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Masters of Contemporary Watchmaking

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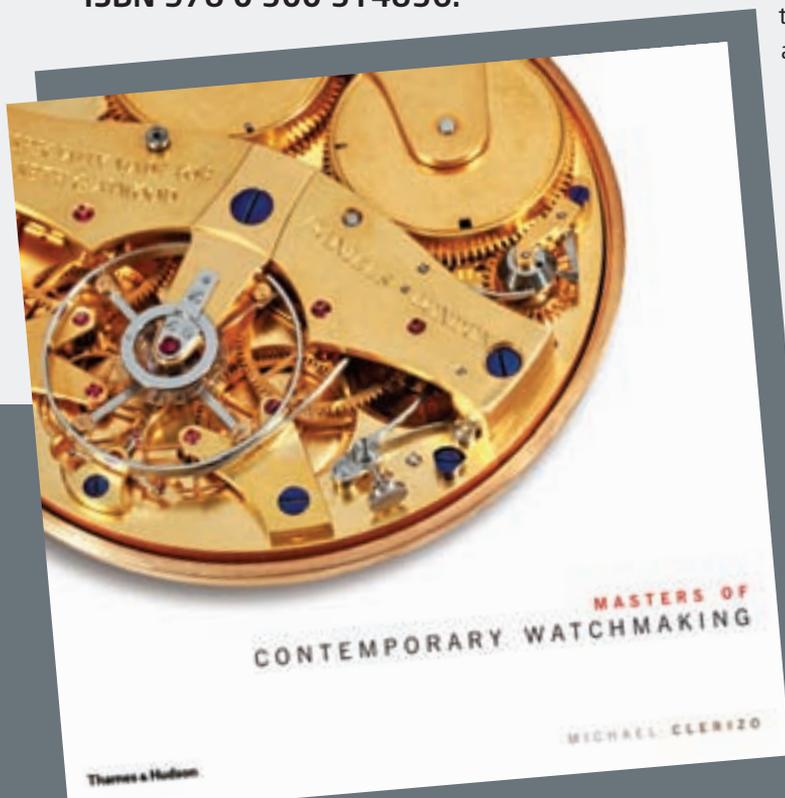
MASTERS OF CONTEMPORARY WATCHMAKING

by Michael Clerizo

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493 in colour.
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Colophons mean little to anyone other than booksellers, bibliophiles and publishers. But the one gracing Michael Clerizo's *Masters of Contemporary Watchmaking* speaks volumes about the work, for Thames & Hudson ranks among the world's premier producers of fine art books. This book's recurring questions are: 'is a watch ever a work of art?' and 'is a watchmaker ever an artist?' Because of the mere existence of the book itself - the fact that it comes from a publisher of art books and the way the watchmakers and their works are presented and respected in the manner of books about René Lalique or Carlo Bugatti - the answer has to be 'yes' to both.

Initially, this LP-sleeve-sized book could be lost in the flood of lavish, watch-related titles that have issued forth over the past six or seven years as interest in high-end timepieces has increased. But merely to group it with yet another single marque history or generic overview would be to miss its one crucial merit: the book fills a gap that has been yawning at us ever since the likes of George Daniels, Franck Muller and



Daniel Roth revived the concept of bespoke, artisan watches in the wake of the quartz juggernaut.

Rather than let cheesy electronics relegate mechanical watches to history's scrapheap, such craftsmen fought a rear-guard action. This book lets us know just who they are and why they were compelled to operate at the most elevated levels of horology. Another book remains to be written about those who fought quartz on a more commercial level.

Clerizo used the most productive device possible for conveying the watchmakers' personalities, motives and beliefs: he interviewed them at their ateliers and let them speak for themselves. The results are fascinating, contentious, salty, acerbic, revealing and - more importantly - entertaining. For those who have never met these legendary watchmakers, their candid remarks humanise them, and - by extension - explain precisely why their creations are the way they are.

Clerizo made his choices by a personal set of rules defining what he believes to be master watchmakers of a certain level of independence, with a singularity of vision. Some whom he approached refused to be part of the project on grounds of ego, which explains one or two omissions, while others were prevented from participating because of extenuating circumstances. Clerizo is aware of this and has already planned a sequel, which may entice the recalcitrant watchmakers once they've seen what they have missed.

Within these constraints, he settled on 11 maestri: George Daniels, Svend Andersen, Vincent Calabrese, Philippe Dufour, Antoine Prezioso, Franck Muller,

Aniceto Jimenez Pita, Alain Silberstein, Marco Lang, Vianney Halter and Roger Smith are his chosen stars. Each of these is dealt with in depth, with extensive biographical detail blending into their own descriptions of why they became watchmakers, what motivates them, why they favour certain techniques and technologies, how they learned their crafts and how they finally achieved their positions as independent watchmakers at the pinnacle of the form.

In their words

Clerizo appears not to have censored them, so there are some unexpected belly laughs. He lets Franck Muller, for example, propose vehemently that future *haute horlogerie* timepieces will incorporate upgradeable electronics modules alongside tourbillons and repeaters. According to the self-proclaimed visionary: "People want to put the computer into a golden case, a platinum case... People want to show they have computer (sic) with their watch. This is the next revolution." Perhaps Herr Muller was indulging a



Right: Montre à Tract by Sven Andersen, with a white gold case, blue guilloché dial with basket weave pattern and stingray strap. It is the first watch known to have a blue gold dial, consisting of an alloy of gold and iron.



Left: Part of Vincent Calabrese's Les Ludiques collection is Sun-Tral (2001). As the sun is central to the universe, so the watch's aperture displaying the hour is central to it. Like the earth around the sun, an arrow or disc orbits around the aperture indicating the minutes.

bit too much in his other passion at the time of the interview: fine wines. I, for one, do not see any of the watch connoisseurs I know aspiring to battery-powered modules in the same cases as their mechanical masterpieces. But then Franck did give us the Crazy Hours watch, the epitome of uselessness in timekeeping.

Moments like that, however, remind us that these men are not gods, though we could all present just such a case for Daniels or Dufour. But with all of them, their humanity is visceral: Marco Lang reveals that one of the key events that allowed him to pursue his art was the fall of the Berlin Wall. Vincent Calabrese was driven by a need to prove that people from Naples can be good workers. Philippe Dufour taught himself the rudiments of watchmaking by buying some tools from 1900 and learning how to use them without any assistance. George Daniels invented the co-axial movement "at three o'clock in the morning. I woke up and I knew I'd got something".

Perfect flow

Page after page, the words flow so beautifully that you wish there was also a portable, text-only paperback edition as well so you could read it on the train, like a novel. But in-between the stories are the watches themselves, photographed and presented in exactly the way you'd expect of a book from Thames & Hudson. The illustrations are simply glorious, reproduced in

fine detail, oversized so that you can see even the microscopic imperfections that prove a watch was hand-made. As many are one-offs, and all are of extremely limited production, this book serves as a rare opportunity for those of us unlikely to own such treasures to see what these artists have created.

Although a reference work by its very nature, if not its intent (even though Clerizo included a technical glossary, suggestions for further reading and a list of specialist websites and magazines), the author points out that it does not purport to show every watch that each of the 11 produced. Also to be inferred is that the book does not represent all of the independent watchmakers that might fall under its umbrella. In addition to the 11 that Clerizo focused on in the main section, another 18 watchmakers are discussed, treated to two- or four-page spreads that offer brief descriptions and photos of their seminal pieces. It's here that one inescapable question is raised.

With all due respect to Clerizo, surely such geniuses as Greubel and Forsey, Kari Voutilainen and the absent, pioneering Daniel Roth deserved to be amongst those who received the full treatment. Conversely, but I won't voice which, some of those at the front of the book deserve to be at the back: when you create a group that includes Dufour and Daniels, you raise the bar to Olympian heights.



Left: A spread of watches created by the great George Daniels.

Below: Part of the section on Philippe Dufour.

Given that this book should - and will - become the reference work on independent contemporary watchmakers, it is inevitable that the absences of Michel Parmigiani, Denis Flageolet (of De Bethune), Christophe Claret, François-Paul Journe, the aforementioned Roth and a handful of others will raise an eyebrow. I had to keep reminding myself that Clerizo had achieved the near impossible with 29 entries in total. Those absent will probably regret their decisions when they see what a magnificent showcase Clerizo created. But, as explained above, merely inviting the watchmakers to participate was no guarantee of successfully enticing them to do so.

Of course, time overtakes everything, and every Basel show hosts a cluster of new artisans fresh out of watchmaking school eager to make their mark. To keep Clerizo busy, there will be a need to expand this book every five years or so to account for the next batch of wizards. And when the inevitable second edition arrives, I hope that they will correct the one aesthetic failing.

While Thames & Hudson's skills at presenting works of art - especially sculpture and jewellery - ensured that the photos of the watches were presented as beautifully as possible, the

designer succumbed to an increasingly unpleasant plague affecting books, magazines and even websites. Due to art directors caring more about 'the look' of the page than they do a book's primary function - which is to be read - the decision was made to present the most crucial text of all in white on a matte gold background. Even worse, many of the pages have this text superimposed over line drawings and half-tone images. As a result, the legibility of the most valuable component of the book has been hamstrung.

Do not let that carping influence you: I'm sure that the compromised legibility of the text will diminish the pleasure no more than would seeing a film on a TV instead of at the cinema. And, as for the omissions? Their losses, not ours. Even without them, this vies with Knirim's epic tome on British military watches as my Book of the Year. ☺

Right: Contemporaine Quantième Perpétuel by Vianney Halter, 1999 with platinum case and dial showing months and the leap-year cycle.

Far Right: Roger Smith's Series 2 with platinum case, hand-engraved silver dial and blued steel hands.

Below: The prototype for Vianney Halter's Trio Petite Seconde et Date (brass case) and the Goldpfeil Jumping Hour Lunar Cycle.

