



DESIGNING TIME

Catching up with Eric Giroud, the man who designs some of the most recognizable timepieces of the modern era.

By Nitin Nair

ERIC GIROUD IS EASILY ONE OF THE MOST accomplished designers of the modern era. The 52-year-old former architect has worked with big names like Vacheron Constantin, Harry Winston, Romain Jerome, Tissot, Swarovski and Leroy, but he's probably best known for the design flair he brings to indie-brand MB&F.

Giroud has won numerous Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève (GPHG) awards for his work, and has time and again demonstrated his versatility as a designer. From the sporty Tissot PRS 516 in 2004 to the futuristic MB&F HM6 Space Pirate in 2014, from creating the curvy and sensual Bertolucci Serena Garbo Lady to the radical Harry Winston Opus 9 in 2009, which featured an unusual linear display, Giroud's portfolio is a formidable showcase of his talent. The unassuming designer is one of the nicest people you'll meet in the industry. We caught up with Giroud at the launch of MB&F's latest timepiece – the HM8 Can-AM.

On the design of the MB&F HM8 Can-Am...

Eric Giroud: The HM8's design is a combination of HM3 and HM5. Both the HM5 and HM8 have clear motoring influences, we took the idea of the visible battle-axe rotor from the HM3. The inspiration came from three or four avenues – the polished roll bars sweeping from the front of the timepiece down to the tapered back are inspired by the roll bars seen on Seventies-era sports cars that raced in the famous Can-Am racing championships. This idea came from Max because I know nothing about cars from that era. He showed me pictures and I was like, OK, let's do this. We were also inspired by

architecture. If you look at the sapphire crystal that sits between the roll bars and on top the movement, you will notice it is fixed on the case without any screws. It's like in the construction of consumer products like the cellular phone. Automotive engines were another source of inspiration. The HM8 has dual oil sumps under its engine, just like the oil sumps located in most car engines.

How the architect in him influences design

When you design a classical watch, you look at it from the top. But when you design something as an architect, you look at the cross section, you look at the cut-up view. You think in 3D as an architect because it's important to consider volume and space. My background as an architect helps because I can keep this notion of volume in mind when I design a watch. I was very young when I started working as an architect and the work of some famous architects left an impact on me. For example, I had Santiago Calatrava's biomorphic architecture in mind when designing the bridge of the MB&F Legacy Machine 1 (LM1) and the two columns in HM8.

Working with Max Büsser

When Max first talked to me about designing the LM1, he wanted to see the balance wheel visible prominently on top. And when he sketched it for me, I remember saying to him, "This is stupid. How would my heart look if I placed it outside my body?" But he insisted and we went ahead with it. In the end, Max was right. We have a lot of discussions about design and we speak our minds. We don't hold



HM8 Can-Am takes its inspiration mainly from Seventies-era race cars



Swarovski D:Light



Bertolucci Serena Garbo Lady



Tissot PRS 516 from 2004



Horological Machine 1 (HM1)



MB&F Legacy Machine Perpetual



Romain Jerome Space Pirate

back. Even when we meet with the technical team and sit around a table to discuss the product, everyone is encouraged to speak their minds. Nothing is off the table. I guess that's why the team is so successful. There is a real spirit of openness. We critique each other's work all the time. Max is very good at managing people in a product-development environment.

On his design versatility

Versatility is a characteristic of my work. And that's thanks to my training as an architect. I am completely open to new ideas. As an architect you sometimes have to design things that you are not really interested in. For example, you may receive a commission to design a supermarket but you may hate shopping. It's important to separate your personal preferences from your work. I'm completely at ease working with a brand like Vacheron Constantin, MB&F, Swarovski or Tissot. These are brands with varying traditions and vastly different price segments. I pay the same level of attention to each product. I am now working with a Swedish watch brand that is supposed to sell at a retail price of €200 (\$212). The price doesn't matter to me. The work is the same, but if the people around the table discussing the product are not on the same page, then the end result is completely different.

The key to good design

I think finding the right balance is important to any good design. It's about getting the proportions right, the ability of the watch's surfaces



MB&F LM101 Frost, one of Giroud's personal favorites



to play with light. And it should be comfortable to wear. Sometimes you see pictures of a product that look great but up close they look completely different. It is difficult to design a watch because of its size. On a computer screen, it looks fine but in the metal you notice that the proportions are not right, the product's surface doesn't play with light. It's important to get this balance right. After years of design, you develop a certain knack but it's not easy.

With a product like MB&F, there's another dimension to the design because in addition to finding that balance, we add an element of tension to the product. Each product has a slightly disruptive element of design, something that makes you wonder, "Why the hell did they go and do that?" At the base level, the most important thing is getting the right balance. It's about getting the proportion right.

A watch design that he really admires

The Audemars Piguet Royal Oak is an interesting design. It was a crazy concept at the time, a luxury steel sports watch, but the design is still relevant more than 40 years after its launch. The flip side to this is, what have they done since? It's like the Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso. It's an undoubtedly beautiful watch and it has completed 85 years now, but guys, come on – what else is new? I'm not criticizing here, but there has to be an evolution of design.

On the need to design other products besides watches

I have designed furniture, cellular phones, coffee machines and glasses. I recently designed knives for a French company. I do it

because it's good to get away from the world of watches, it's a totally different platform and a way to refresh my mind. You meet some interesting people. You engage your other senses.

For example, while designing the coffee machine, you have to be mindful of the fact that the user will be able to smell the coffee. It's good to escape from the world of watches. It's completely different conversations.

Why materials don't matter to him

Each product has its characteristic qualities. As an architect, I think it's important to have the right material for the right product. I love yellow gold and I was very happy when they launched the new Royal Oak in that material this year because the watch industry doesn't do much with yellow gold. At the same time, a Swatch watch in plastic is cool, too. I am not attached to materials.

On the design of smartwatches

It is strange that people from the connected world want to make a watch and people from the watch industry want to make a connected device. But as far as design goes, the Apple Watch is the only interesting product out there. As a smartwatch, it is designed seamlessly to match the iPhone. Everything else is boring.

I'm not saying people from the watch industry are not capable of creating an interesting smartwatch, but the problem lies in the translation of the idea now. Who knows, we might have something interesting in the future. **WT**