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The Other Europeans

Switzerland has a reputation for its watchmaking industry. And yet beyond Switzerland's borders other European voices contribute to the rich narrative of time

On the Isle of Man, Roger Smith aligns himself with the lost tradition of English watchmaking, when craftsmanship and superb quality defined the country's product. In his workshop, Smith makes cases, dials and hands, and also specialises in producing his own movements, including escapements and balances.

"My approach to watchmaking is completely different from that of the Swiss and the two can never be compared," he says. "Apart from the small group of independents who work within Switzerland, the Swiss are involved in the mass production of watches. Some of the most exclusive and luxurious Swiss brands produce in excess of 40,000 pieces per year—some of the even more exclusive 2,000 to 200," he continues. "This year we will make just 10 pieces."

In his watches, Smith uses the co-axial escapement, the invention of fellow Englishman and friend, George Daniels, with whom he worked side by side for three years on the Millennium watch. Smith views the co-axial as the most sophisticated and efficient escapement to have been designed in over 250 years.

When asked where he fits into the industry, Smith replies, "Without wanting

to sound truculent, I do not think I fit in at all with the word 'industry,' especially when it is used in combination with the word watchmaking." Currently, Smith is in production on the Series 2, a watch that took 4 ½ years to conceive. Smith prizes reliability and therefore is not a fan of overcomplicated watches whose mechanisms tend to be finicky. That is why he chose to make this simple, high quality wristwatch, whose only complication is a power reserve.

In addition to the Series 2, Smith also takes on commission pieces, the price of which is dependent upon the complexity and time commitment. He recently quoted a client almost 5 years to make a unique pocket watch. In Smith's hands the watches dictate their own time before they measure it.

Meanwhile, in Glashütte, the German watchmaking tradition is flourishing. Glashütte watchmaking dates its inception to 1845 when master watchmakers such as Ferdinand Lange, Ludwig Strasser, Adolf Schneider, Julius Assmann and Moritz Großmann decided to set up shop in the region.

It was in 1864 that Lange introduced the three-quarter plate, which has become

"In quick succession he presented four new watches that would have made great grandpa Ferdinand proud"

a defining characteristic of German movements, along with a hand-engraved balance cock, screwed gold chatons, and whiplash precision index adjusters. In contrast to a Swiss style movement constructed with several bridges, the philosophy behind the three-quarter plate is to improve stability by combining the bearings for the complete gear train under one plate.

Up until the 1940s, the watchmaking companies in Glashütte were world renowned for producing durable timepieces of quality, beauty and precision. However, World War II decimated the industry. It was not until after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 that the German horology renaissance began. Walter Lange, the great grandson of Ferdinand, re-established the brand Lange & Söhne. In quick succession he presented four new watches that would have made great grandpa Ferdinand smile: the Lange 1,

the Tourbillon—Pour le Mérite, the Saxonia and the Arkade. With these, Lange & Söhne demonstrated it was at the forefront of technical virtuosity and flawless finishing.

The company, owned by Richemont since 2000, continues to do honor to the family name. At SIHH this year, they debuted the Richard Lange Pour le Mérite. Upon first glance, the watch appears deceptively simple, a three-handed watch with an enamel dial. The movement, however, reveals the complex fusée-and-chain mechanism comprised 636 components.

While most watches use a mainspring to directly power the train, this mechanism has inherent limitations. As the watch unwinds, the torque decreases causing a decrease in amplitude and a less precise accounting of time. The fusée-and-chain overcomes this problem by offering a lever effect using a stepped cone to provide constant force as the

chain unwinds. Made from German silver and equipped with Lange's in-house balance spring, the movement of the Richard Lange Pour le Mérite has the highest level of finish with beveled edges, Glashütte Ribbing, an engraved balance cock, and gold chatons.

Just as Lange & Söhne had a rebirth after the fall of the Berlin Wall, so did the collective of watchmakers working as GUB. They became Glashütter Uhrenbetrieb GmbH and revived the techniques and traditions that had previously established their reputation at the forefront of horology. Swatch Group recognised the talent within the manufacturer and in 2000 brought the company within the fold as a prestige brand, along with Jaquet Droz, Breguet and Blancpain.

Better known as Glashütte Original, it maintains the historical design elements of its forebears by using a three-quarter plate, gold chatons for jewels, swan-neck regulation, hand engraving and classical finishing as seen in the Pano and Senator lines. And they are not afraid to experiment with avant-garde presentations, such as the PanoInverse, which places the duplex swan-neck fine adjustment on display on the dial side of the watch along with the handsomely finished base plate.

1 A Lange and Söhne—building on the past

2 The French fancy of FP Journe

3 Dutch delight by Grönefeld



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A less well-known manufacturer based in Glashütte, is Nautische Instrumente Mühle-Glashütte whose reputation, as its name suggests, is founded on its 135 year-old tradition of producing high-precision nautical instruments. The company is a newcomer to the production of wristwatches, but its attractive high-precision watches have proved extremely desirable.

Venture into the town of Oldenzaal in The Netherlands and that is where you will find Bart and Tim Grönefeld continuing the family watchmaking dynasty begun by their great grandfather, Johan Grönefeld, in 1912 and passed down through the generations. The brothers even work in the same building used by their ancestor.

While the Grönefelds acknowledge the favoured position of the Swiss in haute horlogerie, they point out that other countries, such as Great Britain, France and, yes, even the The Netherlands, contributed to its foundations. One influential Dutch gentleman was Christiaan Huygens. “He discovered the pendulum and later the balance spring,” say Bart and Tim Grönefeld with pride. “Without these discoveries wristwatches could not even exist!”

“Journe’s creations have brought him recognition in the form of the prestigious and coveted L’Aiguille d’Or in 2004, 2006 and 2008”

Under the tutelage of their father, Sjef Grönefeld, who took over from Johan, young Bart and Tim fell under horology’s spell. Beginning their formal training in The Netherlands, the brothers then went to Neuchatel, Switzerland to further hone their skills. Bart and Tim proved such adept students that Audemars Piguet (Renaud et Papi) in Le Locle invited them to join their elite complications company. While Bart was responsible for minute repeaters, Tim specialised in tourbillons.

The brothers’ first watch under their own name, The Grönefeld GTM-06 tourbillon, minute repeater, reflects the expertise and passion of both of them. They use a classic movement layout utilising steel, brass and nickel. “New materials such as carbon, titanium and aluminum don’t interest us as they cannot be finished in the same kind of quality,” they say.

Around this movement, a Christophe Claret, assembled and exquisitely finished by Bart and Tim, they have created the case with a specific volume to showcase the Cathedral type gong. The lugs, which are specially channeled from the inside, act as acoustic channels to enhance rather than dampen the resonance.

The GTM-06, with its semi-precious onyx dial, sloping hour markers and visible movement, retails for €325,000 in gold and €385,000 in platinum.

Some might attribute the stunning tourbillons created by John and Stephen McGonigle to the luck of the Irish, but both brothers bring a wealth and depth of experience that few can hope to attain.

From their encounters with the finest antique and modern timepieces, at the likes of Audemars Piguet and Frank Muller, John and Stephen distilled what they believe to be



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- 4 German precision by Nautische Instrumente Mühle Glashütte
- 5 English tradition reworked by Roger Smith
- 6 The Celtic charm of Ireland’s McGonigle Brothers

Text: Meehna Goldsmith

the most essential elements into their watches: elegance, simplicity, precision and reliability.

The hand-wound mechanical tourbillon has a 110-hour power reserve with a mainplate made of German silver that is hand beveled and circle grain finished. Employing a feature of high-grade pocket watches made in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the train wheels and barrels use wolf tooth gearing.

“For a watchmaker there are few greater pleasures than working on a beautifully made watch,” relays John. My brother and I have had the great fortune to have worked on some superb watches. We’d like to return the favour to the watchmakers who will work on our watches in the future.”

The McGonigles incorporate all the elements of Swiss haute horlogerie—with an Irish twist. On the back of the mainplate is a hand engraved Celtic-inspired design created by their artist sister, Frances McGonigle, and the crown has grips in the style of the Ogham alphabet, the ancient Celtic alphabet they also use in the logo. John and Stephen’s handmade Tourbillons start at €108,000 before tax.

To François-Paul Journe, the 18th century remains the Golden Age of watchmaking, and in aspiring to those heights

in his own work, the Frenchman signs his watches with the Latin phrase “invenit et fecit,” which means “invented and made” in his atelier.

A graduate of the Paris Watchmaking School in 1976, Journe went to work in his Uncle Michel Journe’s workshop. Exhibiting his brilliance early, Journe completed his first tourbillon pocket watch in 1982. By 1985 he had established his own headquarters on rue de Verneuil in Paris. He moved to Geneva in 1996 to establish TIM S A workshops, where he designed and made watch mechanisms for other brands. Three years later, he launched his own brand with a collection of chronometers and in the same year also presented a world first tourbillon wristwatch with remontoir in the Souveraine collection.

Journe’s creations have brought him recognition in the form of prestigious prizes such as Bleustein-Blanchet in 1987, the Balancier d’Or award in 1989, the Gaïa for the best watchmaker of the year 1994 and the coveted L’Aiguille d’Or in 2004, 2006 and 2008.

The F P Journe workshops build around 700 pieces a year, with one watchmaker assembling and adjusting just one piece at a time. ■