

The Magic Tour





With more watches than ever on the market, the design of a timepiece has become a key factor in distinguishing one brand from another. Swiss product designer Eric Giroud explains the inner workings of watch design to *QP*.

Thomas Byczkowski

How can a company stamp its identity on to a product no bigger than the base of a champagne flute? Simply putting a logo on to a dial doesn't necessarily have the desired effect, rather it is the overall design of the product that creates and continues a brand's signature DNA. With so many timepieces out there, the instant impression that the watch has is extremely important and becomes almost a 'love-at-first-sight' phenomenon, the first glimpse deciding the future relationship with the watch. Looks have the power to seduce a buyer into a purchase, so a watch not only has to be charged with the brand's identity code but also with its attributes - be they elegant, understated, sporty, crazy or audacious.

This is where product designers come in to their own, creating characteristics that distinguish one company's watches from the flood of timepieces produced by their competitors. Simply

put: it is the designer's task to imbue the products with the attraction of desire - without forgetting the importance of functionality. A prime example of such a design must certainly be Audemars Piguet's iconic Royal Oak watch. As Gerald Genta drew the famously shaped octagonal watch (in just one evening he claims), he not only invented the first ever luxury sports watch made from steel but, single-handedly, painted a synonym for the company which distinguishes it from the crowd even today. Genta seemed to have found the Holy Grail - making a non-precious metal a symbol of wealth. The fact that almost all of his following designs incorporate the octagon as a design feature just enhances the high recognition value of the form.

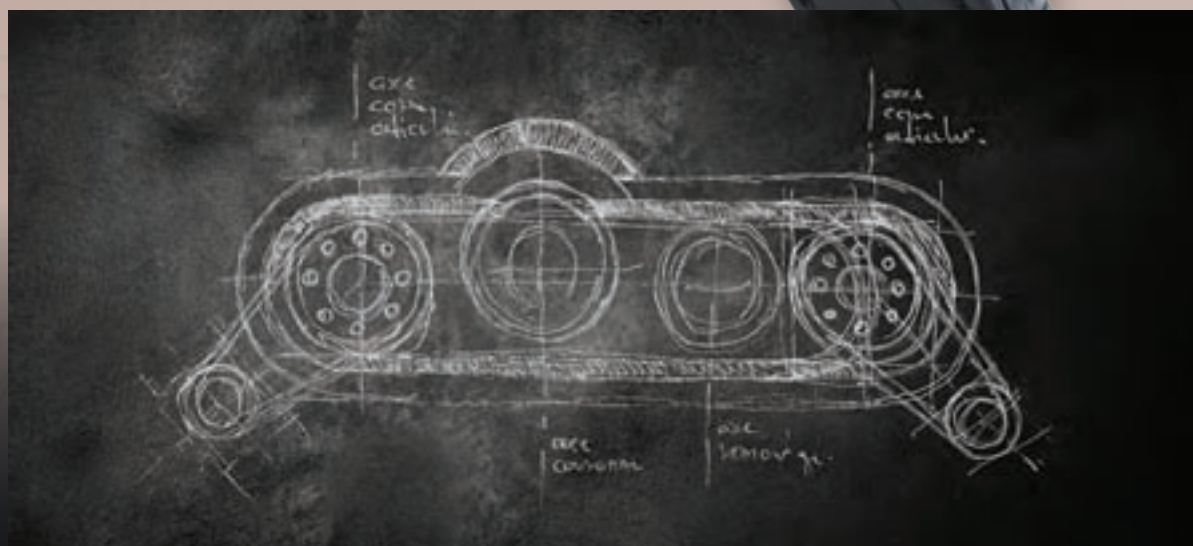
Today, the design of the 50-plus-year-old Rolex Submariner with its toothed bezel, round indexes and Mercedes

This page: The body of the T-1000 was designed by Giroud in conjunction with Rebellion's micro-engineers.



Opposite page: Giroud's work with creative laboratory MB&F has resulted in spectacular three-dimensional timepieces like 2006's HM1.

Background: Giroud's early sketches for HM1.





hands has become the epitome of a watch form; a classic already copied myriad times. The design of a Panerai Luminor can easily be distinguished from any other watch with the shape of its crown protection, the style of its numbers and the general form of the case. These designs are so unique that they easily stand out from the crowd.

Like almost no other product, the tiniest changes to a watch's design can create huge differences. The variations between a polished surface, mirroring its surrounding, and a brushed area with a microscopic structure can create a completely different feel. Minimalistic variations of angles can make all the difference between clumsiness and elegance, with the smallest fraction of a millimetre changing the whole appearance of a watch face. On the same dial, the use of Roman or Arabic numerals instead of small indexes produces yet another look. Yet despite the complications, there are literally dozens of undeterred designers who struggle daily to harmonise all the variables and create the ultimate watch.

A master of design

One of the masterminds behind a lot of current watch designs is Swiss product designer Eric Giroud, who was awarded the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève in 2007 for his design of Harry Winston's Tourbillon Glissière and again in 2009 for Opus 9 - he is also famous for designing flabbergasting time machines for Max Busser's MB&F company as well as the Sequential One for MCT.

Giroud, a 44-year-old, clean shaven man with a huge black quiff and horn-rimmed spectacles, is a kind of Swiss army knife tool for watch design, a multi purpose stylist in the best sense of the word, creating watches for all sorts of companies from mid-range, mass products like Mido, Tissot, Universal Geneve and Swarovski, all

the way down to special pieces for small companies like Revolution.

Perhaps Giroud's most interesting quality, however, is to be found in the fact that, unlike Genta and others, he never reveals his identity by means of a signature detail. Instead he stays true to the brand identity of his clients. But how does he achieve this?

Interestingly one usually talks about the design or the product, almost never about the journey of creation. But the approach to executing a new design gives a good glimpse into how a watch comes to life. Most of the masters in this field - be it Gerald Genta who claims that he has to constantly draw "otherwise he might burst", or the famous Finnish interior designer Eero Aarnio, who said, that he usually wakes with a eureka cry before scribbling down a new design in less than half an hour - say that they simply 'feel' what to do. But their impulses and instincts are driven by experience, making it near impossible to identify a definitive way of working beyond loose common threads.

"Any watch company which sets out to create a new design starts with developing a *cahier de travail*, a list that codifies all aspects of the future model", explains Giroud. "This includes information such as the basic movement and its functions as well as a description of the target group, the case material, the kind of bracelet and dial as well as the price point and the production unit."

Giroud tells the story of a design he did for a Swiss company that produces some hundred thousand watches per year. "At this company, the rules were strictly defined: the project managers went through their collection and singled out the watches that needed a makeover." And it is at this point that discussions usually take place as to which designer - internally or externally - will be approached to take responsibility for the shape of the watch.



The architectural inspiration board and Giroud's original sketches for Harry Winston's Opus 9.

Opposite page, from top: Harry Winston's Tourbillon Glissiere shown from early computer diagram to CGI and finished model.

Giroud's 2009 re-work of the Rebellion RE-2 Flyback Chronograph.

Giroud's take on Universal Genève's Cabriolet – the world's first reversible watch – featured the Microtor UG 101, the brand's own automatic movement with an off-centre micro-rotor.

History first

Giroud says that once he accepts the *cahier de travail*, his first step before submitting anything to his clients is to dive into the history of the brand, to familiarise himself with the styles of their watches and define visual codes for the brand. He insists that a good design has to incorporate the company DNA.

"This is the difference between success and failure. Even if the watch is designed completely from scratch, it has to have some features that unambiguously refer to or resemble its heritage." Even if there is nothing spectacularly new in the watch, if it is only a re-edition of an older model, with a standard movement and a simple dial, "the secret is to embrace the old technology and the history of the company and integrate this into today's demands." That means a lot of research, until the

salient facts are brought together and a possible starting point for the watch design is defined.

"With all the information gathered, we designers set out on our magic tour," says Giroud. The route of that tour Giroud explains changes according to the project – if a model needs to fit in with the existing range of a big company, then it is rather like a fast ride on a highway driven not by instinct, but by rules that define speed limits and traffic; however, in the development of an expensive and audacious single piece or limited edition the journey is much more of a cross country ride. So the development for a big company is completely different from a product for a small firm like MB&F. Says Giroud: "By developing a mid-range watch, we are talking about a serious industrial product, not some hand assembled piece that is designed regardless of the costs."

The process

At the start of his 'journey' Giroud first pencil sketches all possible ideas and forms that come to his mind. This serves as a quick reminder for later, when he sits at the computer and really works on a form: ideas for different hands, the form of an index or the shape of a lug he can find in the sketchbook.

For Giroud, there are two initial aspects – the case and the dial. "It is one thing if you have an idea on how to create a case, but then coming to the dial you might easily get stuck, because a completely different approach is needed, as the dial is a two dimensional world with lots of information, while the case is the frame", he explains. Like in art, the 'frame' can give a completely different perception of the painting or dial that it holds. "And we have not even begun to talk about the detail or the bracelet," muses Giroud.



Giroud is responsible for the stunning architectural design of the highly complex MCT Sequential.



The D:Light by Swarovski was designed by Giroud and was awarded Best Product Design 2010 by Red Dot, when it was credited for being functional, modern and spectacularly stylish.



Eric Giroud.



Another aspect Giroud likes to use for his designs is contradiction. "In the course of creating a case and dial I like to apply what I call my 'theory of tension'," he says. "If everything in the design leads in the same direction - shapes repeating or colours matching - this can lead to a boring product. Like in clothing: if you dress all in black, you have to be very selective with your items to not look boring. But if you manage to give your style a twist, even if it is just with some sparkle of colour, this creates the tension that makes your outfit interesting."

Giroud has an example from his own designs. "With MB&F we wanted to create a very serious watch design. Even if the outcome looks somehow freakish, it should instantaneously be clear that it is a serious piece of *haute horlogerie* - from the shape all the way down to the mechanism." In the HM1, for example, the rotor is inspired by a Manga sword - a gadget of the futuristic fighters in those famous Japanese comics.

"To integrate this Manga element into the watch was very difficult. There is a certain MB&F code and then came

this very small but quite bombastic feature. So how could we possibly fit this into the language we had created for the watch? The outcome was a bit like dropping some words of Japanese in the middle of a sentence in French: everyone who sees it looks dazzled. But unlike actual language, the design-integration can make sense and can be understood," the designer laughs, "even if you don't speak Japanese." But even this special feature, which creates the tension has to emulate into a look of coherency. "And if you take the watch in your hand, touch it and put it around your wrist then it comes alive."

The realities

After Giroud has a coherent design on the computer he meets and discusses the form with his client. As with all creative projects, it is almost inevitable that some aspects of the initial work have to be modified. And once designs are approved, Giroud insists on being an active part of the development. In most companies this process is very fast and intense - in two or three months the whole project can be finished. For Giroud this is where the excitement increases, especially seeing his designs in airports around the world. "Then," he says, "you get a real feeling for what you have created as a product designer." ☺

Since the creation of HM1, Giroud has developed a new Horological Machine for MB&F each year. The latest in the series is HM4 Thunderbolt (below).

