top, so I think of it like a sandwich: the movement, the dial,

the hands, the glass. If you play with the cut and the way the light hits the watch, it's very interesting. Some watches are big, but the shape, the finish, the polish and the way the light hits makes it not too big. The watch becomes different."

He has no sketchbooks with fantasy watches that he thinks no one will ever make, nor any formula for hit watches (confronted with this question he just slowly shakes his head, clearly having been asked a few times before). Sometimes he and a brand will be sure they've got a winner, and product and the marketing are lined up, but in the boutiques it just doesn't sell, with little apparent reason why. The nearest he comes to describing a rule for success is that watch design tends to come down to balance and a little bit of tension: a bright red face on a venerable, traditional-looking model, perhaps, or his gothic spider's web on the Swarovski. It's a principle you can see in all great watch designs, he says, a tension between some elements. But you have to be sophisticated. Finding the balance between elements is what's difficult. "It is not," he says, "just taking a high Swiss brand and adding Disney numbers to the face."

He talks about the way tastes in watches change across time and space: how the use of expensive titanium changed the perception of the relationship between quality and weight, how the Asian and American markets prefer metal bracelets, how the Japanese used to like small watches but switched to liking big. That somehow leads to him describing a recent job redesigning the dial and hands for a cool, mid-profile Swiss brand, and I wonder if he doesn't ever wish that more brands could credit him, or that he could do "the Eric Giroud watch"? No, he says, really. He likes getting to meet interesting people and he still feels lucky to get calls.

And what about uncertainty in the industry, recent talk of slowdowns across some markets? Does it worry him?

Well, he says, the thing about a crisis is that when the industry is down, everyone wants to create something. "You saw all those crazy watches from the big brands, the [space-age gold concept watch with linear display] Cobra, Fifties Patek Philippe — wow!" He makes an amazed face, and then switches to a more thoughtful expression. "When the crisis is on, like when the Apple Watch arrived, all brands think, 'We need something new!' In a crisis, you need to create — it's a paradox. And when a crisis arrives," he says, with a modest and reflective smile, "the brands call me." ●