



Plundering the Depths

You might find it hard to believe that this year marks a decade since the release of *Titanic* starring Leonardo di Caprio and Kate Winslet – although perhaps not quite as hard to believe as the film itself. Now something else concerned with the ill-fated liner, and also rather implausible, has turned up: a wristwatch said to contain *Titanic's* 'DNA'. **Simon de Burton** plumbs the depths to discover what must be Baselworld 2007's most eccentric marketing device.

After hours of trudging around the Baselworld halls, one really does need an antidote to all those watches that dazzle with their polished cases, Geneva-striped movements and hand-guillochéd dials. However, I couldn't help but feel a sinking sensation as I dutifully made my way upstairs to the Romain Jerome booth where, for some unfathomable reason, I had made an appointment to see a watch with a particularly outstanding feature: rust.

Romain Jerome first appeared on the scene in 2004 when it announced plans to make a mechanical golf watch that would also double as a score counter. Anyone who knows anything about horology will, of course, tell you that mechanical watches and golf go together about as well as high heels and American football, but Romain Jerome did it anyway and claimed to have oversold its first quota of Hole in One Golf Counters by four times.

So I already knew that the fledgling brand, set up by former Sector, Baume & Mercier and Hublot

man Yvan Arpa wasn't afraid to be different – but exactly how different I didn't fully appreciate until I encountered its latest effort: the Titanic-DNA.

Finders keepers

The outstanding feature of this otherwise-unremarkable timepiece is that it contains traces of actual metal salvaged from the hull of *RMS Titanic*. Following its discovery by marine archaeologist Dr Robert Ballard in 1985, Ballard quickly made it clear that he regarded the hulk more as a tomb than as a treasure trove and has spent the past 20 years attempting to discourage divers from helping themselves to bits of it and its contents. But despite being located 12,500 feet below the surface of the Atlantic off the Newfoundland coast, the wreck was regularly picked at by souvenir hunters for several years.

After more than a decade of litigation, the US courts ruled last year that RMS Titanic Inc., an underwater salvage firm that has carried out 32 dives on the wreck since 1987 and recovered

(Left) Romain Jerome's new Titanic-DNA watch, which comes in a number of guises including a steel version limited to 2,012, relating to the doomed vessel's forthcoming centenary year. In keeping with the 'wrecked' theme, the steel is rusted to varying degrees ('extreme' rust pictured here; \$8,700), but stabilised to prevent further decay.

(Above) Prior to fitting-out, *RMS Titanic's* completed hull is launched from Harland & Wolff's shipyard gantry in Belfast, May 31st, 1911. It took 62 seconds for *Titanic's* hull to slide from her building berth, aided by vast quantities of lubricant: 15 tons of tallow, 5 tons of train oil mixed together with 3 tons of soft soap. Romain Jerome's salvaged steel was returned to Harland & Wolff, who fused it with new steel for the cases.



(Above right) Pink-gold and satin-finished black-ceramic Titanic-DNA (\$10,900). Note the hands, inspired by *Titanic's* anchor and the deep-black dial; a colour obtained by integrating coal recovered from the legendary shipwreck. The small seconds hand at 9 o'clock recalls the meters of the ship's steam engines.

around 1,800 artefacts, should remain as 'salvor in possession' and the owner of more than \$15m worth of objects recovered from it.

But before any rulings were made, various bits of the liner and a large amount of its contents were legally removed by other dive teams, some of whom offered their booty for sale on the open market - and it is from one such source that Romain Jerome obtained a piece of genuine *Titanic* metal. Exactly how much we are not being told, but it is clearly not a huge amount as the brand has resorted to the services of Belfast's Harland & Wolff shipyard - where the *Titanic* was originally built - in order to have it blended with modern steel from the *Titanic* memorial project to create the material for its watch cases. Hence the 'Titanic-DNA' title.

In relatively plentiful supply, however, were the tonnes of leftover coal from *Titanic's* boiler rooms,

The 'Unsinkable' Ship

- Launched in May 1911 and completed in March 1912, *Titanic* was the world's largest passenger liner
- Her build was financed by American banking tycoon JP Morgan
- She had three giant propellers and a top speed of 23 knots
- Only three of the four 63-foot funnels was real - the fourth was just for show
- Her lavish appointments included electric elevators, Turkish baths and a squash court
- Her White Star Line sister ships were *Olympic* (or 'Old Reliable', retired 1935) and *Gigantic* (later changed to *Britannic*), which sank in 1916 serving as a hospital ship. *Titanic's* premature end came when she hit an iceberg at 23:40 on April 14th, 1912
- An estimated 1,500 people died; around 700 people survived.
- Her bow section currently lies at 41°43'57"N, 49°56'49"W



which was found scattered across the seabed up to a mile from the wreck itself. Chunks of coal were among the first objects to be brought to the surface and sold, and Romain Jerome has used some of it mixed, according to the brand's marketer Wendy Witte, with a special resin to create the jet-black dials.

Coal face

The fact that 2,012 examples of the standard steel version will be available makes me think that the amount of 'real' *Titanic* in each watch must be on the minute side of small (the figure refers, of course, to the centenary of the ship's demise on April 15th, 1912, when a memorial project will surface in Belfast). The model is, however, certainly eye-catching with its rusted (but stabilised) bezel, anchor-inspired hands and small-seconds indicator designed to look like a boiler pressure gauge.

Romain Jerome has enlisted the services of Belfast's Harland & Wolff shipyard - where *Titanic* was originally built - to blend its salvaged piece of the wreck with modern steel.



(Left) 'Ghost-maker' of the moment, BNB Concept has made nine tourbillon versions of the Titanic-DNA for Romain Jerome (from \$121,000), available in white and pink gold, as well as, of course, rusted steel. Apparently, further developments with BNB are in store, including a completely unique take on the minute repeater concept.

(Right) Girls who don't mind wearing the 46 mm bulk can get a piece of maritime legend for themselves too, with the more effeminate varieties of Romain Jerome's Titanic-DNA. This example features a white-ceramic bezel and pink-gold flanks and paws (\$18,250).

And since anything to do with *Titanic* now attracts fanatical enthusiasm, it seems likely that Romain Jerome will have a success on its hands - though I, for one, would find something rather distasteful in wearing a watch conceived on the basis of its connection with the underwater graveyard of 1,500 souls. Already, the brand claims to have sold its one-off 'oxy concept' version of the watch for "tens of thousands of dollars", despite the fact that it is virtually guaranteed to stop working sooner or later since the case, hands, dial numerals and strap buckle are all made from "extremely rusted, non-stabilised steel".

Both the oxy-concept model and the 'standard' Titanic-DNA have casebacks hand-engraved by the skilful Dutchman Kees Engelbarts who is

best known for his own mokume gane, or 'wood-grain metal' timepieces. The main body of the Titanic-DNA's 46 mm case is made from titanium. For those who don't appreciate the rusty look, there are variations on the theme that retain the coal dial but have more conventional cases made from materials like blackened satin-finish steel, steel and titanium, rose gold and titanium, or platinum and titanium. All have good quality La Joux-Perret 8235 movements and, taken as a straightforward watch, the design is actually rather good.

Naturally, a series of nine tourbillon versions has also been created (up to \$180,000 for the diamond-set option) - and yes, the whole range is water resistant. ◉

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