

FASHION

Edited by Divia Harilela
divia.harilela@scmp.com

Young, independent watchmakers are redefining the luxury timepiece market, writes **Karen Ting**

Men of the moment

The world of luxury watches is undergoing a revival as young entrepreneurs, who have built successful careers at well-established companies, strike out on their own with a new take on time.

These independent watchmakers combine unusual designs and innovative techniques to create rare and complicated timepieces. And unlike most luxury brands, they pride themselves on developing their own mechanical movements instead of sourcing parts from other makers.

"The interest in younger watch brands can be compared to the fashion industry," says Carson Chan, managing director and watch specialist at Bonhams. "There are people following Gucci, Prada, YSL, but there are some who are interested in edgy labels and designers that no one has heard of."

"A large percentage of people buy [only] old-school watch brands, but there are those who buy younger and lesser-known ones; they usually pay more attention to the watchmaker's ideology and have an appreciation of such elements."

These brands have broadened the market significantly, Chan says.

"It gives watch collectors an alternative to what the mainstream is offering," he says. "My advice for people buying independent brands is to fully understand the thinking behind the brand and see whether you agree with it."

Richard Mille is a pioneer in this field, having set up his eponymous watch brand a decade ago. With years of experience at brands such as Seiko and jewellery brand Mauboussin under his belt, he launched his first watch in 2001, a tourbillon, RM001, which was inspired by Formula One racing.

"In terms of technique, the world of FI has all the essential concepts for me to work from – including lightness and strength combined with flexibility, speed and reliability under stress – all attributes for a high-performance watch," says Mille.

Since then, the brand has launched more than 20 models that reflect Mille's original vision of creating innovative watches with technical and architectural dimensions. One of Mille's latest creations, the RM25, is a diver's watch featuring a tourbillon and a chronograph.

The brand has a retail network around the world, including boutiques in Paris, Tokyo, Dubai, Hong Kong and Beijing. Mille stresses the importance of community for those just starting out in the industry.

"Watchmakers are usually not designers by nature or interest; they view the world primarily from the angle of the watchmaker's work table. They will need to get input from outside their domain of expertise and knowledge to achieve success."

Teamwork played a key role when Maximilian Busser launched his brand MB&F (Maximilian Busser and Friends) in 2005 at the age of 38. "I had so many ideas but without the



Ones to watch: designers Maximilian Busser (below) with his latest HM3 model (left); Denis Giguet (below, left) with his Sequential One; and Richard Mille (bottom) with his RM01 Felipe Massa



engineers, watchmakers, artisans and creative partners around me, those ideas would [have stayed] just that. The concept of assembling a community of friends each year to craft one model became the goal," says Busser, who had previously worked for Jaeger-LeCoultre and Harry Winston.

MB&F watches are called Horological Machines (HM). The brand's first creation, HM1, received much attention among watch collectors and industry insiders for its unconventional design and complications.

"HM1 was my foundation piece. Its shape was due to the idea of two worlds – MB and friends – coming

together and at their meeting point, the heart would beat, in this case the central tourbillon," he says.

His second watch, HM2, combines many complications including instantaneous jumping hour, retrograde minutes and date, bi-hemisphere moon phase and automatic winding, altogether comprising more than 450 components.

The brand's latest creation, HM3, comes in two versions, the Starcruiser and Sidewinder, both of which have a space-age appearance. Denis Giguet's first watch has a comparatively subdued appearance, but it is generating buzz among watch connoisseurs. Giguet founded Manufacture Contemporaine du Temps (MCT) in 2007 and developed and launched his first timepiece, Sequential One, in only 18 months.

The watch's name is derived from its unique display. Its square case prominently displays the hour on rotating prisms, while the minutes are shown on a brushed sapphire disc. "My original inspiration was to create a timepiece with a very large hour display numeral. I wanted to change the face of time by revealing a new way of showing it," says 39-year-old Giguet, who

[Independent watch brands give] collectors an alternative to what the mainstream is offering

Carson Chan, watch specialist

previously worked at Rolex and Harry Winston.

"I wanted to be free of the constraints of a big group and create watches with unique identities for collectors and discerning enthusiasts. I wanted to raise the bar in the high end independent sector by designing and creating timepieces that challenged traditional thinking," he says.

Like Busser, Giguet worked with many specialists throughout the watchmaking process. "As you can imagine, co-ordinating activities and managing the design, manufacture and supply of all watch components was a huge task," he says.

Both Giguet and Busser insist on keeping their companies small with limited production. MCT



does not expect to make more than 300 watches a year, while Giguet stresses the importance of custom-made mechanical movements.

"The investment in our own movement is a statement of our intent and of our brand's unique character," he says.

Being small also means that Busser does not have to compromise on creativity.

"By letting our creativity follow a personal path, and to materialise the most radical ideas means that very few customers will understand what we are trying to achieve," he says. "I am amused when people ask me with an incredulous look on their face: 'Hasn't everything been done?' [If we] stop looking in the rearview mirror, we are just at the beginning of a creative process."



Q&A: Eri Utsugi

Divia Harilela

Japanese designer Eri Utsugi studied at Esmod in Japan before moving to Paris to study fashion at Studio Bercot. She then returned to Japan and worked for brands including Zucca and Tsumori Chisato before launching her label Frapbois in 2001. In 2005 she left Frapbois and moved to fashion firm A-net, owned by Issey Miyake. Backed by A-net, she launched Mercibeacoup later that year, a label she describes as an extension of her philosophy at Frapbois.



Did you always want to be a fashion designer?

I always wanted to be a singer when I was a child, but I was also interested in fashion, which is why I decided to study it. My career in fashion design only happened after a friend of mine encouraged me to pursue it.

You studied fashion in Japan and Paris – how different was each?

I learned different things from both places. I was taught to trust my own instincts and feelings in Japan and I met many stylish and inspiring people in France, all of whom have made an impact on me and the way I design. I wanted to stay in Paris after completing my studies, but my parents asked me to come home. More than anything, though, I wanted to implement all I learned and transform my crazy thoughts into design pieces. That was the reasoning behind starting my label.

What is the philosophy behind Mercibeacoup?

I wanted to launch a brand that could bring happiness to my customers. Mercibeacoup is happy, cheerful and cute, and people who wear my clothes always enjoy wearing them. I used animals as the theme for my first collection and have continued to incorporate elements that are cheerful. It was important to make clothes that also express my feelings.

Japanese fashion is known for its dark, deconstructed style. Why did you do something so different?

I didn't intend to do something extraordinarily different from other Japanese fashion labels. In fact, I've seen many upcoming Japanese labels that are colourful and well-tailored. My brand is slightly different in that it's infused with humorous and detailed designs. I am always loyal to my own feelings and hope to bring a positive message through my designs.

Your designs are often described as quirky. What's the secret to making them wearable yet fun?

I don't think Mercibeacoup is either street fashion or high-end. It's a unique collection and appeals to

people willing to take up challenges. Wearability is important, but I still see fun and happiness as my first priority, although I do try to strike a balance. My showpieces are a bit loud and over the top, while I still have friendly merchandise to accommodate all customers.

What does your current collection look like?

I built the FW09 collection around the theme of the butterfly, with long parkas and ribbons as accents on long blouses as key items. I was also inspired by my last trip to Russia, and used the Matryoshka motifs in my design. The fur details and trimmings also make up a cosy-looking collection.

How do you see the brand developing in Asia?

Asia is very important to Mercibeacoup, and we have just opened another store in Hong Kong. I think my customers tend to try new things and are all willing to take up challenges. People who wear Mercibeacoup in Japan are a bit different from customers in Hong Kong. My Japanese customers are a bit shy and sometimes aren't open enough to express themselves in a carefree way. People in Hong Kong tend to be more outgoing and fearless, so they wear the brand well. In the end we want to increase our sales and grow, but again, being happy is always my motto and the first priority in everything.

What is the most enjoyable part of your job as a designer?

The best thing is being able to transform all your thoughts into facts and into an actual design. This brings me a lot of satisfaction. On the other hand, I sacrifice much of my personal time. I cannot bring up my son like every other normal mother does because I have less time than others.

The new Mercibeacoup shop (below) is at G/F, 66 Paterson St, Causeway Bay, tel: 2808 2789



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Style bites

No kidding around

Moncler, known for its quilted jackets, is hosting the Toy Project to raise funds for the End Child Sexual Abuse Foundation. The brand has commissioned photographers RongRong & Inri, sculptor Xiang Jing and painter Zeng Fanzhi to design pieces based on its duck mascot (right). They will go on display before being auctioned for the charity on Friday. Limited-edition key chains will also be available with proceeds going to the charity. The artworks are on display until



Thursday at the Harbour Area, Level Two, IFC Mall, Central. Key chains are available at Moncler, Shop 2061, IFC Mall, Central.

Cash and carry

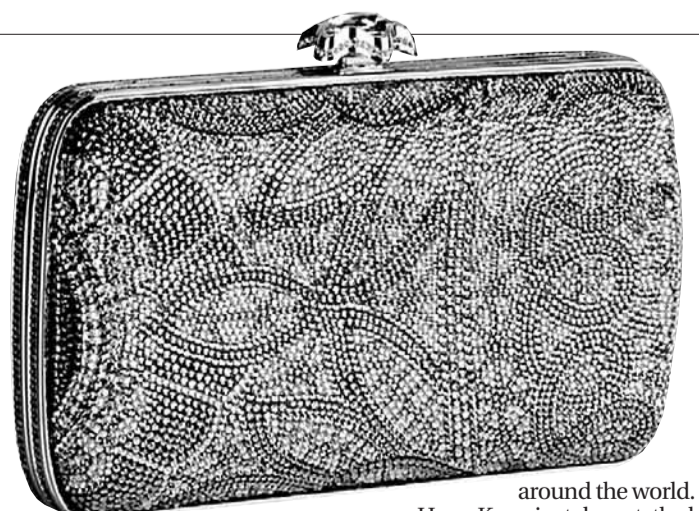
Indian designer Suneet Varma has collaborated with handbag designer Judith Leiber on a capsule collection of minaudières (right). There are 25 styles available only at a trunk show today, priced from US\$1,000 to US\$6,000. Custom orders are also available. Today from 11am to 7pm, the Caine Room, Level 7, Conrad Hotel, Admiralty, tel: 9495 5147

Westwood bound for young talent

Next year's Hong Kong Young Fashion Designers' Contest (YDC) will offer the winner a one-month internship at the Vivienne Westwood headquarters in London. The winners will be announced in January 2010, with Westwood creative director Andreas Kronthaler serving as a VIP judge. The event will be held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre as part of Hong Kong Fashion Week. For more information, go to worldboutiquehk.com.

Watch this space

Gucci's creative director, Frida Giannini, has designed a limited-edition watch to benefit singer Mary J. Blige's Foundation for the Advancement of Women Now. The watch, named Twirl, has a black PVD bracelet decorated with the



brand's signature double-G motif and a monochrome dial, with a rotating case embellished with black diamonds. It is available exclusively in the US.

Reebok hails heritage

To mark the launch of its new Freestyle Styler Series collection, Reebok is hosting a series of Hail Heritage exhibitions in various cities

around the world. For the Hong Kong instalment, the brand has invited local stylist Davena Mok and photographer Douglas Young to showcase the new collection in a series of photographs. These will be exhibited from Saturday until Tuesday, from 10am to 6pm at the Conservancy Association for Heritage, Annex Block, 36A Western St, Western District, Sai Ying Pun.

Divia Harilela