

Shock of the NEW



As customers become more discerning, now might just be the perfect time for the world of luxury watches to hold a mirror up to itself. And what better mirror than a group of brutally honest, rebellious, nay-saying, if not future-thinking, art and design students. While a handful of leading watch companies engage with youth and modernity, via a band of free-minded art and design students, QP wonders what happens when the two worlds collide.

Claire Adler

When it comes to scouting art and design talent in the watch industry, this partially explains the current fascination with choosing the vagaries of youth over experience. It also suggests that outsiders and newcomers bring fresh perspectives to specialist topics and that they can even enlighten seasoned scholars.

In 1993, a pair of academics studying the ages of Nobel Prize winners, noted that the world's highest achievers were startlingly young. In *Age and the Nobel Prize Revisited*, an academic paper published that year; researchers Paula Stephan and Sharon Levin argued that

on average, after the age of 50, the likelihood of making world-class, award-winning discoveries dropped off a sharp statistical precipice. A striking number of Nobel Prize winners between 1901 and 1992 had been in their 20s.

At the cusp of two energetic worlds, 38-year-old Christoph Behling - a product designer by training, a Royal College of Art lecturer and the man responsible for armfuls of TAG Heuer award winners - is driven by these curious facts about Nobel Prize recipients. He is convinced great discoveries are routinely made by people in the early years of their entry into a new area and has long extolled the triumphs of naïveté.

"Asking engineers and watchmakers stupid questions has been one of the greatest keys to my success," says Behling, whose entire design studio is made up of people, just like him, who knew nothing about the watch industry before they started working for TAG Heuer.

Currently, a handful of key players in the watch industry are collaborating with art and design academies in different ways and for apparently different motivations. Some watch companies relish having their feathers ruffled by subversive young students, some like to feel they're giving something back, while occasionally, some exploit the opportunity to engender unforgettable new watches. Integrating the work of students into final products is not mainstream by any means. Often, it's a case of marketing and design all rolled into one.

Outside the box

Take for example Rado, the only brand in the entire Swatch Group to work with an art or design school. Rado watches have always been about a very distinct look and feel, one that is vastly different to all other watches in the Swatch Group stable. The brand's focus on watch design was re-affirmed when it appointed Jasper Morrison - whose other design-conscious clients range from Alessi to Canon, Vitra, Muji and Samsung - to come up with limited edition pieces for Rado's 50th anniversary in 2007.

But now, input from young, artistic minds seems to be having a major impact on Rado - seemingly everywhere but the watches.

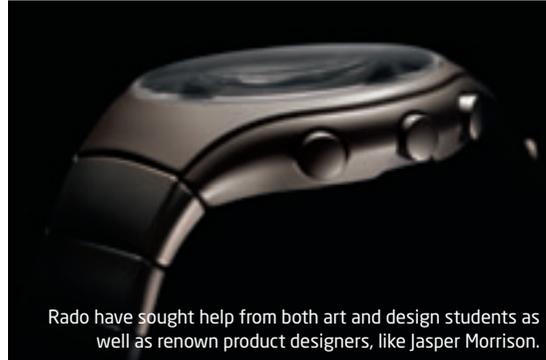
With the help of art students from the Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne, Rado publishes RadoStar, a monthly magazine. Recent themes include "black and gold", "colour" and "visionary". So enamoured were Rado's marketing people with the work of one RadoStar artistic contributor, now at the Royal College of Art, that they commissioned him to arrange Rado's Harrods window display last Christmas.

"We want to give young talents a platform to market themselves. Our association with the world of design is about anchoring our brand in the world of design. We are in a re-positioning process," says Michel Hueter, communications director of Rado, a brand that three years ago was sponsoring tennis.

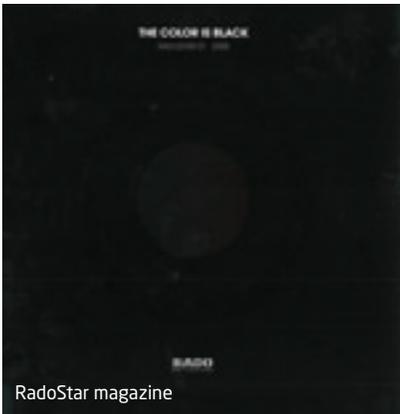




Christoph Behling CEO of SolarLab Research & Design.



Rado have sought help from both art and design students as well as renown product designers, like Jasper Morrison.



RadoStar magazine



TAG Heuer Meridiist mobile phone.



TAG Heuer Diamond Fiction.

At this year's Salon del Mobile in Milan, Rado launched Radostar.com, "a Facebook for the design community" intended as a forum for exchanging ideas, according to Hueter. Radostar postcards designed by invited graphic designers, promote the website at international design fairs and Design Library Cafés in Istanbul, Milan and Shanghai.

Rado also sponsors competition prizes for graduates at Eindhoven's Dutch Design Academy, the Swiss Design Prize (where Jasper Morrison sits on the panel), Shanghai's 100% Design and Thailand's Design Prize in collaboration with Wallpaper* magazine. The brand is currently seeking partnerships with additional universities in China.

Zurich-born, Notting Hill based Christoph Behling views art and design academies as idea laboratories and thinks the potential for impacting and enhancing product development is huge.

Responsible for most of TAG Heuer's new and concept watches, from the Monaco 360 to the stunning Diamond Fiction, the Carrera 360 and Meridiist - TAG Heuer's mobile phone, Behling simultaneously consults for Dior, Fred, Lacoste and Nokia and has also created a solar-powered boat, which can currently be found ferrying passengers across Hamburg harbour. In appointing Behling in 2004, TAG Heuer proved, once again, its avant garde credentials.

Behling believes that after a period of exponential growth, the luxury world is now facing a more questioning public and that the time is now ripe for engaging with the honest, inspiring and sometimes unpredictable world of art and design students.

"In the college design environment, a student is inspired freely, and only then looks at the constraints of distribution issues. For example, if I ask students to look at general questions of time, they might focus on anything from plants to waking up in the morning. Students bring fresh oxygen to the company, while themselves gaining industrial insight," says Behling.

At the very first discussions about TAG Heuer's Monaco V4, the world's first watch modelled on a car's linear engine belt, Behling's own fresh thinking led him to identify that while a Ferrari engine from 1960 looked radically different to one from 2000, the inside of a watch movement had remained pretty much the same over the course of four decades. "Watch engineering seemed to be clinging on to some sentimental past," he says.

When asked to create a diamond watch, Behling looked at diamonds not for their opulence and beauty, but rather - being a designer at heart - for their functionality. Embracing a diamond's ability to reflect light better than any other material in the world, he came up with Diamond Fiction, which sees digital LED lights behind a screen of pavé diamonds telling the time. "This kind of

stuff comes from people who are intrigued by ideas, not so much suffocated by history," says Behling.

In the past, partnerships with art and design schools have led to some surprising and thought-provoking watches. When TAG Heuer asked students to create the watch of their dreams, many came back with digital watches. "Somewhere, the message 'digital is cheap' had been inscribed in Swiss watchmaking tradition," remembers Thomas Houlon, TAG Heuer brand director. "But the Microtimer which resulted, the first 1/100th of a second digital chronograph, won the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève in 2002, opening the door to a new segment of high end digital products."

In 2006, TAG Heuer launched an international competition to locate new talent, entitled *Wristwatches of the Future*, in conjunction with the Domus Academy in Milan, the Institute de la Mode in Paris and London's Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design. The winner became a TAG Heuer scholar in residence, for a year of complete immersion in the brand.

"Working with students is a think tank process. Almost all the products we launch are designed by experienced, professional designers. But the work of design students inspires us and we ensure our collaboration gives students the opportunity to learn how to work with a demanding company," says Houlon.

Éire Purpose

In 2003, the president of Dublin's National Centre of Art and Design invited Graham watches to run a hugely successful competition for 30 students to create a watch based on a detailed brief.

"When we teach detailing in design, sponsored projects with watch companies have proven to be of great value to us," says Professor Paul Fortune, head of industrial design at Dublin's National Centre of Art and Design. "Watches are the most powerful and classic example of looking at design in the minutest detail. Students get to work on magnified drawings to see, for example, the knurling on a watch crown".

Although Graham had anticipated one winner and two awards, CEO Eric Loth ultimately selected two winners and gave 10 awards. What's more, the work of then student Philip Hamilton matched the brief so well, it fell in line with ideas Graham was already working on. Two years later, the finished product was the Graham Swordfish, with its signature architectonic lugs and encircled sapphire protective crystals on the dial. Hamilton went on to do a Masters at Richemont's Creative Academy in Milan.

The Richemont Creative Academy is the vision of its chairman, Franco Cologni, who also chairs the Haute Horlogerie Foundation and the SIHH. Early this year, the Academy welcomed through its doors 21 new Masters students from 11 countries. Cologni



TAG Heuer Monaco C360 LS Concept Chronograph.



This image & below: Graham Swordfish



This image and right: Jaeger-LeCoultre Master Spinning.



believes luxury goods and design are inextricably linked and that investing in creative talent is absolutely vital.

“A luxury goods article lives on and is nourished by creativity: in its creation, its communication, in every phase of its development from concept to market launch,” says Cologni. “Discovering new design artists, cultivating them, educating them and if possible, keeping them for one’s own is the most profitable form of investment for the luxury goods world.”

Teachers at the Creative Academy include Fabian Krone, CEO of Lange & Söhne and today, the Academy’s alumni can be found across the Richemont Group. One rising star is 29 year old graduate and Jaeger-LeCoultre designer, Anna Maccieri.

After beginning a career in marketing, Maccieri discovered she loved painting and design and was awarded a scholarship from the Richemont Creative Academy. After an internship at Cartier in Paris, designing wallets, pens and cufflinks, she received a call from Jaeger-LeCoultre’s artistic director Janek Deleskiewicz. Soon afterwards, he handed her a card with the job title Jewellery Designer, and a brief to give the brand’s ladies watches a new face. From spinning dials loaded with exquisitely cut diamonds, to dials triple layered with pearl marquetry, in the form of lotus flowers, this she certainly has.

Whether watch companies integrate designs and insights from students into their final products or not, all parties still stand to benefit. “I ask the students to work in the same way I’d work with any external designer,” says head of product development at Girard Perregaux, Yvan Ketterer, who gives occasional lectures at the Haute Ecole Arc engineering and design school in Le Locle.

“Teaching is very inspirational,” says Behling, who teaches Masters level product design at the Royal College of Art. “You think you have become an expert and then people challenge you with the very thing you thought was set in stone. While most watch designers are based in Switzerland and focussed on watch design, I’m not. Entering the watch world involved a painful learning curve, but London is home to the best schools in the world in the fields of fashion, product design and architecture.”

According to Behling, serious money rarely changes hands with such collaborations. A competition might lead to an exhibition where both the watchmaker and work by students share each other’s limelight. In more commercial models, a handful of competition winners receive prize money. Other times, the corporation might fund the cost of student visits to factories or other excursions.

Behling confesses working with art and design students can be a double-edged sword. After teaching six tutorials, he admits he sometimes returns home exhausted.

“Within a product development department, people expect to meet their deadlines and have defined questions answered. But in an art college, I can’t demand results. I can’t even demand that students show up. There is no real authority,” he says.

Untamed imaginations

A brand might ask for a new watch design, but they need to be prepared to end up with a web or iPhone application, warns Behling. For today’s students, physical and virtual distinctions are fluid. When his students started a project for German electric goods manufacturer Braun, many expressed their disdain for the brand’s focus on marketing and commerciality in contrast to its great designs from the 1970s. Some student designers refuse to work on projects altogether on the grounds of sustainability, saying they’d advise a company not to go ahead at all. Another challenge to bear in mind, according to Gerald Roden, CEO of Gerald Genta and Daniel Roth, is the time it takes for students to learn how to hold a productive conversation with a technician.

“If you employ free thinkers with no pay and no conditions, you will get brutally honest answers. Some brands don’t like this,” says Behling. “So if you’re looking for innovation to bring a product to market in the next three years, go to a design agency. But if you want to engage with the antithesis of yes-sayers, have your feathers ruffled and learn from people who challenge every assumption in the book, go to a design or art school.”

So assuming all goes well, can external collaborations ever reflect badly on in-house abilities? TAG Heuer’s brand director Thomas Houlon doesn’t think so.

“TAG Heuer will never pretend to do everything in-house. We are like a chef in his kitchen. He cooks with the best ingredients, but does not produce the cow, the salt or the pepper himself. From the V4 to the Microtimer and the Grand Carrera, TAG Heuer brings together the best ideas in terms of both movement and design,” he says.

All of which goes to prove that in a climate where watch companies appear determined to demonstrate they can do everything in-house, it takes a true leader to openly say that in the quest to remain at the top of their game, they will freely look elsewhere for inspiration. ☺