

Resurfaced

Diving watch veteran Dino Zei is back on the scene

Ken Kessler



Anonimo has wasted no time in asserting itself as 'the other oversized Italian diving watch.' And while similar instances would suggest a whiff of the wannabe, Anonimo has a bunch of aces up its sleeve. Unlike repellent £200 quartz surrogates from fashion houses that should know better, Anonimo is to Panerai what Lamborghini is to Ferrari; not a substitute, nor a rival, but an alternative. Moreover, the Florentine watchmaker has allayed all remaining doubts by turning up to Baselworld this year with Dino Zei in tow - CEO of pre-Richemont Panerai for no less than 27 years, and now the eponymous collaborator on a brand new range of diving watches.



Following the original 50 pairs of blue-dialled Nemos, the second-wave Nemo, limited to 100 pieces, is pictured here. The automatic Valjoux 7750 chronograph movement replaces the original manual-wind 7760, and is visible through a witty design motif on the caseback - a diver's helmet window.



It was enough that Anonimo employed pre-Richemont Panerai watchmakers, staying true to its Florentine roots. Equally, the brand can rightfully boast of its patented crown-locking system, its proprietary watchstrap technology, its fabulously cool looks, its exceptional value for money and its inherent rarity. Indeed, the latter is becoming an increasingly crucial concern for many watch aficionados, as the passion for fine timepieces spreads.

Anonimo produces far fewer watches than its Florentine neighbour and you are unlikely to run into many others wearing any Anonimo - let alone a similar Anonimo.

Only now though - over eight years since its foundation - has the brand unveiled its secret weapon. And the militaristic tone to this metaphor is apt: Anonimo has entered into collaboration with none other than the legendary Dino Zei.

Zei will already be familiar to *QP* readers who saw the review of his history of Panerai in Issue 11. For those who did not, they should know that Zei was *capo* of Panerai for over a quarter-century prior to its acquisition by the Richemont Group (then Vendôme). Anonimo securing Zei's services is not unlike TAG Heuer seducing Jack Heuer out of retirement. Credibility by the ship-load. And now that the Zei name is gracing a line of watches, let us just say that Anonimo has leapfrogged into the giddiest heights of ultra-desirable alpha-male wrist attire.

In the Navy

The venerable Col Dottore Dino Zei was born in Viterbo in 1931 and entered the Italian Naval Academy at the age of 19. In 1958, having attained the rank of Naval Weapons Officer, he graduated in Industrial Engineering at the University of Pisa. Zei's progress through the Navy was - possibly unbeknownst to him - priming him as ideal candidate for the post that would mark him as one of watch collecting's unsung heroes.

In 1968, he was assigned two concurrent positions in the Navy, as both Head of the Weapons and Explosives Section of the Navy

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Commandos and Divers Headquarters ("Teseo Tesei") and Head of the Ammunition Section of the Institute for Weapons, Ammunition and (deep breath) Missiles of the Standing Committee for the Experimentation on War Materials. To add to this in 1969, Zei became Director of the Centre of Studies of the Navy Commandos and Divers Headquarters. Those aware of Panerai's work in these fields can see why the future fit would be perfect.

Then, in 1972, after Giuseppe Panerai's death, Zei left the Navy to take up the management of Guido Panerai e Figlio - then a Florence-based company "engaged in important and extremely delicate work for the Special Units of the Navy." That year, he established Officine Panerai Srl and became Sole Director, taking over all the activities of Guido Panerai. He became Chairman of Officine Panerai SpA, until the watch division and trademark were sold to Vendôme in 1997. Thus, Zei was in charge of the brand during its 1993 revival, when he sanctioned the production of the first Panerai watches for civilian consumption, rather than just the Italian Navy. He remained in this position for the Panerai Sistemi SpA until 1999, when the business was transferred to the Bologna-based company Calzoni.

Back on the block

In retirement and bound by the terms of his agreement with Panerai's new owners not to engage in watchmaking for five years, it seemed as if that would be the end of Dino Zei's watch career. But as Anonimo's CEO Federico Massacesi informed *QP*, "When he was writing the book *La Panerai di Firenze*, Mr Zei felt a little bit of 'nostalgia' for the world of business - he was really missing it! As the terms of his agreement with Vendôme allowed him to use his name for watches, it seemed to him the best way to come out of retirement.

"He met with a couple of watch brands, with a view to creating a new line. But he soon decided that Anonimo was the closest to his concept of traditional, mechanical Florentine watchmaking. And, of course, he also liked the way we did business."



(Above left) The 74-year-old Dino Zei: custodian of Panerai from 1972 to 1999, and - now free of his termination contract's five-year 'lie-low' clause - "an integral part of Anonimo's design and technical team."

(Left) The caseback of the Jalea model (ref. 11002; £2,670) reveals a modified ETA 28362-2 with additional Candino module, which allows the model to show continuous seconds and the date on a dial at the 4 o'clock position.

(Above) The Nemo model (ref. 11001; £2,850), with polished case and black dial. The original Nemo models, sold in pairs, had blue dials and either satin or Ox-Pro blackened cases.





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In record time, Zei and Anonimo entered into an arrangement that would create distinct, new models to bear Zei’s name, to be sold alongside the Anonimo models in the Opera Meccana range. *QP* asked if there were specific aspects of the Dino Zei Anonimo watches that Zei always wanted to feature in Panerai, but did not or could not do at the time – especially in light of the fact that the Officine Panerai watches made in the early 1990s were emphatically reissues rather than new models.

“To tell you the truth,” explained Massaccesi, “I had a frighteningly short time to get the Dino Zei watches to market after I signed the agreement with Mr Zei. We barely had time to agree on the first collection that we introduced at Basel this year. So, in reality, we are working on Zei’s other ideas for wristwatches with future models.”

Massaccesi is too self-effacing: the initial releases ooze originality. Within months of showing the first model (the very limited manual Nemo chronograph sold in a tiny run of paired watches with differing dials) a family of four more models was unveiled. Characteristic of all the Dino Zei timepieces are mechanical movements and robust cases employing Anonimo’s well-proven production techniques – endorsed by skiing, rallying and diving professionals, rescue services and other ‘extreme’ watch users.

Long-term investment

As Massaccesi describes the appeal of the company’s new collection, he differentiates it from Anonimo’s main lines: “The Dino Zei models feature new case shapes and dial designs, as well as the use of advanced movements and rare calibres.” Dino Zei watches will not be restricted to the use of specific materials, but Massaccesi is intent on retaining core Anonimo values. “We are positioning Dino Zei timepieces in the category most frequented by serious and enthusiastic watch collectors, while staying true to the philosophy of value for money. This will ensure that enthusiasts of every category of ‘watch interest’ will be attracted to the Dino Zei line.”

Adding that bit of ‘Zei-ness’ to the range is easy, because Anonimo has already demonstrated an adventurous approach to materials and construction topologies – exactly like Zei’s attitude toward design. “The 2005 Dino Zei Collection is only the first expression of a long-term project whose goals are to employ advanced research and experimentation, along with finding new solutions in design and technology.”

So where does Zei himself come in? Well, it seems the veteran is a totally hands-on participant in the project, described by Massaccesi as “an integral part of our design and technical team, [who] is focused on the research and development for the Dino

Zei collection. Calling upon his vast experience and successes together with his rich cultural and entrepreneurial background, he employs his vision and goals to build and expand upon his documented legacy of Florentine watchmaking history.”

The line-up

Anonimo launched the range with a mouth-watering pair of watches, sold in sets and limited to 50 numbered examples. The handsome box contained a signed letter from Dino Zei and two manual-wind Nemo chronograph day-date watches. Both watches featured the witty Zei trademark on the back – as wry a design fillip as Dunhill’s Bobbyfinder: a diver’s helmet with the facemask drilled out and bearing a window to the Valjoux 7760 movement’s balance wheel.

Anonimo’s main specialty is its case design, and the original brace of Nemos featured three-part 43.5 mm AISI316 Plus steel cases, carved entirely from a stainless steel bar. To ensure water resistance to 12 ATM, the crown was screw-locked, the actuators were high-pressure push buttons. One of the pair had a polished and satin-finished case, with cyan dial, on an Anonimo Kodiak process tan strap (another innovation that allows the leather strap’s immersion in fresh and sea water for up to 24 hours). Partnering it was a second version with Anonimo’s patented Ox-Pro process-blackened case.

All of which is fine for 50 lucky collectors. But do not despair. Four new models, all with black dials and available separately, have followed the introductory pair, each model produced in runs of 100 pieces. The ‘second-wave’ Nemo, Jalea, Marea and Narvalo offer a variety of functions, all housed securely in the same, chunky case. Interestingly, the case shape is unlike anything from Anonimo’s typically cushion-shaped oeuvre, placing a sharply angled, circular dial window onto a flat, tapered baseplate. If anything, the inspiration behind this design is reflected by the clever diving-helmet window on the Nemo model’s caseback.

And on the subject of case variations, the effervescent Massaccesi actually let slip a small scoop for *QP* shortly before going to press, suggesting a ready willingness to deviate quite significantly from Anonimo’s established image. “Mr Zei has a lot of ideas – that’s the problem! We simply don’t have the resources for following his ideas as quickly as he comes up with them! But I can tell you this: we are developing a new case of 45 mm or 46 mm diameter. It will be based on the first Anonimo cases, but it is updated and will form a test-bed for new materials.” Beyond this however, Federico’s lips were sealed as tightly as an Anonimo Professional GMT’s case. ◊



(Above left) For the complications lover, the Marea (ref. 11003; £3,950) combines a flyback chronograph and a GMT hand, driven by a Jaquet 8112 module modified by Maison Jaquet SA, on a Valjoux 7750 base with additional Tricomplex module.

(Above right) The fourth new member of the Zei family, the Narvalo (ref. 11004; £3,600) uses an automatic Dubois Depraz 14000 module on an ETA 2892-2 base, modified with an additional Dubois Depraz module for small seconds counter and ‘big date’ calendar at the 12 o’clock position.

Further information: Anonimo Firenze UK, 14–16 Corn Market, Halifax, West Yorkshire HX1 1TH. Tel: 01422 369611
The English translation of Dino Zei’s *The Panerai in Florence – 150 years of history* is now available; £95 incl. p&p. Enquiries: 01422 369611