

...
The
GENIUSES
Of
MODERN
WATCHMAKING



ILLUSTRATION BY KATHLEEN C. FAYE

The watch industry

has gone through more ups and downs in the last four decades than at any time in its five-century history. The Japanese quartz onslaught nearly killed the European watch industry in the 1970s, till the Swiss, with the help of some smart watchmakers and marketing wizards, fought back by creating a new market for their mechanical watches at the top end called the 'luxury segment' of the watch market (and of course at the low end as well with Nicholas Hayek's economical and cheerful quartz-based Swatch watches). Through continuous innovation, the luxury and super luxury mechanical watch market has since expanded exponentially, a process that seems irreversible, at least in the nearer term. But at the same time, the quartz watchmakers have prospered too. A period of relative calm has once again returned to the industry. Here we profile some of the men who have been responsible for the transformation of the modern timepiece and the market for it since the 1980s. This is not an exhaustive list but an inclusive one



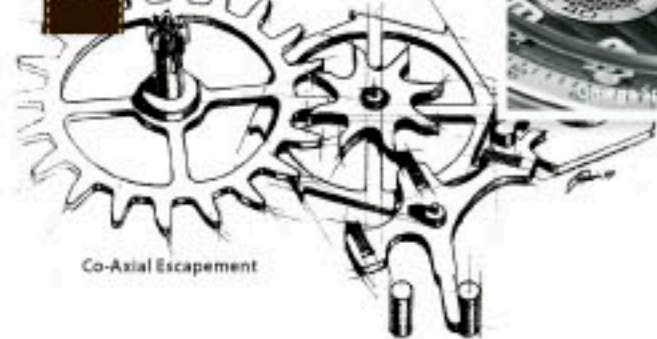
Hayek photographed in the '90s

NICOLAS G HAYEK

Nicolas G Hayek, who passed away a few months ago in harness at the age of 82, is regarded as the father of the modern Swiss watchmaking industry, the man who single handedly revived an industry which was almost given up for dead after the assault from cheaper Japanese-made quartz watches in the 1970s. A Swiss of Lebanese descent, he spent the first thirty years of his working life as a management consultant. In the early 1980s he was asked by a banker friend to help in the sale of two big ailing Swiss watch companies, ASUAG and SSIH, to Seiko. Appalled that brands like Omega would go out of the hands of the Swiss (and the fact that ASUAG also

owned ETA and Nivarox-FAR, the leading Swiss manufacturer of watch movements and components) Hayek merged the two, renamed the new entity SMH and bought the controlling stake. Simultaneously, he asked two ETA engineers to create a cheap Swiss quartz watch. They created one with just 51 parts (as compared to the 151 in Japanese watches), housed them in colourful plastic cases and called them Swatch (after Swiss watch). They sold for less than \$50, cheaper than anything the Japanese could make. They were an overnight success worldwide. In 1983, the first year itself, 1.1 million of them were sold. Swatch helped revive Swiss watchmaking

and made Hayek a powerhouse. Over the next two decades the billionaire Hayek transformed himself into a consummate watchmaker (he used to wear two and three watches at a time on his two wrists), and transformed the group (it was renamed Swatch Group in 1998) into the world's largest watchmaker with as many 19 of the leading watch brands in its stable, including Omega, Blancpain, Rado, Longines, Certina, Hamilton, Tissot, Breguet and Balmain. Last year Swatch Group manufactured more than 1.2 billion watches, and its component and movement-making subsidiaries keep the Swiss watchmaking industry running.

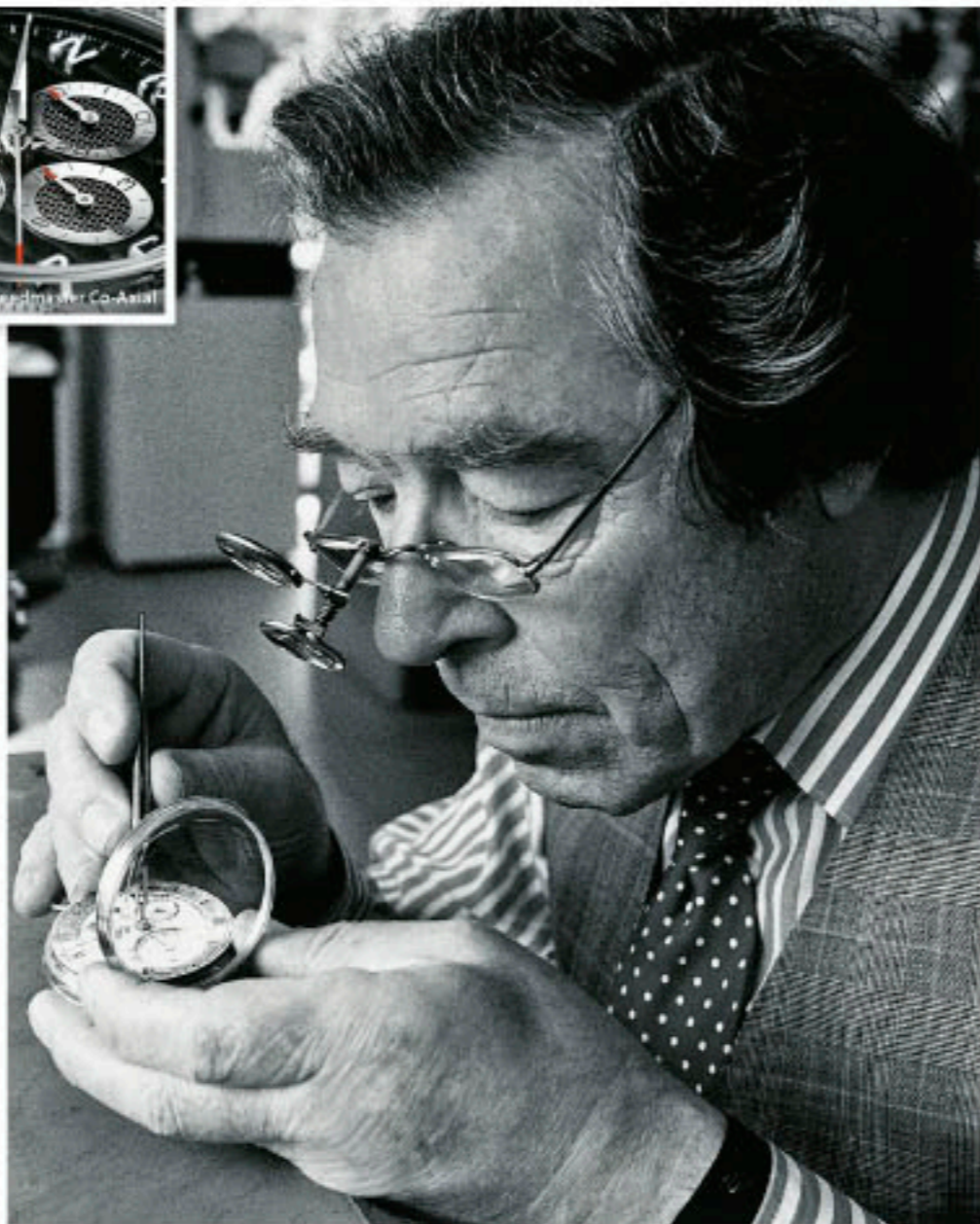


Co-Axial Escapement

GEORGE DANIELS

The 84-year old George Daniels, considered by many as the greatest living watchmaker, created the Co-Axial Escapement, which solved a problem that had baffled watchmakers for 500 years — the problem of lubrication. Yet, for more than 20 years, he did not find any buyers... till Omega (a brand he has been associated with for over 50 years) decided to industrialise the invention in 1999. One of his pocket watches — once owned by the great American collector, Esmond Bradley Martin, and sold at Sotheby's New York for £205,000 in 2002 — was sent for trial at the Royal Observatory at Greenwich in 1980. It proved to be so accurate that

it earned him the prestigious Tompion Medal, only the fifth person (at that time) to be given this horological award. In his autobiography, *All in Good Time*, the Englishman writes about how he learnt watchmaking: "I was 23 years old... After work each Monday, Wednesday and Friday I would cycle to the digs, bolt my dinner and then set off at a trot on foot to catch the tube train from Edgware to Angel. Work started at 7:00 pm and finished at 9:30 pm when it was back to the tube train and return to Edgware." Not surprisingly, he topped the class and was awarded a Fellowship of Britain's Horological Institute (of which he later became a Chairman). Daniels, who has played with watches since the age of five, is one of the few living watchmakers who can create a complete watch, including the case and dial, by hand.



JACK HEUER

Jack Heuer is the man behind the historic Tag Heuer watches like the Carrera, Monaco, Silverstone Monza, Chronosplit Manhattan GMT, Daytona and many others. He was born in 1932 in Bern, Switzerland, the great-grandson of Edouard Heuer, the founder of the company now called TAG-Heuer. He joined the family business in 1958 and was instrumental in pushing for the development of the world's first automatic chronograph, which was launched in 1969. In that same year, Heuer Leonidas (the name of the company then) became one of the first non automotive sponsors on the Formula One racing



The original Monaco

circuit. In 1971, he started a very close and successful technical co-operation with Ferrari in Formula One, which lasted nine years and sealed TAG-Heuer's position in the high technology auto-racing field. Heuer was

one of the first few men to anticipate the electronic revolution and introduced watches such as the Microtimer (in 1966), a low-cost timing instrument measuring up to 1/1000th of a second and The ACIT (1976), an Automatic Car Identification and Timing system which applied the principle of putting a radio emitter on every F1 car to allow for precise timing, lap counting and car identification. This system, albeit modified and improved, is basically still the one used by TAG-Heuer today in its F1 timekeeping. Since 2001, Heuer has been serving as the Honorary Chairman of Tag Heuer.



KENJI SHIOHARA

Kenji Shiohara, 52, works as a master craftsman with Seiko, which owns the only watchmaking facility in Japan. In 1979 he won the World Skills Championship for his watchmaking talent. In the mid-2000s, Shiohara's passion for the

development of Seiko's traditional watchmaking skills paved the way for the creation of its world famous Micro Artist Studio, which now specialises in the manufacture of its specialised watches, including its best known Spring Drive watches. The Credor Sonnerie was the earliest masterpiece to come out of the studio, featured 617 components and is built on the base of Spring Drive movement 7R series with its glide-motion hands. On the Spring Drive movement is added the sonnerie, which has its separate barrel, ensuring that this mechanism has more than 40 hours of power reserve. The sonnerie mechanism has an hour striking function and is built around a typical Japanese hanging bell sound. In 2006, Shiohara won the Medal with Yellow Ribbon, one of Japan's highest civilian honours.



Credor Sonnerie Spring Drive



WALTER LANGE

A Lange & Söhne was founded in 1845 by Ferdinand Lange in Glashütte, then the cradle of German watchmaking. It was shut down at the end of World War II by the Russians who expropriated the property. Following the collapse of communist East Germany, the company and the brand was revived in 1990 by the founder's grandson Walter Lange, now 86, with financial support from watchmaker Günther Blümlein, the then head of Jaeger LeCoultre



and International Watch Co (IWC). In less than two decades he transformed the company into one of the world's great luxury watch brands. Lange unveiled its first range of watches in 1994 — the iconic mechanical wristwatch Lange 1 being the most important,

taking on established Swiss giants like Patek Philippe and Vacheron Constantin, becoming a symbol of Germany's national pride. Lange's movement design and decoration doesn't have typical Swiss features; instead, it flaunts specs like three-quarter plates and screwed gold chatons. His watches are described as more "austere" than the watches produced by comparable Swiss firms. A Lange & Söhne is now part of the Richemont group, whose other brands include Panerai, Cartier, Van Cleef & Arpels, Jaeger-LeCoultre, IWC, and Montblanc.

THOMAS PRESCHER

Thomas Prescher, 44, developed the world's first flying double-axis tourbillon in a pocket watch in 2003 and the world's first flying double-axis tourbillon with constant force in the carriage in a wristwatch in 2004. The tourbillon turns around two axes, both of which rotate once per minute, is powered by remontoir, a special constant-force mechanism created so as to equalise the effects of a wound and unwound mainspring, friction, and gravitation. Prescher entered the German Navy at the age of 19 and finished at the rank of captain before plunging full time into studying watchmaking. His first job was a one-and-a-half-year stay at Audemars



Piguet's German service center, which was followed by four years at Gubelin lab in Lucerne, Switzerland, where he specialised in the restoration of antique and

complicated watches, and manufacturing of custom-made timepieces. A while back, Prescher, who has displayed a marked predilection for complicated timepieces, unveiled the world's first triple axis tourbillon regulator wristwatch. These days he makes and sells highly specialised designer watches through his Twann, Switzerland-based company Thomas Prescher Haute Horlogerie. The watches, which feature single, double and triple axis tourbillon, are more for the connoisseur with prices ranging from Rs 20 lakh to Rs 2 crore.



QP1



JEAN CLAUDE BIVER

Jean-Claude Biver, the CEO of Hublot SA, learnt his skills first at Audemars Piguet and then at Omega. In 1981, in an audacious move, the 61-year old teamed up with friend Jacques Piguet to buy the oldest, but virtually dead Swiss watch brand Blancpain. This was in an era when the world had moved away from mechanical watches to



embrace the new technology of quartz. Biver created the historic ad line: 'Since 1735 there has never been a quartz Blancpain watch. And there never will be.' It was a loaded statement invoking the great mythology of Swiss watchmaking, implying its classiness and elegance over the upstart culture of quartz. It was a brilliant marketing strategy. Mechanical watches suddenly became a status symbol and those who could afford them were prepared to pay a premium to own one. Over the next decade, the strategy revived not just Blancpain but the entire Swiss watch industry. In the early 1990s, Biver sold Blancpain



Hublot King Power

to Nicholas Hayek of the Swatch group. As a board member he helped revive the group's other marquee luxury brand Omega. In late 2003, he quit to become the CEO of Hublot, a little known company which was known in watch circles for combining luxury gold watches with rubber straps. His emphasis on design and use of unusual combinations like gold with ceramic, titanium and red gold and even magnesium and titanium led to a ten-fold increase in sales in less than five years. Hublot Big Bang watches are now considered to be among the best designed watches in the world. Hublot was taken over by LVMH, the French luxury group, while Biver stayed on as the CEO.



ROGER SMITH

The 40-year-old Roger W Smith, a winner of the Bronze Medal of the British Horological Institute in 1989 (awarded to the most outstanding graduating student of any given year), made a tourbillon pocket watch at 22, and sought the legendary watchmaker George Daniels' opinion on it. After some constructive criticism and encouragement from Daniels, he joined him at the Isle of Man and began his work on another one — a watch that was completely finished by 1997 and won kudos from Daniels, who after a few months took Smith on board to create 50 co-axial escapement watches for Omega. Smith hasn't looked back since then, nor come back — he runs his handmade



The Millennium Watch

watchmaking business — Roger W Smith — from the Isles. The man who is known not to make more than 12 watches a year is considered an horological virtuoso and his Series 2 line of watches — whose movements boast of frosted and gilded plates in the English style, and whose jewels are set in gold chatons — truly represents the revival of English watchmaking.



MAXIMILIAN BUSSER

When Max Büsser, of German-Swiss and Indian heritage, was head hunted from Jaeger-LeCoultre to head Harry Winston's watch division he was just 31 and the company was

pieces. Under his reign, Harry Winston launched the Opus series — the Opus 1 was a resonance chronometer devised by the watchmaker Francois-Paul Journe. It created a stir for its unprecedented technology and innovation as an Haute Horlogerie project. When Büsser left Harry Winston in 2005 to found his own company,

Max Büsser and Friends (MB & F), the watch division had grown from seven employees to 80, and revenues had risen ten fold. MB&F produces limited editions of highly innovative watches, which Büsser calls Horological Machines. Horological Machine 1 for example, has two overlapping circular faces, for minutes and hours, and a tourbillon cage inspired by the battle-axe of a Japanese Manga



HM Face 2

hero. Büsser works with some of the world's most talented horologists and independent watchmakers and MB & F is seen by many to be a small but utopian company,

on the verge of going belly up. Büsser overhauled the supply chain and turned the weakness of being a limited-outlet retailer into a marketing strength by stressing the rarity of its

VINCENT CALABRESE

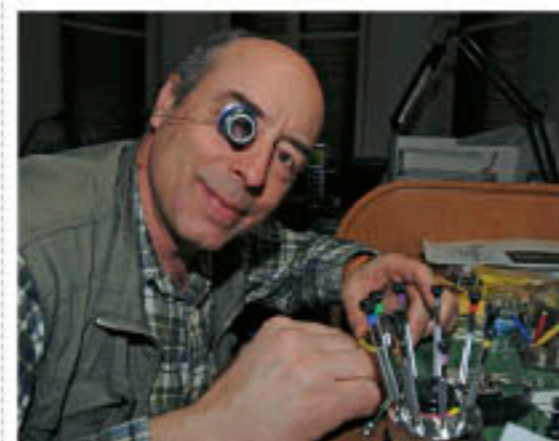
The 67-year-old Vincent Calabrese, who has no formal training in watchmaking, is best known as the creator of Corum's Golden Bridge watch. This watch derived its name from its manually wound movement, which placed the winding works, going train and escapement in a straight line, mounted on a single bridge made from 18 karat gold. Displayed in a unique case with sapphire crystals on both sides, this marvel offered collectors an exhibition movement unlike any other. Two years ago, Swatch group's Blancpain acquired Vica Sarl, the company that owned the Vincent Calabrese brand of watches.



Calabrese had a major role to play in designing Blancpain's first flying tourbillon in the '80s. He is one of the founding members of the Swiss-based Academie Horlogere Des Createurs Independents, which was created in 1984 to promote manual and artistic watchmaking and craftsmanship.



Corum Golden Bridge Movement



LUDWIG OECHSLIN

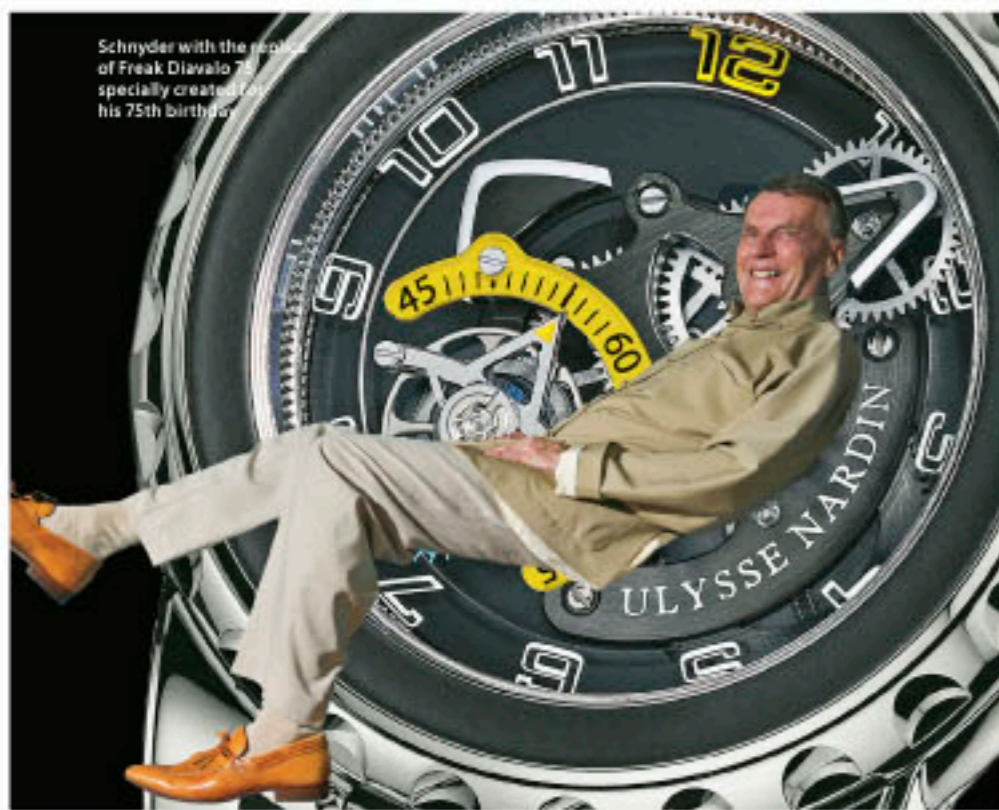
If Rolf Schnyder, the owner of Ulysse Nardin, was the man with the dream to take the firm to the highest levels of watchmaking, Dr Ludwig Oechslin, 58, was the man with the chops to turn the vision into reality as the creative head of Ulysse Nardin. Oechslin is the creator of all Ulysse Nardin's Trilogy of Time masterpieces: the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, the Tellurium Johannes

Kepler and the Planetarium Copernicus — watches created in the '80s and '90s. He also designed the watch that bears his name, the Perpetual Ludwig, the only perpetual calendar watch



The Moonstruck

which can be set forward or backward using only the winding crown. It is said the Italian-born Oechslin came to watchmaking thus: one day, while visiting a small shop, he spotted a minute repeater wristwatch. He wanted it, but he could not afford it, so he determined that he would learn to build one himself. A veritable Renaissance man, he studied philosophy, archeology, ancient history, astronomy, theoretical physics and Greek at the Universities of Basel and Berne in Germany. Oechslin doesn't see complexity as an end in itself — a view that runs contrary to mainstream thinking in Swiss watchmaking. His priorities are functionality, precision and reliability. He believes the fewer pieces in a work, the greater its value as a complex mechanism. Oechslin has launched his own brand, Ochs und Junior, two years ago, and his latest collaboration with Ulysse Nardin is the Moonstruck, a follow up to the Trilogy of Time series, a watch that clearly presents orientation of the earth, sun, and moon, and is available in rose gold and platinum versions.



Schnyder with the dial of Freak Diavolo 7, specially created for his 75th birthday

ROLF SCHNYDER

Rolf Schnyder, 75, took over Ulysse Nardin in 1983, at a time when the company, traditionally known for marine chronometers, was getting hammered due to the quartz revolution. Schnyder's comeback strategy was simple — manufacture a breakthrough product. The wall clock Astrolabium in Jorg Spöring's workshop in Lucerne, Switzerland caught Schnyder's attention, and provided the inspiration for the creation of a famous wristwatch of that name.

His main aide in the project was Dr Ludwig Oechslin — historian, inventor and master watchmaker. Together they propelled Ulysse Nardin into the horological hall of fame with the revolutionary Astrolabium Galileo Galilei, which was named by the Guinness Book of World Records in 1989 as the world's most functional watch and transformed Ulysse Nardin into one of the world's best known luxury watch manufacturers. Two other astronomical watches followed: the Planetarium Copernicus (1988) and the Tellurium Johannes Kepler (1992). The three pieces constitute what the brand calls the Trilogy of Time.