

# MHR



The MHR (AKA 'Mahara') Sparviero S.79. Common to all MHR watches were anti-reflective mineral glass, and a screw-down crown providing water resistance to 30 metres. The watches were available with stainless-steel bracelets or straps in leather, denim or linen, with either deployment buckles or folding clasps.



(Left) Your author ended up missing MHR's initial run of the Sparviero and purchased this near-identical model with date beneath a 'cyclops' window at the 3 o'clock position, and with the same pink dial.  
(Right) A watch for the early-nineties, pre-VW-owned incarnation of Bugatti was made by MHR. This gold model was up for sale at Christie's in December, but failed to sell.

## The first of QP's new historical series reflects on the unappreciated legacy of 'Mahara'

Ken Kessler

One day, a book will be written about the brave brands that kept the faith during the years between the arrival of quartz and the revival of mechanical watches. If you weren't a watch enthusiast 15 or 20 years ago, you would be unaware of the gloom that beset the industry in the wake of quartz - especially given the industry's current hyperactivity. Equally, you would be unaware of the courage shown by watchmakers who became company founders during this period, making mechanical timepieces in the face of a battery-driven onslaught. People such as Gerd-R Lang, who launched Chronoswiss, or Dr Luigi Macaluso, who revived Girard-Perregaux, deserve our thanks. Among them should be included an elegant Genevoise antique jewellery expert named Dominique-Marie Pibouveau.

In 1987, Pibouveau decided to add a line of watches to her already-successful jewellery business. Her partner was Franco Giolla, a highly-regarded jewellery designer. The two of them created a range of affordable watches that pre-dated nearly every other brand's expression of the qualities that dominate the watch market to this day: tasteful, intelligent exploitation of 'retro' touches, larger-than-average cases, huge numerals and the use of atypical colours (for dials *and* straps) to add elements of both glamour and fun.

Think about it: fully six years before Panerai was relaunched in Florence, Pibouveau's brand, MHR (also called 'Mahara') offered watches with dials based on those found in pre-World War II aircraft. The now-obligatory, over-sized 3-6-9-12 numerals seen on just about every brand's mock-military model since Panerai reappeared was first revived on the long-forgotten MHR watches. Because MHR was new and not the reincarnation of some forgotten marque, it never purported to be what it was not. This made MHR far more honest in every way than some of the names that have been resuscitated as if the intervening 200 years never happened.

### Instant hit

If any lack of 'prehistory' might suggest that the brand was designed for fashion rather than any concern for horology, think again. With the exception of one or two men's and ladies' models fitted with quartz, all of the watches used ETA or Piguet automatic mechanical movements. What made the MHRs stand out from the other affordable mechanical watches of the day were the cases: solid, robust, and looking and feeling like they would withstand any punishment you could inflict.

They were an instant hit, with the company selling 5,000 watches in the first year. Of course, the Japanese and the Italians took to



The Sparviero was joined by the Bleu Leman (navy-blue dial and blue denim strap) (left); Black Storm (right), Red Devil (red dial and strap), Papier Mais, Sparviero Rose, Green Pepper (dark green dial with yellow numerals), and other variants including 'reversed out' Sparvieros with grey dial and pink numerals.

them first, and it was not long before MHR realised that, by virtue of keen pricing, its customers kept coming back for more. Enter the next clever innovation: fun with colours.

The defining model was an hours-minutes-seconds classic called the Sparviero S.79. Fitted with an ETA 2824-2 calibre, the Sparviero boasted a salmon-pink dial and black numerals, and a leather strap with suede lining. An Irish linen strap was also supplied for warm weather usage. The hour hand featured the same 'Mercedes' motif as seen on certain Rolex, while the sweep-seconds hand bore a large disc to add to the legibility. With an overall diameter of 39.3 mm, it was considered large for its era. And with a SFr.1,530 price tag (call it circa £650), it was a giveaway. MHR's coolness even extended to the packaging: cardboard boxes that looked like miniature filing cabinets.

### Vanishing act

On 6th November 2000, *Swiss Watch News* published the announcement of a "Double Acquisition for Franck Muller," and how the company had "plans to develop its brand portfolio." The group acquired, at the end of August, the assets "of the Genevan manufacturer Mahara Montres (MHR)," including the retail outlet in Geneva. "These 'middle range' watches will benefit from new design."

Or so the brands' fans had hoped. From that point on, there was silence. Muller did, indeed, develop new brands, including Pierre

Kunz and the absurdly named European Company Watch, but nothing was heard again from MHR. Shortly after, the website closed. I knew it was all over when the canniest watch retailer I know told me that he had hidden away a tray full of MHRs as a future investment. For all of the pieces sold, MHR has practically vanished. Not even eBay produces more than the occasional MHR for sale, so it looks like the collectors are hanging on to them for now.

Alas, it is probably too late to revive the brand, especially if 3-6-9-12 is truly MHR's primary calling card. Why? Because 3-6-9-12s are everywhere. Panerai has re-established itself as one of the most coveted makes on the market and Bell & Ross has done an amazing job providing the market with an entire selection of 3-6-9-12s, albeit at the next price point above MHR's original market placement. As for colours, Chronoswiss recently launched its ultra-functional Timemaster in fetching shades of yellow, blue, green and other hues, while Franck Muller has always had a salmon dial or two in its range. And you can't escape orange dials this year. Or coloured linen straps.

So, the next time anyone tells you there's anything new under the sun, please spare a thought for MHR - the brand that pioneered today's cool details nearly two decades ago. But remember, too, the well-known aphorism about pioneers: they are also the ones who got shot in the backside with the Indians' arrows. ○