

Andreas von Zadora-Gerlof

Purveyor of Dreams

i "I can make an aardvark that moves and put it on top of a watch," says Andreas von Zadora-Gerlof, founder of Zadora Timepieces, which launched the first of its fantastical, bejewelled watches last summer. "These aren't what I would call a first-choice watch," he adds.

Maria Doulton



(Top & Bottom) Frog Prince. Textured 18 ct. yellow gold, the body is pave set with ombréd tsavorites and studded blue sapphire cabochons with diamond feet details and ruby cabochon eyes.

(Center) Queen Bee. Minutely textured 18 ct. gold, the body is embellished with canary yellow diamonds, wings with white diamonds and ruby cabochon for the eyes. It is wearing a multi-gem encrusted crown and presides over yellow and white diamond pave honey cells.





Swap a lethal looking scorpion for a kindlier looking golden Prince Frog.

The mechanics of these miniature wonders are as intriguing as the artwork. As the top of the watch is occupied by the golden sculpture, the side of the watch tells the time, using a system similar to the 19th century 'mystery' clocks while the drum shape reminds us of the 16th century watch worn around the neck. A golden arrow set into the case points to the hours etched onto a rotating cylinder.

The movement is a sophisticated manual winding mechanism made at Zadart, Zadora's small atelier in Neuchatel, Switzerland. Many of the components are produced in-house and the movement is assembled and finished with beautiful hand-decorated details.

Prepared to meet the maker

Having been astonished by photographs of Zadora's watches that I first saw last summer, I was determined to find out more about their creator, the exotically named, Andreas von Zadora-Gerlof. Finally my "golden ticket" moment arrived and I was able to meet the man himself, who lives between Canada and London, one rainy January morning, in his baronial Mayfair apartment.

As you can imagine, these are no ordinary watches with a trimming of diamonds on the dial. This sculptor and creator of 'objets d'art' sees the 1.5 square inches on top of a watch as a place to make a wonderful sculpture, a piece of art that you can wear. One of my favourites is a golden bee perched on top of a drum-shaped case. His body is covered in yellow and white diamonds and he hovers over a delicate, sparkling lattice of honey cells.

So sweet a changeling

Using a special system patented by Zadora Timepieces, the miniature sculptures can be interchanged, so should you wish, you could swap a lethal looking scorpion for a kindlier looking golden Prince Frog complete with diamond studded feet and ruby cabochon eyes and tsavorite pave body. Each watch will set you back some US\$ 150,000 but at this price, you are sure of having something truly unique, as all twelve models are made to commission.



(Top left) The watch designs use an orbital dial face with roman numerals, a triangle diamond indicator and a transparent sapphire case back displaying the mechanism.

(Above) Scorpion. Created from oxidized 18 ct. white gold and micro pave set with grey and white diamonds with ruby eyes and a cut rubellite stinger, the scorpion crouches on a guilloche top sprinkled with black diamonds.

(Left) Ladybird. This harbinger of Good Luck uses micro pave set with richly coloured rubies and black diamond details with cabochon emerald eyes.



I entered a world in which anything is possible. Should you wish, von Zadora-Gerlof can make you a pair of golden automaton monkeys that will wave their hand at you from the top of an enamelled palm tree, or command aquamarine and tourmaline fish to swim around in an aquarium clock wrought out of lapis lazuli and gold. Von Zadora-Gerlof can also arrange for a gold and opal dragon fly, controlled by electromagnetism, to freely flit above a pond full of automaton frogs whose movements mark the passing hours. And these are just a few of the jewelled sculptures, stone carvings, clocks and automatons that von Zadora-Gerlof's firm, Zadart has created over the past twenty years.

The glass of fashion

Von Zadora-Gerlof's work has been widely acclaimed and collectors include the Rockerfellers, the Johnsen family, the Forbes, celebrities and heads of state from around the world. The beauty of his work prompted Christopher Forbes a collector and admirer of von Zadora-Gerlof to write: "I experienced the same pleasure and delight in viewing and handling his exquisite pieces that I had with our first Fabergé acquisitions."

Like Carl Fabergé, the master jeweller so beloved of Tsarist Russia, von Zadora-Gerlof is capable of producing the most exquisite workmanship, rarely seen today. Engine turned guilloché enamels, virtuoso stone carving, mechanical automatons, artificial muscles and complex jewellery work come together with cutting age robotics and electromagnetism, that when brought to life by von Zadora-Gerlof's fertile imagination, leads to outstanding creations.



Though I may be as wide eyed as Charlie discovering these mineral, artisanal and mechanical works of art, Von Zadora-Gerlof, is no fanciful Willy Wonka character. Dressed for the great outdoors in cowboy boots, jeans and a camouflage brown polo neck sweater, it was difficult to place an age on this karate black belt. I could perfectly easily imagine him rolling up his sleeves and working alongside his team of 160 designers, stonecutters, enamellers, sculptors and goldsmiths in his workshops making these 'objets de vertu' that range in price from US\$50,000 to 11 million.

The makings of

Zadora's background is as colourful as his creations. Born into a noble family from Pomaria, on the Baltic Coast, World War II forced his parents to flee. Fortunately his great grandfather had acquired an island South of Alaska. "You know it was one of those funny things people did at parties," explains von Zadora-Gerlof of the unlikely geography of his youth. Taking with them a few family portraits and mementos of their



As you can imagine, these are no ordinary watches.

(Left) Snake. The serpent is made of oxidized palladium and micro pave set with black and canary yellow diamonds and enhanced pear shaped emerald eyes, it also clutches a baroque South Sea pearl in its mouth.



I entered a world in which anything is possible.

former noble life as well as some Fabergé pieces that included silver cigarette cases, a rock crystal vase with lilies of the valley and a silver toad with ruby eyes resting on a malachite base. Following a stint in Vancouver, home was now the Charlotte Islands halfway between Vancouver, British Columbia and Alaska. Here the young von-Zadora-Gerlof carried on the hunting, shooting and fishing ways of the motherland.

A hunting accident was to change the course of his life. At the age of twelve, while stalking a deer, a large log fell on him and trapped his hand. The resulting paralysis was not responding to traditional physiotherapy and by the age of 14 his hand had seized up. The father of his Indian hunting partner, suggested he learn traditional Haida totem pole carving, at which he excelled.

Breathe of life into a stone

From totem poles he went to learn the art of glyptography (or precious stone carving) in Idar Oberstein, Germany and soon set himself up in Los Angeles making agate cameos and signet rings out of stone. He was fascinated with the delicate play between the white and the dark agate, an effect he describes as "a breath on a pane of glass." His big break came when his then girlfriend, Lilbet Johnson (of the Johnson & Johnson fame) introduced him to her mother. Impressed with skills as a stone carver and jeweller, she commissioned him to create scaled down replicates in precious materials four of the Delacourt clocks that she so admired in New York's Central Park.



(Above) Sea Turtle. An ancient symbol of wisdom, the Sea Turtle is made of textured 18 ct. gold with a pave set light brown diamond body and a sculpted citrine shell and emerald cabochon eyes.

(Opposit page) Enamel Guilloché. The watch is made from 18 ct. yellow gold with a royal blue enamelled guilloché disk. The bezel is set with white diamond details surrounding a large green cabochon tsavorite centre stone.

From mechanical automatons and large clocks to wristwatches was an inevitable jump for von Zadora-Gerlof and he rose to the challenge when his business partner suggested he reduce his tabletop clocks to wearable proportions. Even accustomed to working to such high standards and experimenting with ingenious mechanical solutions, he underestimated the complexity of producing wristwatches and the first one took five years to complete. "It was a humbling experience," he admits. "The watch industry is very set in its ways and it is all about planning but it was worth the end result."

The serpent's egg

Applying the same rigorously artisanal production approach to his watches, von Zadora-Gerlof is particularly proud of his antique, restored hand operated lathes for engine turned engraving that create the ripple effect under glassy enamels. So far only twelve watches have been made for the original series and he has plans to make no more than 200

watches over the next five years. "They are very much bespoke, for example you could have something levitating over the watch" suggests von Zadora-Gerlof. Or indeed a slithering serpent with gem scales about to swallow a creamy pearl.

Von Zadora-Gerlof has plans to produce a line of men's watches, but don't expect a simple three-hander. However, he will not reveal more about his horological plans other than: "Assume that it will be the best of its kind, because it is what I go for." He does however show me a sketch of an automaton clock he is working on. When the frog blows, the seeds of a dandelion float across the dial and are dispersed at random. But exactly how did this and his other fantastical ideas come to him? For this answer von Zadora-Gerlof returns to his rugged, outdoor upbringing: "It is like fishing" he explains, "they pop up when you least expect them."

So what is the creator of some of the most fanciful timepieces of our age wearing? A discreet gold vintage Blancpain lies under his cuff, while under the coffee table lies a Jack Russell-sized lion carved out of citrine, patiently waiting to have a clock mounted on his back. ☺

Further information: www.zadora.com / www.zadart.com

David Duggan

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