

Millenary Man

AP's brand identity is in Octavio Garcia's hands

⌚ Designers are often inclined to cite their influences and watch designers especially so. Broadly speaking (and apologies to those and their key figures who fall outside this necessarily abbreviated list) these circle like so many Heathrow-bound Swiss shuttles around the likes of Le Corbusier, Raymond Loewy, the Bauhaus school, and if a 21st-century icon is required, perhaps Philippe S+ark (sic) or Jonathan Ive. But surely no one could call on the progenitors of late-Eighties Chicago house music as having set them on the path to world-class design in one of the most cosseted industries on Earth. Could they? *QP* shares a Maserati with Audemars Piguet's 'eyes'...

Bill Prince

Consider the career to date of Octavio Garcia, 37-year-old Design Manager at Audemars Piguet. A native of Chicago, Garcia is, furthermore, a product of the Second City's infamous Southside, where, for the first half of his life he was steeped in its gang culture; specifically, the Latin Kings, whose ranks Garcia joined as a teenager, and which, via many a scrape with rival neighbourhood outfits, drew him into the aforementioned house scene.

"I was a gangster," Octavio tells *QP* without menace or apology over lunch in the incongruous (given the topic under discussion) surroundings of Ceccone's, an upmarket Italian in London's Mayfair. "And I suppose at one point you wake up one morning and you say it's time to do something with your life. And I'd met a lot of Europeans clubbing in Chicago. The house scene back then was just amazing and meeting all these people was a revelation."

The man charged with leading Audemars Piguet's brand development and product design, Octavio Garcia. The 37-year-old from Chicago first started in watches at Omega in 1998, moving to AP five years later, where he has revived the dormant Millenary range.

Although originally inspired by his hometown's celebrated skyline to become an architect (still no mean leap for a fellow with blood-curdling stories of gang violence to share over lobster linguine and a flinty white), Garcia set his sights even further afield in 1993 when he enrolled at the Art Center of Design (Europe), the better to follow his girlfriend (now wife) back to her native Switzerland. From there, a chance encounter with a fellow seeing a BMW in half introduced him to the School of Industrial Design. Graduating in 1998 and in need of a job, he answered a newspaper ad and went to work as the Head Designer at Omega.

In 2003, at the grand old age of 35, another newspaper ad led directly to Garcia being hired as Design Manager at Audemars Piguet, where he has been responsible for the rebranding of the Le Brassus *manufacture* (albeit within limits - Audemars' forest green remains the corporate colour somewhat to Garcia's enlightened bemusement), as well as advancing one of the more credible marketing synergies in the motoring/horological field - the Maserati Millenary.

Thus it was in the back of a £75,000 Maserati Quattroporte that *QP* enjoyed one of its more salubrious trips across London, accompanying the Helmut Lang-clad Garcia on a fact-finding mission around the capital's design landmarks, while discussing the various ways open to a designer with sights set beyond the cloistered world of complications and casebacks.



(Above) Garcia incorporated F1 driver Rubens Barrichello's comments into the design process for the brand ambassador's special edition Royal Oak Offshore. The limited series of 1,650 watches includes this titanium version (£16,200), whose counter hands come in the Barrichello's national colours - the green, yellow and blue of Brazil. The eight bezel screws resemble engine screws, the bezel joint mimics a ventilated brake disc, and the pushpieces are shaped like air extractors.

(Left) Discussing the goods at Marcus, New Bond Street (from left): the author, Marcus' Caroline Kemp, Garcia and the Editor.



QP: Prior to joining Audemars Piguet, had you been a fan?

Octavio Garcia: I wasn't necessarily a fan but I was familiar with the watches. Especially the Royal Oak Concept piece. It was an earthquake for the watch industry. I saw then that there was potential elsewhere!

How are things changing now that you are in charge?

The best way to understand the history of the brand and the direction the brand wants to go is to be inside it and to live it. Trying to explain that to an outside designer is not always easy. So everything has been centralised, even the jewellery design. One of the advantages we have is working directly with [AP CEO] Georges-Henri Meylan. It allows us to understand what the corporate strategy is and also the vision. Also, we speak regularly with our regional sales managers and they give us input from their countries, and the trends that are happening. All this information is filtered, obviously, by Mr Meylan and together we use that information to better aim our various projects.

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How do you reconcile an understanding and responsibility for the heritage of Audemars Piguet with doing something of your own?

It's important that we conserve the DNA of each collection because at the end of the day that's what our customers are looking for. But if you take for example the Royal Oak collection, we are using different materials and we are collaborating with personalities like Rubens Barrichello.

What, apart from the obvious marketing synergies, does an ambassador like Rubens bring to AP?

Can you quantify that relationship?

Well, obviously it's difficult to meet with someone like Rubens regularly and to show him our development process, but he was involved in the sense

(Right) The first thing Garcia did at AP was to breathe new life into the oval Millenary range by using the watch for the company's first Maserati tie-in, launched in 2004. (Steel Dual Time Millenary Maserati pictured, limited to 900 pieces; SFr.19,500.)

that Mr Meylan - who knows him very well - had the chance to present the sketches and direction we wanted to take with the watch and Rubens gave us some general input on the way he imagined the theme of the watch. He really wanted us to get extremely into the detail of his car. That's something he suggested to us very strongly.

Does that sometimes feel as if you're sharing the job of design?

Not at all. Very quickly the personalities realise it's not that easy! It's a complex process and there are a lot of technical constraints, so at some point I think they realise that there are also time constraints.

Who are you designing for?

I like to think that I'm working for Audemars Piguet, building the brand and building the brand image so I would say every time I approach a new product, Audemars Piguet is the key for me.

Does that mean, as a designer, you must first sublimate the ego?

No, not really. Because at the end of the day it's a team effort, as corny as that may sound, and you give an impulse but it's part of a whole process. But it's always a real pleasure when you see someone wearing the watch that you've designed!





**Millenary MC12
Technical Specs**
 Ref. 26069PT.00.D028CR.01
 Limited to 150 pieces
Movement: Calibre 2884
 tourbillon and chronograph;
 hand-wound twin barrels;
 21,600 vph; 30 jewels;
 336 parts; anodised
 aluminium bridges
Power reserve: 240 h
Case: 950 platinum;
 diameter, 47 mm
Water resistance: 20 m
Price: TBC

(Above) Demonstrating considerable audacity in the design department was last year's Millenary MC12, launched in tribute to AP's association with the 'Versione Corse' MC12 supercars taking part in the FIA GT races - Maserati's first return to the track in 37 years. The new watch has blue and white colours matching those of the road-going Grand Tourer pictured here, with indexes derived from the MC12's dash, and openworked dial at 3 o'clock mimicking the bonnet's air outlets.

More and more watch designs seem to be driven by market forces rather than a pure design ethos. How does that sit with what you do?

It's true at the end of the day you can get the feeling that you've done what others have done. But I find more and more people are looking for more idiosyncrasy in their purchases. And on the one hand you have the idea of offering a new experience to our clientele. But on the other hand you inherit the collections - so you have to work with these two elements. But now that I'm overseeing the corporate identity of the brand, I must admit most of my inspiration comes from places like museums, which

are so strong at presenting objects. I think it's more this kind of environment that inspires me rather than other brands.

It's a particularly febrile time in the market for high-end sports watches. How do you cope with all the 'noise' surrounding the launch of something like, say, the Zenith Defy?

Well one of the ways is by collaborating with personalities with strong themes. If you take Rubens Barrichello as an example: his is a strong universe. So that allows us to create new products like the Rubens Barrichello piece and the Maserati Millenary.

Another approach is to really plan-out a trajectory for a collection. If you take Millenary for example, we really thought-out the process of the oval time, what it means, where we want to take it, who we want to speak to.

Is the Millenary customer different to the traditional Audemars Piguet customer?

I imagine it's not someone who is going to buy a Royal Oak or Offshore; it's somebody that's maybe more fashion-conscious, that likes sophisticated products and is design savvy.

What role does Maserati play in this?

Well, I think as the Royal Oak Offshore is to a Hummer, then Millenary is to a Maserati;

it's a sophisticated, gentleman-driver's car, understated but with a Latin spirit. It's a very nice balance of these two elements - aggressive and sophisticated at the same time. And I think Millenary reflects that.

You clearly adore cars...

I love cars! Growing up, I loved classic American cars like the Shelby Cobra. Amazing...

Were you able to bring any of this to bear on your relationship with Maserati? Did you discuss ideas with the designers there?

With Maserati I had more contact with the marketing side, so they gave me more of a commercial vision of how they see things and they shared with me some of the

developments their designers are doing with the cars.

Are there similarities?

Absolutely. Maserati had a racing heritage at the beginning and they only built cars for racing, like the Maserati MC12, and in a similar way we have unique, rare products [see last year's 'MC12' tourbillon concept]. Also Audemars Piguet is very much about function - it's always a balance, and a very delicate balance. Sometimes we are tempted to go into something non-functional but sexy, but we always try to keep in mind that as industrial designers it's important for a chronograph to be readable, even if it's off-centred and has a funky dial - you have to be able to use it. We are very aware of that.

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(Right) The blue, anodised aluminium bridges visible through the Millenary MC12's sapphire caseback echo the struts found on the road-going grand tourer's 700 bhp V12 engine (below).





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So what do you think of Maserati’s oval dashboard clock?
It’s integral to the car. It’s just as legendary as the grille. I wouldn’t imagine changing it. At one point we were speaking to them about doing a Millenary piece, but it just wouldn’t work, because it’s such an icon.

Much like the Royal Oak. Is it your favourite AP?
Every once in a while I’ll throw on a Millenary, but yes, it is one of my favourites. I think it’s become a very recognisable piece: it’s bold, and if you look at the approach they took at the time, it’s very audacious. It’s so recognisable; it’s become a status symbol. It’s like a Corbusier from the Thirties. It’s timeless.

From Todd Terry to Corbusier? Only *QP* can do this! ◉

Bill Prince is Deputy Editor of GQ.