

Postcards

Wish you were there? QP's writers report back from the April fairs



How on Earth to assimilate and digest another year's barrage of new watches? As they recover from a hectic fortnight racing around the expansive halls of Baselworld and Geneva's SIHH, your regular authors give some first impressions of the scene that was set for 2006; watches that stole their attention from the thousands of others (for either the right or wrong reasons) and the trends that prevailed from stand to stand. Silicon, titanium, red gold, rubber, diamond overkill, tourbillon overkill... there's something for everyone here.



Rude Health

James Gurney

There seems to be an ever-present crew of Jeremiahs in the watch industry ready to foretell doom at every opportunity. The fact that the industry is (at least superficially) doing rather well thank you very much is all the more impressive given that the Jeremiahs usually have a point - whether about over-reliance on the Swatch Group, over-production of tourbillons or any one of a number of desperate portents. Between Baselworld and the SIHH, the level of creativity on display was impressive; all the more so for a good selection of misses, howlers and absolute shockers. But to précis my impressions, I offer the following:

How to arrive at Baselworld and the SIHH? AMG 55 CLS - the IWC version of course. Such a sensible solution to the business of getting press packs back to the office, and just about the most civilised and discreet grand-tourer around. So discreet that only the best-informed eyes even glanced twice as we returned along the Old Kent Road. QP is obviously in no position to comment on its speed-limit shattering performance and road holding, but we did manage a respectable (for a super-charged V8) 18 mpg.

Why are they not more famous? De Bethune is part of the select band that is pushing the technological boundaries of watchmaking and is doing so with a panache that is all its own.

Genuinely surprised and impressed: Seiko's Credor Spring Drive Sonnerie. Just in case you thought Seiko had no real ambitions when it comes to the highest levels of watchmaking.



(Above) Seiko's revolutionary Spring Drive was one of last year's big stories, and it should stay in the headlines with this year's Credor Sonnerie Spring Drive (ca £72,000). Its hour-striking function chimes a miniaturised Japanese 'hanging bell'.

Double-take moment: Yes, that really was organ-playing scholar Claude-Daniel Proellochs at De Witt, a mere seven months after retiring from Vacheron Constantin. Truly a meeting of the understated and the over-the-top.

Just right (nearly): Talking of Vacheron, its new Platinum Secrets Patrimony was one of the more perfect designs on display, marred only by a 'Platinum 950' mark on the dial - an unnecessary obtrusion that even the new CEO Carlos Torres admitted was, at best, a beauty spot.

Turning the corner: Parmigiani's Kalpa Due is the watch that books the Fleurier house's place at the top table.

How to design watches: Bedat & Co.

Relentlessly clever: Breitling: the Prince on steroids, subterranean parties and a very large fish bowl.

Should I have been more honest about..? Tiret, Tom Bolt's Dunhill Parody Stone 'King Arthur' visor watch (the video was cool though), Harry Winston and Greubel Forsey's Opus VI and Glashütte's ladies collection.

P.S. I still want a Breguet La Tradition.



Breitling for Bentley's rectangular Flying B made one of the biggest waves at Basel this year (red-gold model pictured; £14,555).

Breitling was relentlessly clever, with its Flying B (the Prince on steroids), subterranean parties and a very large fish bowl.

Rich Pickings

Simon de Burton

Like most people who attended Baselworld and SIHH back-to-back, the majority of the tens of thousands of watches on show have now blended into one - but that still leaves more than enough to reflect upon

Best of Basel: Harry Winston Rare Timepieces Opus VI. Developed with Greubel Forsey in a period of just six months. Imaginative and exquisitely finished, it belongs in the Science Museum.

Best of SIHH: Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso grande complication à triptyque. A triumph of micro-engineering and a fitting tribute to a 75-year-old horological icon.

Top five shopping list (if only): Cartier square-cased monopoussoir chronograph, Vacheron Constantin Malte

Chronographe 'Excellence Platine', Patek Philippe's new World Time with 'ring' hour hand, de Bethune DB15, Panerai's unbranded and über-cool Radiomir '1936 California'.

Most improved brand: Maurice Lacroix.

Best horological accessory: 'The Gentleman's Corner' shown by Glashütte: combined cocktail cabinet, humidor, hi-fi, TV and watchwinder.

Largest watch, bar none: BRM MT. Based on a V8 engine block and almost as big.

Best quote: "I visited Baselworld and was bored within 20 minutes. Everyone is copying one another." *Richard Mille.*

Best use of timber: Chopard Leopard Paradis minute repeater with marquetry dial made from 280 pieces of wood from 12 different trees. Two made, SFr.461,000 each. Both sold.

Trend Watching

Bill Prince

Evolution not revolution seemed to be the theme of both Basel and Geneva - brands consolidating on recent launches or simply keeping their powder dry while awaiting future announcements. That said, there was still plenty to like and a lot of trends to take away: the growing importance of ladies' watches boasting mechanical movements and mother-of-pearl dials one being of the strongest; the continuing domination of tourbillons as *the* haute horological signifier being still the most evident.

Trends detected beyond the cases and sapphire crystal: a move for the top brands away from multiples and in-store boutiques to stand-alone retail sites, allowing creative control and putting blue water between themselves and their competitors. Among the fashion brands, a concerted effort to improve designs, construction and credibility. Hedi Slimane's PVD Chiffre Rouge was a standout, as were the new watches produced by Hugo Boss, Gucci, Armani and Burberry.

Geneva, by contrast, re-iterated Richemont's brands' commitment to selling a story as much as a timepiece, viz IWC's new Pilot series, Van Cleef & Arpel's impressive men's pieces joining in their centenary celebrations, and the ever-more impressive collection from Montblanc, fast devolving from its core writing instrument business. My watch of the fair though had to be Dunhill's Parody Stone. Three Lions on a watch, anyone?

Bill Prince is Deputy Editor of British GQ



The most mentioned watch of this year's postcards was Jaeger-LeCoultre's Reverso grande complication à triptyche - launched to celebrate the Reverso's 75th anniversary this year. Its 18 complications span all three faces of the legendary model. The third face is remarkable for its unique location: a perpetual calendar in the Reverso carriage.

The departure of Maximilian Büsser from Harry Winston Rare Timepieces last year left 2006's Opus project hanging in the balance. However, newly appointed Managing Director Hamdi Chatti took up the baton with relish. The New York jeweller's sixth haute horlogerie collaboration is with Greubel Forsey, and has spawned an adaptation of the duo's 30° double tourbillon (€413,100).

Dashes of Decadence

Claire Adler

There is an undeniable mood of über-luxury in the air - luxury for the sake of luxury. I was even irreverent enough to burst out laughing in the face of the charming new CEO of Harry Winston Rare Timepieces, Hamdi Chatti, when he ushered me into a private room at Baselworld, whispering in excitement that his initial dream for the new Opus VI was to create a tourbillon without time indication. Fortunately, a wise advisor turned him off this idea. But a stunning waterproof tourbillon on a rubber strap from the same brand proved that a dash of decadence is thoroughly of the moment.

Meanwhile, the ongoing blurring of the sexes continues. If women once saw watches as mere arm-candy, they are now much more connected with what goes on inside their timepieces. Conversely, Western men are showing a growing interest in diamonds, as evidenced at Zenith, Patek Philippe and Parmigiani.

On the other hand, IWC has brought out its most feminine watches yet. Kurt Klaus, the company's master watchmaker for over three decades, almost sneered when I questioned him at last year's SIHH about IWC and women's watches, insisting that "IWC is about men's watches." Personally, I'm all for this year's satin-strapped Ingenieur.



TAG Heuer is consolidating its range, adding improvements and squeezing all the juice out of past winners, rather than showering us with more showstoppers.

(Above) Tom Bolt's latest adventurous design for Dunhill is a far cry from his Motorities pieces (in white gold, £8,700; platinum limited edition, £19,500). (Bottom left) Parmigiani Fleurier launched the Kalpa Due (née 'Tonda') at SIHH 2006, which displays a new and unusual round shape, underscored by Parmigiani's four trademark lugs. (Rose-gold model, £8,480 (39mm) and £9,570 (42mm). (Bottom Right) TAG Heuer's Monaco LS ('Linear Seconds') was designed to echo 2004's V4 (finally nearing completion), and contains 2005's Calibre 360 chronograph movement, accurate to one hundredth of a second (approx. £10,000).





Appliance of Science

Timothy Treffry

My top memory of April's fairs is sitting for a few minutes (on the ground) in the pilot's seat of an elderly Junkers airplane during the promotion of IWC's updated but still oddly named pilot's watch, the 'Spitfire'. No WW2 Spitfire pilot ever had an IWC watch. The heroes of the Battle of Britain had Smiths English Clocks watches, and Omegas said to have been smuggled out of Switzerland in a diplomatic bag.

Setting promotional puff aside, there is real excitement for the 'propeller head' watch variant. Ulysse Nardin has moved its new Dual Ulysse escapement from the Freak to the rather special watch produced for its 160th anniversary. Its delicate wheels delight the eye. Audemars Piguet also revealed details of a new escapement and Jaeger-LeCoultre allowed brief glimpses of a version it will launch in May. All these escapements are more efficient than the classic lever escapement and do not require lubrication. [See Timothy's article on p.86 for an in-depth exploration of new materials in watchmaking.] The excitement here is in the shift in the industry from cranking-out mechanical watches based on 20th century technology to having the confidence to invest in new ideas and leading-edge materials science.

(Top) Pounding the halls of Baselworld was a much more interesting affair this year, thanks to Breitling's huge sea-bass tank.

(Left) Glashütte Original's homage to the 500 year-old city of Glashütte is five exclusively designed timepieces, contained in a 1.15 m high piece of furniture. 'The Gentlemen's Corner' (£119,440, including the watches) is coated with a black piano lacquer, offering slightly more than just five watchwinders. When the lid is lifted, a thin film transistor display becomes visible. Two drawers keep diverse utensils for watch care, as well as the remote control for the DVD and audio systems. Fans of good cigars can keep them in a humidor, which comes with a selection of Cohiba cigars. The bar is complete with an 18-year-old bottle of Scottish single-malt whisky.



Every time I find a watch I think I like, I see one nearly the same made by a different brand with the same gadgets, and just as expensive, only with better girls... I thought life was supposed to be easy for the rich.

Social Chameleon

Nicholas Foulkes

I think it is 15 years since I attended my first Basel fair and in a way its presence on my calendar is rather comforting - there was a Basel fair before me and I hope that, even though I intend to live to a remarkable age, there will be a Basel when I am gone.

Given the large number of pre-Basel and Geneva reveals, the fairs are as much of a social as a professional event and this year was memorable for giving Simon de Burton, Maria Doulton and Ed the opportunity to drive their own private Gumball Rally at the wheel of a Georges Kern-spec AMG. I trust that QP has set up a charitable fund to meet the cost of those speeding fines...

At Basel, the highlights were the Breitling party (with its subterranean setting, topless dancers and fire-meets-ice sci-fi theming), the Breitling stand with its fishtank and the new Breitling for Bentley timepiece - a rectangular (yes, rectangular) Flying B jump-hour with the dimensions of a paving stone. De Grisogono was also playing the jump-hour game with some skill, viz the FG One while Chopard presented a mind-blowing minute repeater with marquetry dial.

Horologically, the SIHH was particularly diverting, with G-P's three-crystal-bridge Laureato Evo3 tourbillon in titanium case and platinum bezel managing to strike a highly contemporary note of stealth wealth. At Jaeger the large triple-face Reverso with 18 complications was hard to ignore, while Octavio, Head Designer at Audemars Piguet, boosted the revival of the Millenary.

(Above right) Almost as big as the V8 engine that inspired it: the BRM MT (£5,500).

(Right) Bedat's perfectly designed and proficiently realised '888' with pink-gold bezel (£3,600).



