

Ahead of the Curve

ⓘ Watch brands excel when it comes to explaining the past. But do they risk running out of history? Are they as good at determining how to create the classics of tomorrow? Key players in the Swiss watch industry have become increasingly involved in the business of forecasting trends and predicting the future. Dig a little deeper and it emerges many are keeping their eyes firmly fixed on trends and influences that hail definitively from beyond the world of watches.

Claire Adler

In recent years, many watch manufacturers have started to enlist the services of trend forecasters. Although commercial crystal-ball gazing is an established phenomenon amongst leading fashion houses, it is a much newer concept for high-end watch brands. Now, it seems, a brand's heritage and history simply aren't enough. TAG Heuer, Patek Philippe, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Maurice Lacroix are all taking a broader look than ever at what's influencing design, style and, ultimately, consumer choice.

Companies such as Nokia, Procter & Gamble and Philips have always used what is known as 'futures thinking' - an approach that involves taking a broad look at trends including those way outside one's own sector. Even the British government has set up a 'horizon scanning' centre as part of its Foresight project. The watch industry is now moving in much the same direction, like many luxury and fashion brands. LVMH, Givenchy and H&M have long worked with Paris-based Nelly Rodi, for example - one of Europe's 'trend-counselling' pioneers.





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"The watchmaking industry is increasingly taking inspiration from trends outside its own sphere," says TAG Heuer's Head of Product Development, Stéphane Linder. "After the crisis in 2002 and 2003, I think people understood we had to be more dynamic and ready for change."

At TAG Heuer, all members of the creative, design and marketing teams subscribe to the services of WGSN.com. Founded in 1988, the Worth Global Style Network offers tip-offs by showcasing international catwalk collections and shop windows, offering insights into new materials, technologies and social and consumer trends.

"We sometimes buy a specific study about colours, materials or design trends from an outside agency," says Linder, "but WGSN is our source for an ongoing flow of information that influences and informs our products, catalogues and advertisement concepts daily."

Market-savvy

While details such as seasonal colours or particular diamond settings and straps can be informed by trend information, TAG Heuer's status as an innovative watchmaker and its higher price points mean the brand cannot be seen as too fashion driven, says Linder. He expects a TAG Heuer watch to last between three, five and ten years. Therefore, influences from architecture and cars come into play at TAG far more than fashion, he adds. As well as swearing by his subscription to WGSN, Linder can also be spotted every spring pacing the halls of Milan's furniture show, and routinely scanning the pages of *Wallpaper** and *GQ*.

Even Patek Philippe, while insisting its museum is its main source of inspiration, confesses the Creative Director is a regular subscriber to trend news services. Other regular subscribers to trend information services include Ebel and Maurice Lacroix, whose Product Director Sandro Reginelli's regular reading list includes McKinsey's quarterly business reports.

(Above left) TAG Heuer's Stéphane Linder is an unabashed subscriber to Worth Global Style Network, which enables him to keep TAG's product development fresh and in tune with fashion's next trends. The Monaco Vintage Gulf Edition pictured here (limited to 4,000 pieces, £2,500) updates last year's Steve McQueen racing-suit scheme with an edgy new combination of colours - in tribute to the livery adorning the Porsche-Gulf 917K driven by McQueen in *Le Mans* (1970), but also in keeping with the current retro Seventies look.

(Above centre) The wealthy are stealthy this year, as luxury brands increasingly venture away from bling bling. Maurice Lacroix is one of many getting sinister at Basel 2007, with a dark version of last year's Pontos Décentrique GMT in titanium. Product Director, Sandro Reginelli's architectural tendencies are apparent in the multi-layered, multi-textured, three-dimensional dial.

(Above right) "We cannot make watches ... without linking them with the trends," says Zenith mastermind Thierry Nataf. Whatever the trends are, last year's headturning Defy range proved they're far removed from anything else on the current watch landscape. If anything, this year sees the Xtreme models make an even bigger impact, bringing pink gold into the formula.

(Below) Italian stationary and pen designer Giuliano Mazzuoli devoured books and magazines seeking inspiration for his own watch, until he realised this would only lead to a derivative design. Eventually, it was a pressure gauge ('manometro' in Italian) that provided the necessary 'lightbulb moment'. The recent chronograph model from the Manometro brand (£3,300) is powered by a Dubois Dépraz calibre.



So what has prompted this surge of interest in trends?

For one thing, a constant craving for newness is putting pressure on cycles of consumption. "Women no longer buy a Louis Vuitton bag and expect it to last many years - they buy this season's bag," says Mark Tungate, Paris-based marketing journalist and author of *Fashion Brands: Branding Style from Armani to Zara* (Kogan Page, 2005). "Many watchmakers now compete in this same luxury accessory and fashion space. So they should be aware of the latest trends in colour, texture and form."

Heightened interest in trends can be explained by three factors, according to Tom Savigar, Trends Director at the Future Laboratory, a consultancy founded in 2001 that counts Orange, Nike and Thomas Pink amongst its clients. "The mainstreaming of luxury and premium goods; a climate where global trends dominate alongside a simultaneous need for differentiation; and finally, consumers being more marketing-savvy than ever all means that companies have a greater desire for consumers' intricate needs," he says. "In a time of fast-changing trends, legacy, heritage and authenticity are not enough."

Enlisting experts to forecast what will sell from one season to the next and then running with those trends minimises financial risk: "New collections take at least a year to develop and another to market and advertise," says TAG's Linder.

"Consumers are now highly disloyal to brands and jump from fashion to fashion and object of desire to object of desire extremely rapidly," adds Mark Tungate.

Create, not copy

But if this all smacks of calculations so precise, you'd rather see them directed towards horological accuracy than towards profit forecasts, you wouldn't be alone. "The words 'trend agency' are banned at Girard-Perregaux," says an initially sceptical Philippe Maurette, Director General of the Sowind Group, which owns G-P, adding that creatives are encouraged to visit contemporary art exhibits instead. "The luxury industry is not a mass-market space like fashion," says Maurette. He emphasises these are thoughts he shares completely with



Boucheron's new watch collaboration with Girard-Perregaux will appear in a later issue of *QP*. For now, the Parisian jeweller's versatile contemporary chic can be admired in combination with luxury cellphone brand Vertu - proving how well seemingly disparate design philosophies can gel. 'Signature Cobra' is limited to eight unique pieces (£189,000). Note the bezel and keys in rose gold - a 'hot' metal for watch and jewellery design (see Zenith's new Defy models).



Designed for Tiffany & Co. by 'starchitect' Frank Gehry, these 'Torque' bangles (from £415) translate one of many recurring forms from the Canadian's oeuvre.



(Left) Ebel's Villa Turque in La Chaux-de-Fonds, which now serves as the brand's PR base, was acquired in 1986. Originally designed in 1916 by legendary modernist Le Corbusier for a wealthy local entrepreneur, its combination of straight and gentle curves continue to inspire Ebel's design process. (Photo: Fondation Le Corbusier)

(Above) Ebel's new 1911 'Discovery' (£2,250) - "younger brother" to the prestigious 1911 BTR line launched in 2006 (see Issue 21). Slightly smaller and more overtly sporty, it is powered by a COSC-certified ETA movement, unlike the three proprietary calibres used for BTR, making the Discovery and Ebel as a whole more accessible to young men with a taste for mechanical watchmaking.

Boucheron President, Jean-Christophe Bédos, the man with whom he is launching a collection of Boucheron watches containing Girard-Perregaux movements.

Bédos is similarly unequivocal. He believes being on-trend is far less important than creating "beautiful, relevant and long-lasting" objects. He also urges his creatives to absorb culture while immersing themselves in the Boucheron archives, "to create, not copy".

Likewise, Zenith President, Thierry Nataf claims to be a resolutely in-house man. The mastermind of the Zenith Design Studio, responsible for all product development, communications and marketing from concept down to execution, he eschews the need for external consultants of any kind. "I am a man living in his time. My products are the image of what is going on now, not of what used to be," he maintains, though admitting that, "fashion is the instantaneous mirror of culture, society, human being. Therefore, we cannot make watches - even *haute horlogerie* watches - without linking them with the trends."

All of which suggests that what some of the most creative brains in today's watch industry do share in common - whether they employ trend services or not - is an awareness that the culture around them, not just history, has a definite bearing on what they do.

Why else would Max Büsser admit that the winding rotor of MB&F's Horological Machine No. 1 was actually influenced by

childhood recollections of a weapon from 1970s Japanese anime series *UFO Robot Grendizer*? And why would Jaeger-LeCoultre, a maker of predominantly conservative-looking watches, hook-up with an off-beat Los Angeles streetwear designer to come up with a limited-edition Reverso attached to a leather bomber jacket, sold at London fashion mecca, Brown's last year? (See Issue 17's News section.)

Transporting design knowledge from one field to another is pretty common and well-respected nowadays - think architect Frank Gehry for Tiffany or Boucheron for Vertu phones. And currently, watches are flirting with design influences from fashion, cars and architecture.

Ebel prides itself on its connection to 20th-century architect Le Corbusier via Villa Turque, the brand's home in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Its modernist lines and curves do indeed recur throughout the brand's collection to good effect. Maurice Lacroix's Reginelli also brings his architectural tendencies into watches, and the key designer behind MB&F's Horological Machine No 1, Eric Giroud, is an architect by training and a contemporary art connoisseur.

Elsewhere, artist and designer Giuliano Mazzuoli has come up with Manometro, calling it "not so much a watch as a pressure gauge for the wrist" - this from a former Seventies Alfa Romeo racing driver who made his name with contemporary stationery designs for New York's MoMA and a range of pens inspired by ten-pin bowling pins and coffeemakers.



"We don't follow any brand DNA..." Maximilian Büsser and his friends' first 'Horological Machine' is engineered by British watchmaker Peter Speake-Marin. The seven-day power reserve is charged by a winding rotor inspired by the crescent-shaped blades of Grendizer's 'Double Harken' weapon from Seventies anime *UFO Robot Grendizer*. See for yourself: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grendizer>

"In a time of fast-changing trends, legacy, heritage and authenticity are not enough."

True to form

Watch purists may view links between watches, fashion and architecture as lightweight. But in some cases, certainly at the very high end, this rapprochement helps to further elevate watches into the realm of art, which, unlike mere whimsical trend, is enduring.

As Maximilian Büsser sees it, "We are not aiming to please the majority at MB&F. We are putting our guts into our work without any commercial considerations. We don't follow any brand DNA - we believe that's true art."

The fact that watch industry leaders are looking to the future and at the world around them - with or without the help of trend services - is thoroughly refreshing news for an industry often bogged down in history. At a time when people are more design-savvy than ever, this is a recognition that watch brands want to

avoid being insular, that they are committed to designing objects with longevity, and that good design is about creating watches that don't just tell the time, but more than that: they reflect the time in which they were conceived. The challenge is never to compromise on individuality, creativity and technical innovation in the process.

But it is hardly surprising that some watch brands view trend agencies and news services with scepticism. Luxury brands typically see themselves as trend-setters, not followers. Many only started using external advertising agencies very recently. Nevertheless, the Chief Executive of Nelly Rodi claims that even though many brands deny using his company's trend books, photocopies can be found in many designers' studios. Who knows if some watch brands are trying to underplay their outside influences? 

As you may have guessed, an emerging trend for watches this year is the sinister and stealthy aesthetic, using black metal and rubber. Hautlence's new HLS07 jump-hour model (below; SFr.53,000) and Corum's new Admiral's Cup Tides 48 (bottom) both exemplify this dark progression.

