

Through a designer's looking glass, the future of time

Eric Giroud has spent the last 15 years designing some of the most memorable timepieces on the market, from bejeweled creations for Harry Winston to concept watches for MB&F, the curved Badollet Ivresse, and even early smartwatches. Mr. Giroud, who lives in Geneva where his company, *Through the Looking Glass*, is based, says he owns about 10 "serious" watches including a pink gold *Patrimony Contemporaine* by Vacheron Constantin — not a model he designed but one he wears most often. He spoke with Nazanin Lankarani.

Q. What training did you receive prior to designing watches?

A. I started out studying music in various conservatories. But without talent sufficient to devote my life to music, I eventually switched to architecture. I learned to draw, not beautifully, but functionally, and to build things. I saw my job as overcoming the constraints in a project. That is magical but it also teaches you humility. In 1989, I opened my own architect's office but had to close down two years later due to the financial crisis that followed the Gulf War. Then I took a job in a design firm in Lausanne, designing all sorts of products from furniture to light fixtures, coffee makers to telephones.

Q. What was your introduction to watches?

A. In 1998, while working in Lausanne, Underwood, a leather maker, asked me to design a watch to go with their leather bracelets. The project was simple but the production phase took me to the Jura region of Switzerland, where I met local watchmakers. That was all it took. I quit my job in Lausanne, moved to Geneva and started working for Tissot and Mido in the Swatch group. Since then, I have devoted my career to designing watches.

Q. Where do you find your inspiration?

A. I work alone. I find that looking for inspiration while sitting behind a desk does not work for me. Leaving my comfort zone stimulates my imagination. I try to meet people outside of my own line of work, to expand my horizons. So I travel, read and talk to people. Otherwise, I am fascinated by curves. I like the shape of old plates and the door handles of certain automobiles. I photograph them and use them for inspiration.

Q. What was the first watch you designed?

A. The first complete watch I designed was the re-interpretation of the PRS516 for Tissot in 2003. I based my work on the existing model that was inspired by the world of automobiles. To design from scratch, you must listen carefully to the words your clients choose to describe what they want. If the watch brand has an interest in automobiles, I try to imagine the year of the car, the culture of its decade, the way one would sit in it and what the ride would feel like.

Q. How is your work different from that of a watchmaker?

A. I am given exact specifications, like the size of the movement and the volume of the dial, and I must design with precision everything outside the mechanical aspect of the watch. My job is to take the structure and the aesthetics and work them within those given constraints so that the concept can be both beautiful and functional.

Most watch brands use a designer. Some independents like Kari Voutilainen, Peter Speake-Marin, François-Paul Journe, the watchmaker is also the designer.

But many big groups like Richemont or LVMH use outside designers.

Q. What do you think about smartwatches?

A. I designed my first — if not the first — "connectable" watch long before digital watches as we know them today, were marketed. It was a groundbreaking project for a big watch group that was shelved in 1999. Today, "connectable" watches are not aesthetically pleasing objects.

The debate among designers is how to make them more wearable and more pleasing to the eye. For now, we are focused on the wrist and limited to a square-shaped dial since we cannot make round digital screens yet. I would certainly buy a smart watch or two. I find them amusing. But there is no comparison between a smart watch and a mechanical watch and 500 years of history.

Q. What are some of your most memorable collaborations?

A. My introduction to mechanical movements came from Peter Speake-



Collaborations

Clockwise from above: Eric Giroud in 2011; the Harry Winston Opus 9 that Mr. Giroud developed with Jean-Marc Wiederrecht; the Manufacture Royale with rose gold; and the Ivresse watch by Badollet.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE, RIGHT: JOHANN SAUTY; ERIC GIROUD; STEFAN VOS / MANUFACTURE ROYALE; BADOLLET INTERNATIONAL SA

Marin, the English watchmaker, in 2001. He taught me the technical aspects, and together we designed his jump-hour Oxford model, a prototype that was never marketed. Peter introduced me to Max Büsser [founder of MB&F] who at the time was head of Harry Winston Timepieces. I also met Christophe Claret at Harry Winston, and together we designed the limited edition *Tourbillon Glissière*. Then I worked on the Harry Winston Opus 9 with the master watchmaker Jean-Marc Wiederrecht in 2009. That was a fantastic project for a very contemporary concept watch. When Max left Harry Winston to start his own brand, Max Büsser & Friends, I joined him. In

10 years, we have created at MB&F something very new. I was the first "friend" in the MB&F adventure. I have designed nearly all the MB&F watches, including all the *Horological* and *Legacy Machines*.

Q. What are some of the brands you are working with today?

A. I am working with Manufacture Royale. The history of the Manufacture goes back to the 18th century, but there is limited ancestry in the product line. So we have freedom in designing the new line.

For Leroy, my mission is different. The brand has a long history and a known heritage in chronometers. The

new product line must be in homage to that heritage.

Q. What is the current state of the watch industry from a creative standpoint?

A. There are too many watches out there and the market is saturated. There is a glaring absence of creativity in the industry and too many models look alike.

The brands need to take more risk, not in terms of opening markets, but in terms of being original and creative. That is the responsibility of company chief executives, not their designers. The watch industry needs new ideas. Creativity is the salvation of the entire luxury industry.