

INSIDE WATCH DESIGN

Designing a watch is extremely challenging. Watches are tiny, compared to such products as furniture or cars, which limits design opportunities. Add to this the fact that there are so many watches and brands on the market today, and it's more challenging than ever to have a unique design.

by Keith Strandberg

The Challenges

The over-riding task of every watch designer is to come up with a new design that doesn't look like anything else on the market. Considering the small size of a watch, and the conventions associated with timepieces, it's a tall order to design something truly unique.

"The biggest challenge for us is that there are so many watches and every client wants something new," says Claudio D'Amore, owner of independent Cosanova Design. "The detail makes the difference. We need to find the balance to all the little elements. We work hard on finding innovation in watches, to find the proper character."

Smaller brands can get away with really outlandish designs, because they don't have to sell it to the masses.



Claudio D'Amore



"For high end brands like Hautlence, it's important to be different in the design but also in the global brand building," says Guillaume Tetu, COO, Hautlence. "We are relatively new players, people have to recognize the product at the first glance."

Other companies have a wider audience, so they can't be as daring because it may result in failure. "To offer something different than the others, to be recognizable among all the other watch brands, and to maybe have the chance to have some PR coverage – that's the challenge we face," says Matthias Breschan, president, Hamilton International Ltd. "Having a unique design doesn't mean a top seller, however, it can be too special and become a flop."

The design of a watch has to embody the spirit of the brand, so people know right away what the brand is. "Today every brand is looking very hard for a distinct design," says Thomas Morf, president, Carl F. Bucherer. "At the end, it's about creating something with timelessness. There is so much design trash within the industry, just to be different by all means. Carl F. Bucherer watches aim to be timeless, yet fresh and contemporary."



The Design Process

The process of designing a new watch is different for every brand. Some brands, like Hamilton, mine their rich history while also doing new products, while others, like HD3, have to do something way outside the box.

"The biggest challenge is to change everything, while making sure it's not a copy," says HD3's Jorg Hysek. "A new watch cannot look like other products."

Every design starts with an idea. Some presidents are the guardians of a brand's DNA, while others are open to ideas from just about anyone. Designer houses take their cues from the head designer, while other companies open up product development to a sort of competition, looking for the next great idea.

Bovet's president Pascal Raffy does all the designs for his brand. "Having the passion of Bovet timepieces, I attempt to draw our watches myself," he explains. "In many cases, my design drawings need to mature. As an example, some drawings of Bovet timepieces that I had drawn in 2001 still deserve, according to me, that I work on them. I remain certain that I will not abandon them."

Some companies use only in-house designers, not willing to trust their brand DNA to anyone outside the "inner circle." Others use only freelance designers, preferring to think "out-

side the box" and tweak any outlandish ideas.

Most brands use a mix of internal and external designers.

"Using in-house designers is easier, quicker, and they have top priority to work on your collection only," says Hamilton's Breschan. "Freelancers work for other companies as well, but they are more aware of the new trends, they introduce 'fresh' ideas. Sometimes, they will go wrong, they will not interpret your needs correctly, but their work can be a great surprise as well. I personally like to work with many different designers; I feel that different designers have their own strengths. You have to take the best from them."

At the end of the day, if it's a great design, it doesn't really matter from where it came. "The best solution for the brand is more important than the question whether you're going to use in-house or external designers," Carl F. Bucherer's Morf says. "I don't care who's going to make the design. I want the best solution for Carl F. Bucherer."

Perrelet works with both inside designers and freelancers. "Our experience is that it is most fruitful to have both internal and external sources compete and work with each other," says Marc Bernhardt, CEO, Perrelet. "We probably come up with around 60 individual designs before we arrive at a design that deserves to be developed further."



HD3 Three Minds Tourbillon Titanium



VOLNATOMIC



CONCORD C1 Eternal Gravity

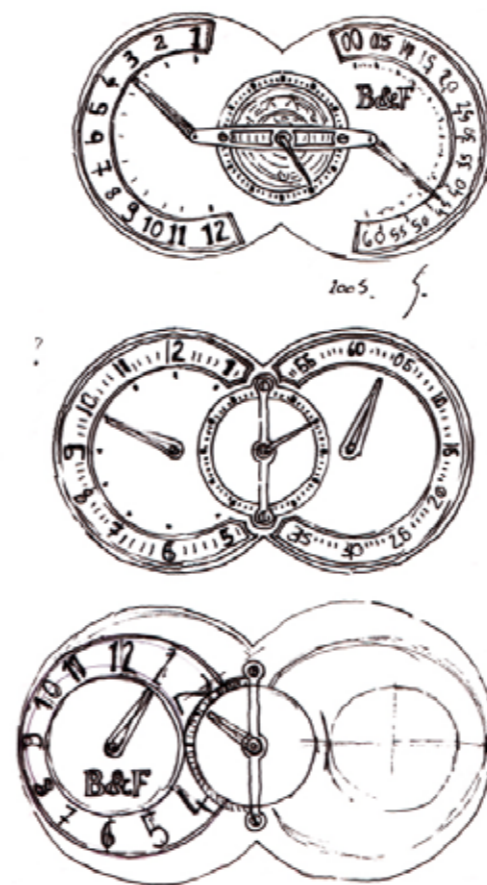
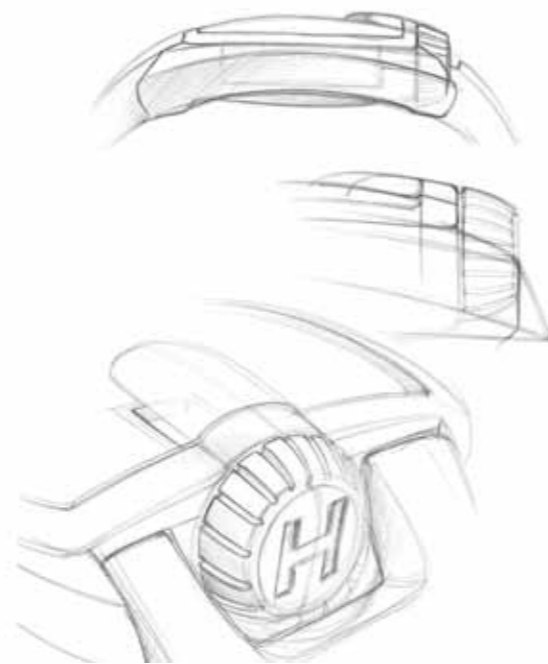


Carl F. Bucherer ChronoDate ladies





HAMILTON Route 66



Horological Machine No3 Frog

MB&F presents Horological Machine No3 Frog. Haute horlogerie is (usually) a very restrained and serious business; however one of Maximilian Büsser main goals in creating MB&F was to bring a child's sense of awe and sense of playfulness into high-end watchmaking.

The protruding eyes of the (amphibian) frog enable it to see in many directions without having to turn its head. The bulbous domes of the HM3 Frog have the opposite, but no less important, feature of enabling the time to be easily seen from many angles without having to turn the wrist. The Frog differs substantially from HM3 in that it is the aluminum domes that rotate under the sapphire crystals in the Frog, whereas it is the hour and minute hands that rotate around their respective stationary cones on HM3.

Rotating domes of this size and shape posed MB&F with a number of technical challenges. The hour and minute domes are machined from solid aluminium - chosen for its optimal strength to weight ratio. The domes weigh in at just over 0.5g. They are milled first from the outside and then the inside to arrive at a paper-thin wall thickness of just 0.28 mm, which reduces their energy requirements to an absolute minimum.

Even the fabrication of the semi-spherical sapphire crystal domes was incredibly demanding and only recently even possible at all. This is due to the fact that any slight imperfection in

the sapphire might introduce a disconcerting magnification effect. The sapphire has to be shaped and polished to be perfectly uniform.

The Frog's unusual method of indicating time necessitated the development of a new gear train for the HM3 engine. This was because the aluminum hour dome of the Frog rotates in 12 hours compared to the 24 hour revolution of the HM3 hour hand. And as the oversized date wheel is driven from the hours, the gearing driving the date had to be reworked as well.

The Frog may portray the time in a playful manner, but there is nothing but serious and meticulous attention to detail and care regarding the fine hand-finishing of the high-tuned engine purring within its lightweight high-tech titanium case. A close inspection of the case is rewarded with carefully thought out detailing including a figure 8 engraved around the domes that mirrors the form of the display back (revealing dual ceramic bearings); distinctive clover-head white gold screws; and an engraved arrow discreetly indicating the easy to read over-sized date.

If the viewer's gaze manages to break away from the oboculate indications, it is likely to be arrested by the brightly-coloured 22K gold battle-axe winding rotor or the intricacies of the thoroughbred movement beneath.

The HM3 Frog is available in Grade 5 titanium with blued rotor or a limited edition of 12 featuring mark-resistant black-coated titanium with green rotor.

Watch design today remains a mixture of inspiration, perspiration, dedication and luck.

Design to Reality

The time it takes a watch to go from the design stage to producing an actual watch really depends on the brand and the kind of watch. An update to an existing design can happen pretty quickly, while completely new watches can take several years or more to go from the design stage to finished product.

"The timing really varies," notes Sandro Reginelli, product director, Maurice Lacroix. "The full development of a new collection including movement development can take three to five years. Life cycle management of an existing collection - for example redesigning the dial/hands/bracelet - can take between one to two years."

Brand Icons

There are watches, like the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak, the Panerai Luminor, the Rolex Daytona, the Omega Speedmaster and others that are iconic products, products that help consumers identify the brand. Sometimes these products are the result of a concerted effort to make a watch an icon - by design focus, marketing, advertising - while other watches catch the public's eye and become an icon because they are truly interesting watches. An iconic watch is rarely just a marketing trick, though - the public has to buy into it and accept the design. There are plenty of examples where watch companies have tried to foist a watch on the public only to have it backfire and fail.

"You cannot develop only brand icons," says Hamilton's Breschan. "Icons are created to pull people into the brand and we always hope they will sell like hot cakes, but that is not their primary function."

An icon must be a 'talking piece.' The icon has to communicate - in many cases the customer will go to the shop to see it and end up buying the 'regular' product, so you have to make sure the identity of the icon is transmitted to the 'regular' products."

Honestly, no one truly knows which watch design will catch on and which one won't. As screenwriter William Goldman has said, "Nobody knows nothing."

