



# How watch designers saved the Swiss watch industry

REV★LUTION's roundtable discussion on the power of design in modern horology with four of the most influential watch designers today: **Gérald Genta, Giampiero Bodino, Xavier Perrenoud and Octavio García** BY WEI KOH

In the popular children's fantasy series, Harry Potter is a teenage wizard, something of a genius who was forced by circumstance to dwell both in obscurity and in obedience to people who both need him yet regard him with repudiation and fear. In the past, the lot of the watch designer was not totally dissimilar: in the best case scenario, he dwelled in total anonymity, locked Quasimodo-like away in the dark bowels of the watch manufacture's hegemony. And in the worst case scenario, like Kaiser Souze, the fictional villain in the brilliant Neo-noir film *The Usual Suspects*, he didn't exist at all.

You see, historically, watches were designed by watchmakers who, while technical geniuses, were somewhat limited in aesthetic inventiveness. Indeed, the flip side of the obsessive compulsive personality that made a good watchmaker was a certain haughty disconnection from popular culture. For this reason, the basic design architecture of a watch stayed essentially the same for hundreds of years, expressed by a round case, a round dial and a pair of hands. With few exceptions, generally, the concept of mass commercial design was entirely foreign to the watch industry – perhaps to reinforce the perception of the watch as a tool rather than a jewel.

Watches were a uni-directional product created by the watchmakers with little interesting in prevailing trends, cultural dynamics or popular tastes, and sent from their isolated hamlets into Switzerland to populate the world. This disdain for fashion continued after the popularization of wristwatches in the 20th century, right up till the Quartz Crisis of the 1970s.

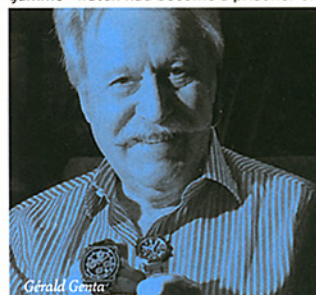
By the mid '70s, by virtue of its aesthetic uni-directionalism, the "haut de gamme" watch had become a prisoner of its own device. What was remarkable

the Swiss luxury watch industry was hit by the new technology of quartz, it was already aesthetically anachronistic – so out of touch with modern consumer culture that it was ripe for a downfall.

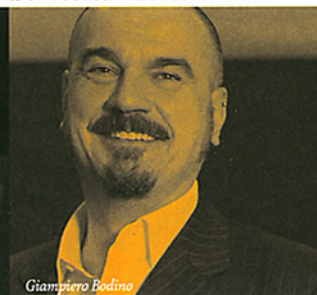
While many attribute the rebirth in popularity of mechanical watches today to the renewed interest in horological mechanisms, the truth is, consumers buy products with their hearts and not their minds. Accordingly, the single most important factor in the resurgence of the Swiss watch industry has been the introduction of the watch designer; because all the incredible technical achievements of the modern era would be meaningless, if not contained in watches that connected passionately with the modern consumer.

The smartest manufactures have not only embraced the watch designer but put him in the spotlight, understanding his vast potential as a communicative device for their brands' values. It is the designer's ability to meaningfully innovate, surprise and charm devotees, and win over new audiences that will allow the watch industry to continue to thrive in the future.

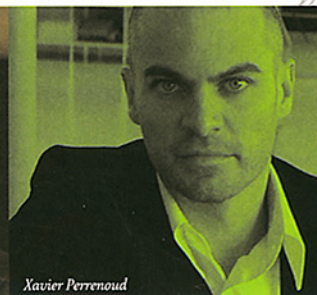
As such, it is REV★LUTION's great pleasure to celebrate the designer in our special section dedicated to watchmaking's most vibrant creators. What better way to start things off than with a roundtable discussion on "The Power of Design in Modern Horology", with four of watchmaking's most important designers. They are: the iconic Gérald Genta, the man who brought the designer into the forefront of public consciousness in the '70s and the first designer to start his own brand; Giampiero Bodino, the legendary Richemont Group design director who created Panerai's modern identity; independent designer and professor Xavier Perrenoud, the man behind Ebel's transformative 1911 BTR; and Octavio García, the young,



Gérald Genta



Giampiero Bodino



Xavier Perrenoud



Octavio García





## THE POWER OF DESIGN IN MODERN HOROLOGY

### WHAT IS THE POWER OF THE DESIGNER TO INFLUENCE CULTURE?

**GB** I think the meaning of "power" today is related to the idea of having control. But in this case, the concept is more in relation to making proper choices, and to the way of comparing the things surrounding us. In other words, I would say a more contemporary and democratic attitude, in contrast to the by now obsolete attitude of absolute command from brands. A designer today must be in touch with, and be sensitive to, the world around him, and not force choices upon it.

**GG** Design is the art of transforming technical know-how into emotion, through products that reflect a brand's governing values. You must have a product that is powerful emotionally, but that legitimately communicates who you are as a brand. It is only when this balance is achieved that a product is capable of striking a chord with its clients.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CREATE THE UNEXPECTED?

**GG** The desire is to surprise or seduce form into something extraordinary, but always with the ultimate goal of servicing what we call "le beau" or "beauty". In each of my collections, I tried to realize perfect forms that are in harmony with their designs. The Carré Point Coupée case with its cut-off corners brings a contemporary look and a perfect harmony to the design of the watch; this form is seductive – that's the power of design.

**XP** Creating the unexpected should be one of the points of focus for designers; however, one should pay attention to the fact that the culture of the object and brand's philosophy must be respected. Creative doesn't necessarily mean fancy! Some of the most powerful designs are pure, simple ones.

**GG** The element of surprise is an important component in our development process. It has become a motivating force that drives innovation at Audemars Piguet, expressed by our pioneering work in new materials, new displays of time and totally new aesthetic sensibilities. Staying ahead of the game – our clients have come to expect that from AP.

### WHAT IS THE EMOTIONAL BEAUTY OF THE MECHANICAL WATCH?

**GG** Maybe its "tic-tac" (the sound of its escapement) is evocative of our heartbeat and brings us to the fundamental problem of human beings: life and time passing. The mechanical watch is here to remind us that time is precious. It's done in a mechanical way – like for human beings, our heart is our motor.

**GB** The emotional power of the luxury watch consists exactly in the self-gratification derived from the possession of a unique object that is precious, rare... and, therefore, destined only for a restricted circle.

**XP** It is the power of timelessness; a real piece of art and exceptional beauty that beats like a heart on your wrist.

**GG** Man has always been attracted by technical performance, and a finely crafted mechanical watch is no exception. Even in its simplest form, a mechanical movement is visually striking and remains an expression of technical prowess.

### WHY HAVE YOU CHOSEN THE MECHANICAL WATCH AS YOUR CANVAS?

**GG** Like every human being, I had a crazy dream of time imprisonment. As a watchmaker, I could give myself the illusion of at last placing a box with a design around time. In order to realize this, I've surrounded myself with the best technicians who've created diving time-telling mechanisms. I created the nicest boxes in watchmaking, and used the most precious and most innovative materials.

**XP** The watch's expressive capacity is intimately linked and connected to the love of performance. It's like the two faces of the same coin. Art and function in one entity. These are the products that invariably attract men the most.

### WHO IS THE MOST POWERFUL DESIGNER IN THE WORLD?

**GG** In my opinion, undoubtedly Raymond Levi. He understood that the beauty of

the objects and their usefulness are defined totally by their interaction with the human condition.

**XP** There are many powerful designers in the world! Personally, I feel close to the Bauhaus designers' philosophy. I'm also a Joe Colombo, Ray and Charles Eames, and Achille Castiglioni fan.

### WHAT IS THE MOST PERFECTLY DESIGNED OBJECT IN THE WORLD?

**XP** There is no such thing as a perfectly designed object. I think that designers have always aimed at perfection without ever reaching it. It is my philosophy of work, and something that propels me always.

**GG** Even the most refined, well-thought-out product has to evolve, because consumers need change, due to fierce competition in the market place or access to new technologies. As such, by definition, an object cannot be perfect, as it can always be improved. I find this wonderfully reassuring.

### ON THAT SUBJECT, HOW HAVE YOUR DESIGNS EVOLVED AS THE WORLD HAS CHANGED?

**GG** My designs have always evolved to capture ever greater purity. The world is becoming more and more confused and brutal. Each small increment of sweetness and refinement we can bring to human beings is a minuscule advantage that we should always look for and strive to achieve. Luxury is wonderful because it is moral. It brings beauty, dreams and love to the human soul. We all have the pleasure to work in a deeply moral industry.

**XP** I've always tried to be true to the same philosophy of work, to be open-minded and curious about different fields, to cultivate and renew myself all the time. I try to call myself into question all the time. I spend a lot of time working on proportions and details. Equilibrium of shapes gives identity and power to the design.

**GG** By exploring new territories in design, materials and technology, and applying them to create unique, innovative and functional timepieces.

### HOW CAN WE CREATE WATCH DESIGNS THAT ENSURE THAT THE LUXURY WATCH INDUSTRY STAYS HEALTHY?

**GB** The best way to ensure continuation and stability in this market is by carefully managing new proposals. The market has to, in fact, be fed and not "flooded" by novelties. Every new proposal has to be the result of an authentic technical research, and not simply the creation of wrong needs based more on image than on substance. Products must be legitimate and offer originality, value and substance to consumers. Designers must learn to be humble and respect the know-how of watchmakers. The future generation in watch design must be attentive to this.

### WHAT IS THE DESIGNER'S ROLE IN SOCIETY?

**GG** He is what a scientist is to science, or a doctor to medicine. He imagines objects that don't exist yet, but because of his vision, he will be able to create them for future generations. Before everything, he is a visionary.

**XP** In a globalized world where things are going faster and faster, and where marketing is ever more pervasive, the designer should harmonize the shape and the function of objects by respecting the culture and the identity of brands. The designers have to contribute to happiness and give life to the objects. A designer's reward is a contribution to culture and happiness – an evocation of the harmony of shapes. Design is also a memory of the future.

**GG** Design is becoming a strategic business tool, and creativity is giving companies a competitive edge by exploiting these distinctive skills to create innovative products. I would argue that there is no one most powerful designer. Design, when used effectively, is power. ★