

AN INFORMED APPROACH

INDEPENDENT WATCHMAKER ANTOINE PREZIUSO UNDERSTANDS HOROLOGICAL HISTORY AND HIS OWN PLACE IN IT

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

British statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke famously said, “Those who don’t know history are destined to repeat it.” Master watchmaker and brand namesake Antoine Preziuso is not one of these. Preziuso definitely knows his history—the history of watchmaking, that is—and that knowledge informs his approach to his work, whether he’s creating new watches or performing restorations.

Preziuso gleans much of his historical perspective from restoring antique watches and movements. It is work that can be humbling when he encounters incredible centuries-old pieces far surpassing what is possible in watchmaking today. “I love doing restorations,” says Preziuso, in his friendly and open manner. “When I am working on something that is 250 years old, it’s as if I am traveling back

in time as I touch the same metal that the watchmaker touched back then. In many ways, I feel him, what he stood for, what he was trying to accomplish.”

As amazing as such antique pieces are, Preziuso is quick to explain that he never attempts to repeat horological history; instead, he tries to use it to advance today’s watchmaking. He explains, “Working on restorations, I learn a lot about the history of watchmaking, the forms, the finishing, the shapes of the bridges and much more. Then I try to take what I have learned and use it in my modern watches. I like to combine the ancient ways and the contemporary; it’s like mixing Louis XV chairs with modern furniture when decorating a home.”

Likewise, Preziuso’s workshop in Planles-Ouates, Switzerland, is a unique mix of styles. The space is filled with old tools, vin-

tage engraving machines and ancient workbenches juxtaposed with modern furniture. It’s a clear expression of a man who has a foot in two distinct eras.

Revered, one might even say legendary, this master watchmaker is known for independence and creativity, including innovative use of rare materials, such as meteorite. In addition to a collection of “ready-to-wear” production watches, he makes a range of complicated watches. There are also one-of-a-kind and made-to-order pieces, *pièces uniques*.

Unlike makers who wait for orders before starting production on special pieces, Preziuso makes the watches first and then begins to talk to potential buyers. “I have lots of old movements from which I draw to make unique pieces or limited editions,” he says. “The watches depend on the moment



{ FIG. 1 }
THE ANTOINE PREZIUSO B-SIDE
AUTOMATIC REVERSIBLE WATCH,
DISPLAYING THE BACK OF THE
DECORATED MOVEMENT

of creation. I work like an artist making a painting—the painting is his creation, and he hopes that people like it and buy it. Like an artist, I wait for the people who will appreciate my art.”

Sometimes, Prezioso can't help but fall in love with a new creation. It's a tendency that can interfere with business. “There are some pieces that I like to wear. People want to buy them right away, but I want to wear them for a little while, which I think is my prerogative,” he explains. “Sometimes it's a special customer I sell to in the end. It's not about business here; it's about a relationship.” It's almost

toward in-house movements is a positive one for the watch industry. He sees the problems of reliability and after-sales service as the biggest stumbling blocks. “The inconvenience is above all at the client level—a movement that is developed in-house doesn't necessarily ensure after-sales service for the client for the long term,” he explains. “Numerous brands have offered very interesting and original concepts, but what will happen once these pieces come back for repair? Years of research are needed to develop a reliable movement. Now, certain collectors are only looking for horological feats and are not re-

moon phase and others,” he details. “I use different suppliers to make the parts from my designs, and I assemble the movements here in my workshop. I hold about 20 years' worth of parts for after-sales service.”

As one might expect of a student of watchmaking history—which stretches across centuries—Prezioso takes a long-term view of just about everything, including the economic crisis of the past couple of years. His motto might well be “This too shall pass.” “I make between 800 and 1,200 watches if the market is strong, fewer if things are not going so well,” he says. “If I make more complicated watches,



B-Side Automatic



Grand Robusto Chronograph



Monumental Tourbillon

as if Prezioso desires to find the right “home” for these special watches. “I have refused to sell the latest Stardust watch for the past year

ally concerned with the functioning of a timepiece. However, when you invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in a timepiece, it seems

then I make fewer normal watches. If the economy goes down a little bit in Japan, then the markets go up in Russia and Ukraine. I have a boutique in Geneva, which is now selling to local people more than to tourists, which hasn't always been the case. We are experiencing a bit of a renaissance in the Swiss buying from independent Swiss watchmakers, and this is good news for my brand.”

One of the true gentlemen in the watch industry, Prezioso has built a career and a brand by making decisions that respect the traditions of watchmaking and his place in horological history. Sitting with Antoine Prezioso in his workshop, one gets the sense that no matter what happens in the world's economy, he will continue to make watches the way he always has, and his watches, his small works of art, respectful of watchmaking history but not limited by it, will continue to find an audience.

antoine-prezioso.com

“WE HAVE A HISTORY, A STYLE AND SOMETHING SPECIAL THAT I THINK PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR TODAY.”

—ANTOINE PREZIUOSO

and a half, because I love this watch,” he says, smiling sheepishly.

The mention of in-house movements elicits a serious and thoughtful response from Prezioso. He brings out a catalog of movements from the 1950s and flips through the pages. “In the 1950s, there were hundreds of movement manufacturers,” he says. “Now, the watch industry has lost that knowledge and ability; there are only a few movement makers left. That's a shame, but it's the reality.” Even so, Prezioso is not sure that the current trend

to me that the least a brand can do is deliver a functioning watch and ensure that it can be repaired in the long-term, in other words, for several generations.”

This is why Prezioso prefers to rely on ETA and other established suppliers for his movements, to which he adds modules for the special features in his watches. No matter what happens in the future, watchmakers will always be able to service and repair ETA base movements. “I make the modules to put on the movements, like the double time zone,

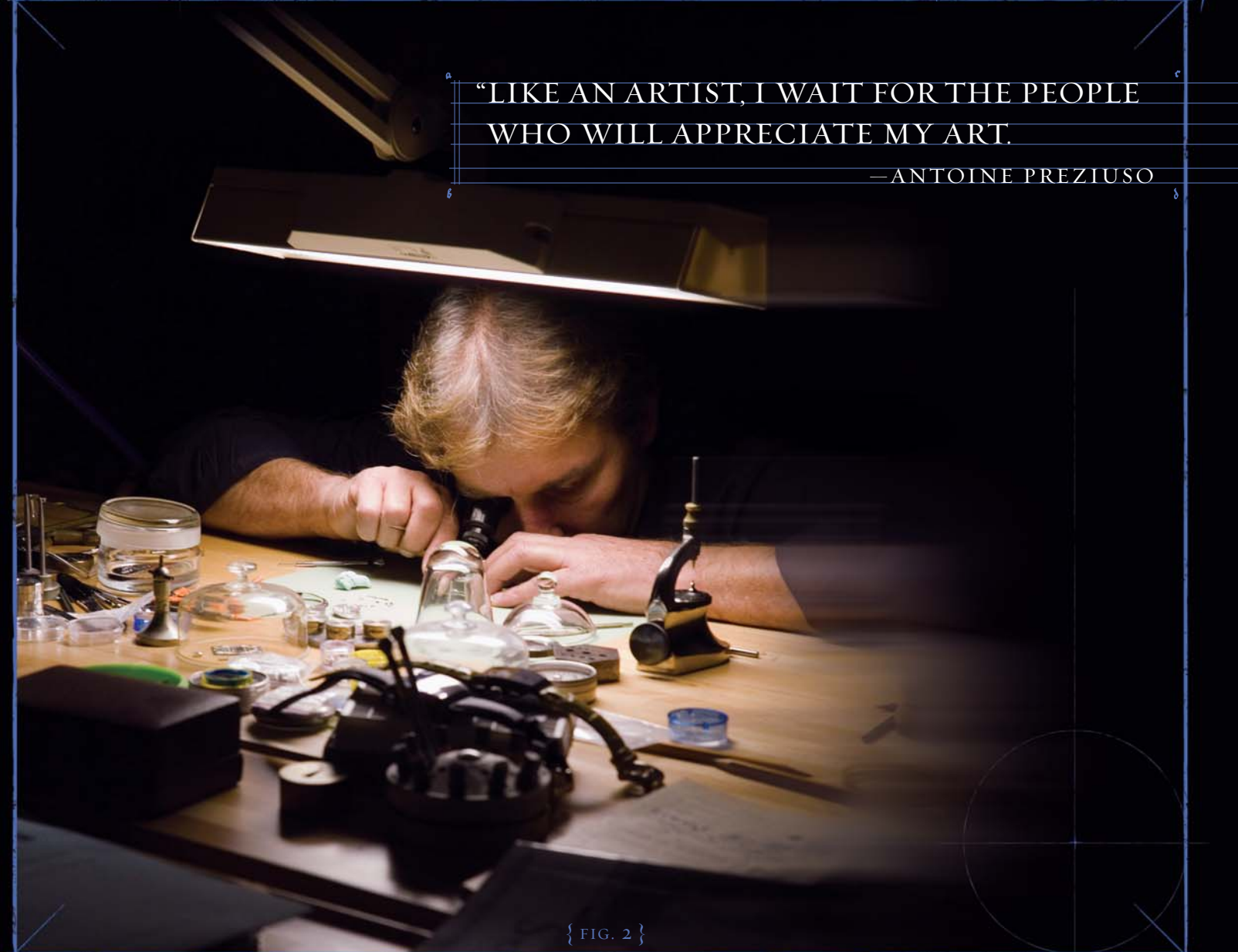


AS HE SEES IT

“There are so many designers of movements now, but they are not watchmakers,” says Antoine Prezioso, commenting on the proliferation of in-house movements. “When you design a movement, you are making a motor. You have to understand how it works, the materials to use, you have to study watchmaking to really understand all the variables, the potential problems, the long-term effects and so on. The big problem for certain brands is that it's not watchmakers making the watches, it's constructors and designers. They use a computer program, click the mouse and make a movement, but they have no idea whether it will work, nor do they understand the long-term capabilities of the movements.” As an established independent watchmaker, Prezioso has the background and the technical knowledge to tell the difference between a workable design and a suspect one. “I have constructors and designers coming to me every day, knocking on my door or calling me to try to sell me new ideas,” he says. “I tell them to keep moving.”

“LIKE AN ARTIST, I WAIT FOR THE PEOPLE WHO WILL APPRECIATE MY ART.”

—ANTOINE PREZIUOSO



{ FIG. 2 }