

# TENSION IN THE WORKPLACE

*CEOs and watchmakers might be more recognisable, but few people in the industry can claim to have influenced as many watches as designer Eric Giroud. As he explains, it's all down to those crucial contrasts*

*Interview by Josh Sims*

**“So my future wife said** that I should go skiing with her, meet all her family, so I said ‘sure’, and there was this very cool old guy there,” recalls Eric Giroud. “We talked about watches and he showed me some books. It wasn’t until many years later when I won at the Geneva Watchmaking Grand Prix that he told me, ‘finally you’re part of the family.’”

The very cool old guy was Jack Heuer, Giroud’s wife’s uncle and legend of the watch industry. He would, Giroud admits, later open a few doors. “It was the start of my watch education,” he says.

Giroud might be said to have come a long way. Arguably the world’s leading independent watch designer, he has worked for Tissot and Harry Winston, Vacheron Constantin and Swarovski, Boucheron and Van Cleef & Arpels, Romain Jerome and, most notably, MB&F, creating some of these brands’ most acclaimed pieces. It’s a diverse bunch – more than 60 brands – and he likes it that way.

“Sometimes I get asked to work full time in a company but, phew, no thanks,” says Giroud, a man who likes to laugh a lot. “I work home alone and like it that way. And it’s the diversity of the brands I work for that’s really great. Every few years through my career I’ve got to work with slightly ‘higher’ brands, but it’s important not to forget that when you’re designing someone’s house, it’s

not your house. It’s for someone else to live in. You can’t have an ego about it.” The house analogy is apposite. Giroud, 53 this year, only took to watch design in his 30s, after a spell attempting to become a musician – during which he discovered he wasn’t a very good musician – followed by a decade practising as an architect – at which he found he was somewhat better. Later, working for a design agency, he was put on a watch project that nobody else really wanted to handle and, in doing so, found a vocation.

“Well, kind of. I’ve always really wanted to design clothes,” says the ever Euro-elegant Swiss. “I’m addicted to clothes. But I never wear black – and I say that as an architect. I just can’t do it. That includes watchstraps.”

Certainly Giroud’s success might be attributed not only to his readiness to follow a brief, rather than impose his own vision – despite the discomfort he feels when invited

by a brand to work with its internal design team “to shake things up a bit” – but the very fact that he was not trained as a watch designer. That gives him a fresh perspective in an industry in which, he cautiously notes, “there are a lot of very classic watches being designed and they’re nice but, well, maybe boring too. There are too many watches. But at least over the past five years watch design has got better because there’s more of a readiness to forget the past. And the watch industry just loves to keep taking inspiration from the very distant past.”

The timing has certainly been right for him as well: an over-crowded market, intensely competitive, with a younger, progressive consumer of rising importance looking for watches with a point of view – just like those offered by the independent makers for whom he often works. “I don’t know if those younger consumers really respect ‘classic’ watchmaking in the way the industry does,” Giroud notes. The new emphasis, he suggests, is on interesting form over replicated function, “since nobody actually needs a watch, like they need shoes,” he says.

“In fact the higher the brand the less I understand,” Giroud laughs. “All that talk of tourbillons and complex mechanisms. I sit in the car after a meeting and think ‘what was that all about?’ The technical aspect of a watch is interesting but it’s hard

**“Recently watch design has got better because there’s more of a readiness to forget the past”**

to understand.” Unlike, say, the intuitive response we have to aesthetics. “Some people get very excited about the bridge or the plate. But it’s the space in between that matters,” he suggests. “It’s the same with a building – you don’t live in the wall or the roof, but the gaps between them. And watches today have too many details, because it’s hard to have just the right details, only those, and only in the right places. And that’s all the more important when you’re working with such a small space.”

Does that sense of spaciousness define a Giroud design? Giroud admits that he doesn’t think he has a signature, despite people’s

readiness to tell him what it is. He does, however, speak of the need for what he calls “tension” in a design. “If everything about a design is round, you need something square to draw the eye. If you have a very classic dial, you need contemporary numerals. If a watch is small, it needs to be deep,” he explains. “It’s in that tension that you find personality. It’s when everything is ‘right’ in a watch that you end up forgetting it.”

He suggests there’s a similar tension in his most successful working partnership to date, that with Maximilian Büsser of MB&F, for whom Giroud has designed most of the

Horological Machine series of watches.

“I know the music, Max knows the cars,” says Giroud. The latest Giroud release (prior to those launched at Baselworld) is MB&F’s Aquapod, a diving watch – of sorts. “When people keep telling you that the bezel is on the wrong watch then you know you’ve entered a kind of twilight zone,” Giroud laughs. “So we put the bezel on the outside of the watch, kind of floating. I really didn’t think that would be possible, which is a testament to what it’s like to work with MB&F. And I really like the result.”

At first glance it’s actually one of Giroud’s less outrageous designs – compared with, for example, his cyberpunkish T1000 for Rebellion, or his Romain Jerome Spacecraft wedge of a watch, the latter being a favourites of his. Not that he ever wears any of his own designs, not even the prize winners, be they recipients of industry gongs or ones, the likes of Red Dot, given by the wider design community. That, he suggests, would be to blur his work and his home life. Not that he’s even that into watches – he’s much more into jackets, of which he has a sizable collection.

“Many times at the end of the day we come up with a watch that’s not for me,” says the man who – keeping it in the family – is more often lately found wearing a 1970s yellow gold Heuer Carrera. “But that’s not the point. The watch isn’t for me. It’s for the customer and you have to remember that. Of course you may enjoy the project but ultimately it’s about making the market happy.”

And that is something Giroud seems to have a talent for doing, which is why his client list keeps growing. That, of course, being the office-phobic agent that he is, is as he likes it. “You know,” he says, “the process of watch design is actually pretty simple. It’s like music. You start with two or three notes and you build on that, and in the end you have a symphony – or a sports watch. It’s a big process because you start with nothing. But it’s a process I love.”

“When people tell you the bezel is on the wrong watch you’re in a twilight zone”



Giroud’s LM 101 FROST, above, and Aquapod HM7 diving watch, below, for MB&F and the Opus 9 for Harry Winston, right





● Trained as an architect, Giroud admits that the technical aspects of watchmaking often pass him by