



Q&A



Now 76-years-old, Kurt Klaus has been a Master Watchmaker at IWC for the past 53 years. Now a senior ambassador for the brand and mentor to the students of its watchmaking school, the self-effacing Mr Klaus talks to *QP* about the industry's good times, its dark days and his proudest achievement.

You started your career with IWC in 1957, are you still a hands-on watchmaker?

I actually retired about 10 years ago, but I couldn't stay away. Today I am more involved with development in watchmaking. IWC has its own watchmaking school and we currently have 16 pupils - it's a four-year programme so we have four students in each year. This is where my heart lies, as a mentor and tutor. We take IWC trainees straight from school and there is definitely a growing interest in the training course with demand outstripping the amount of places we have to offer. For the first time this year we will offer five places rather than four and we have started to bring candidates in for a week's work experience before deciding who to offer a place to. It is pretty easy to tell very early on who has the necessary skill and dedication to become an IWC watchmaker.

You are obviously very loyal to IWC but what made you choose that particular company?

There is no great story as to how I ended up at IWC - you could say it was a matter of luck rather than judgement. I was born in the east of Switzerland, close to Schaffhausen, but moved to the west when I decided to try my hand

in the watch industry - I have always liked small things and chose to study micro-mechanics so it seemed like the perfect career for me. Eventually though I wanted to move back to the east and IWC was the only manufacturer in the area. A very happy accident almost.

But what made you stay there for your entire career (at least so far)?

I went to IWC in January 1957 and worked under a technical director called Albert Pellaton who told me on my first day: "Anyone who works here is not just a watchmaker, he is an IWC watchmaker, he is one step above the rest." Mr Pellaton's total faith in and commitment to the brand inspired me. He was an extraordinary man, an inventor who created an automatic winding system in the 1950s that is still among the best in the world today. When I developed the Portuguese Auto, I thought: "Why invent a new movement when we already have the best?" It may be 50 years old, but there is still nothing to beat it.

So Albert Pellaton became your mentor?

Yes. I began my life at IWC in the servicing department and learnt everything from the ground up. I was 22 - fresh from school via my national service - and Mr Pellaton observed my every move, giving me special tasks such as building the prototypes for his developments. I learnt so much from him and I will never forget him. Every time I have built something over the years I always ask myself: 'What would Albert Pellaton think?'

Although he was ultimately a watchmaker, Mr Pellaton was more what you would call an engineer and constructor. He was a brilliant director and mentor and I learnt so many elements of precision engineering from him. It was sad when he retired but I was determined to continue in his steps.

Have any other watchmakers made an impression on you over the years?

In about 1985/86 I had a friend who was looking for work. I introduced him to our CEO who could see straight away that

Below and bottom: Thanks to a hand-assembled, complicated movement designed by Kurt Klaus, the Da Vinci Perpetual Calendar tracks the days, months, years, and moonphases for hundreds of years at a time, even remaining accurate during leap years.

The watch is signed by Klaus on the dial and a picture of the great man is engraved on the caseback.



he was an extremely talented individual and did not hesitate in employing him. We worked for many years together developing the Da Vinci Minute Repeater and we are still very great friends today. He was the legendary Giulio Papi and, although he claims to have learnt a lot from me, I equally learnt much from him - he even gave me a trigonometry calculator so that I no longer had to do the calculations in my head! In 1990 we were able to present IWC's first grand complication - a result of our close collaboration and combined effort. Like me, Giulio sees himself as an engineer rather than a high watchmaker but to me he is simply the cleverest watchmaker I have ever worked with.

What has been the greatest moment of your long career?

Without doubt, my greatest professional achievement has been the development of the perpetual calendar. It was the 1970s, Albert Pellaton had just retired and quartz





watches were the latest, greatest thing. IWC had never made a complication before but we knew we needed to make a watch that could do something a quartz watch never could. The process started with precision drawings - and this was before computers so that part of the process took a fair bit of time. By 1984 we had the first calendar prototype ready - we studied it under a microscope to observe the movement and took Polaroid pictures and after several hours we watched as the date moved from 28 February to 1 March. For me this represented the renaissance of the mechanical watch - it was a huge success and from there IWC's reputation soared.

So you're saying that the quartz crisis can be partially credited with IWC's success?

To a degree, yes. As everyone knows, the mid-1970s was the lowest point for the Swiss watch industry. IWC had to diversify to survive and began producing

small silver Porsche models - nothing to do with watchmaking but it did forge the start of a long relationship with Porsche. It was during these quiet years that I was able to apply my energies to developing the calendar pocket watch that eventually led to the Da Vinci Perpetual Calendar. We were dedicated to providing fascination. Quartz watches are needed, but IWC complicated watches are wanted - that is the fundamental difference. That first calendar pocket watch that we developed, we made 100 pieces. At SIHH that year, the IWC stand was surrounded by quartz watches but our booth featured just one piece - the mechanical pocket watch. By the second day of the fair we had sold all 100. It took us a year to complete the orders.

And this success gave IWC the motivation to continue making mechanical watches. We had a new CEO at this point - Günter Blümlein - who showed great faith in me.

When everyone else was asking: "What is Kurt doing now?" Günter believed in me and pushed for the perpetual calendar to be finished.

Why did it take so long to complete the perpetual calendar?

As well as being a very difficult complication to manufacture, I was aware that IWC would also need to offer a brand new twist, so I decided to leave tradition behind and head off in new directions. All perpetual calendars before were hard to adjust and I wanted to create something that would be very easy, where everything could be adjusted with just the crown.

My proudest moment came at the end of 1999, when I imagined the moment that all 20,000 owners of the Da Vinci watched as their timepieces ticked over into a new Millennium. Who could ask for more? ☺