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MAN BEHIND THE WATCH FACE

Having worked with more than 60 different brands, Eric Giroud is one of the most influential watch designers alive today. Here, he speaks exclusively to MOJEH about his history, inspirations and why he'd never join a company full-time.

Words by Peter Iantorno

For a man entrusted with designing watches for more than 60 brands around the world, Eric Giroud is, by his own admission, not much of a watch wearer. "I don't actually own very many watches," the 52-year-old Swiss designer, who works with some of the biggest names in the watchmaking industry as well as numerous luxury brands, tells MOJEH in our exclusive interview. "I do own quite a lot of jackets, though. I'm completely addicted to clothes!" It's far from the ordinary opening gambit one would expect to hear from a watch designer at the launch of his latest timepiece, but then again, when it comes to this particular watch designer, it is always best to expect the unexpected.

The winner of numerous awards, Giroud is one of the hottest properties in horology, having designed for the likes of Vacheron Constantin, MB&F, Boucheron, Harry Winston and Van Cleef & Arpels to name just a few. With such an enviable client list, one might assume that Giroud was always destined to become the bona fide watch industry super-designer he is today. Yet, while he was born in the right country for it (Switzerland, naturally), Giroud's path to the pinnacle of watch design was far from a straight one. "My first love was music," he says. "I remember when I was around 16 years old, I loved the music of The Police, and it inspired me to play music of my own. I wanted to write

music for movies and I stuck with it for a few years until I was around 20; the problem was, I soon discovered that I wasn't a great musician." After giving up on music, Giroud moved into architecture, carving out a promising career that saw him open his own studio in 1989, only to be forced to close two years later due to the financial crisis that followed the Gulf War. "I was left with nothing, so I went to Africa for a year and a half to reflect on my life and what was important to me," he recalls. "I decided my career was important and being back in Europe was important, so I needed to find a way to do that." On his return from Africa, Giroud found a job in product design working on everything from furniture and



lighting arrangements to mobile phones, before, one day, he was tasked with designing a watch. "Everyone in the office was unsure of exactly what to do with the watch, but I found it very interesting," says Giroud. "The brand liked what I did, and it all started from there really." Nowadays, Giroud finds himself in the enviable position of being able to take his pick of which of the world's elite brands he fancies working for – and it's a position he has no intention of giving up. "I would never do that!" He exclaims when we enquire whether he'd ever be interested in doing what doubtless any number of brands would love, and committing to work in-house for a single company. "I don't like that way of working. I don't like to

work in an office. I've been working for 25 years by myself. It can get lonely, but I know it's not very easy to work with me all the time so I like to have the time away. "This is the way it works for me. I love working with different companies; it's my own kind of network. I still enjoy working as part of a team, but I just like to work as part of lots of different teams and for different goals. That is my pleasure. Some people have different friends for different activities, and what I do is kind of like that." Clearly, Giroud is a man who has to wear many hats in his line of work, and the particular one he's wearing at the time of our interview just so happens to be one of his favourites, as he's in Dubai to launch his latest

timepiece for progressive watchmaker MB&F, the HM8. Shortened from its full title (the Horological Machine No.8 'Can-Am'), the HM8 is actually the 10th piece (including variants) to come out of MB&F's Horological Machines series. The HM collection translates the childhood memories of company founder Maximilian Büsler into incredibly sophisticated modern mechanical timepieces. For the HM8, Büsler takes his inspiration from the now-defunct Canadian-American Challenge Cup racing series, which would have celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2016. The watch features the same distinctive angular form, optical prism displays and now-signature 'battle-axe' winding rotor

that is seen on many of the other Horological Machines, and infuses them with a turbo-charged dose of Can-Am-style racecar design. In the words of Büsler himself, the HM8 is "one of the coolest" pieces ever created by the brand.

It's clear from the passion with which he speaks of the brand that although Giroud is steadfast in his decision to never allow himself to be tied down to a single company, he has a special place in his heart – and his schedule – reserved for MB&F. "I hate the serious part of watchmaking," he says. "At the end we all have to be serious, but I love working with MB&F because even though we are serious about the high quality of the design, materials, mechanics and finishing, we always have fun along the way. At the start people told us that it was a joke: 'It's not possible to build this brand,' they said, 'this is a toy'. But after 11 years, people are starting to take us a bit more seriously. We share a curiosity – this is the key thing."

And it's this curiosity that has seen Giroud design each and every one of the Horological Machines for MB&F, from the groundbreaking HM1 that started it all, to the organic-looking HM6, and everything else in between. While the concepts for all of these pieces are very specific and the design brief given to Giroud will, no doubt, have come with very detailed parameters, the area where Giroud has excelled for so many years is finding that little touch of magic to really make a design work. But where does he find his inspiration? "It's very difficult to know where I find my inspiration because that depends on the project," he says. "Each project I do has different brands, different styles of watch, different people and different prices. The first thing for me is to understand the project; after that, inspiration can come from anywhere. Sometimes it comes from the history of the brand, or sometimes it can come from somewhere completely unexpected. Maybe I'll be out walking the dogs and suddenly – wham! – I've got it! It could be a cool car, a detail on a pair of shoes, something I read in a book... who knows."

While his inspiration can come from anywhere, one aspect of his work that Giroud has always been comfortable with is in applying his architectural knowhow to the art of watch design. "It definitely helps me in designing watches," he says of

his time working as an architect. "I spent 10 years working in architecture and that means I always have that reference and can apply it to watches. For example, most people design the watch from the front, but I start with a cross-section, just like in architecture. A watch isn't flat – it is three-dimensional and I believe it should be designed to fill the space." Our interview takes place in Dubai's MB&F M.A.D Gallery surrounded by millions of dirhams-worth of incredible horology and art, which begs the question: surely Giroud must be tempted to put less effort into designing a sub-AED 1,000 piece for, say, Swarovski than he does for an AED 300,000-plus piece like the

HM8 for MB&F? "For me, there's no difference," he says, diplomatically. "The first step is always understanding what the project is – in fact, it's usually harder to design a cheaper watch! The real difference comes in after I've done my work, on the materials, manufacturing and finishing – that is what makes a watch more expensive. I take pleasure from designing any watch, no matter the price." And that is the thing that really shines through when speaking to Giroud: the man simply loves designing watches. He doesn't care whether it's a cheap mass-produced item for a massive company or one of the most ornate and luxurious timepieces on the planet – for him, a love of design conquers all.

MB&F HM3 Starcruiser



MB&F HM6

