

Facelift

Daniel Roth's traditional design is evolving

Alex Doak



Of Bvlgari's two younger siblings, Daniel Roth has always seemed to play second fiddle to extrovert Gérald Genta. Thankfully however, the focus of attention is starting to shift, as ultra-conservative Roth emerges from the wings boasting a slick new repertoire of dial designs. Since 2000, CEO Gérald Roden has seen his two very different brands go from strength to strength. Here, he speaks exclusively to *QP* on upholding the legacy of Daniel Roth, modernising the traditional, and stumbling across a box of old IWC movements...

When writing about Daniel Roth, one never gets far before mentioning Gérald Genta. Ever since Bvlgari bought the two brands from Singaporean company, The Hour Glass, in 2000, Roth has always taken a backseat to its gregarious sibling. The two were placed under one roof under very similar circumstances at a similar time, but the legacy of Gérald Genta's eponym was always going to draw more attention. After all, it is a name associated with some of the greatest designs in watch history (the Nautilus, Royal Oak, Ingenieur).

Messieurs Genta and Roth both left their brands long ago, and now work out of their own workshops under the subdued guises of 'Gérald Charles' and 'Jean Daniel Nicholas' respectively. Gérald Genta the brand is finally edging away from the legendary designer's shadow with its own extrovert design philosophy. But it is precisely this revived philosophy that is distracting punters from Daniel Roth - a resolutely traditionalist affair.

Though the two are joined at the hip structurally, they could not be much more different. But it is soon obvious that

comparison is unnecessary anyway. Step up Gérald Roden, who has manned the helm for five years. As genial, confident and charming as you would expect from any CEO in the luxury product business, Roden is firm on the matter:

"We have three designers working on both Daniel Roth and Gérald Genta at Le Sentier, each with their own skills and preferences. Once a week we meet and discuss the various projects and come to various decisions. But despite such a close working environment, there has never been - nor ever will be - any overlap between Roth and Genta; their heritage and brand positioning are too different."

So why do we find them together? "A shortage of funding was the principal reason behind putting the two small companies under one roof. But their respective strengths also played to our advantage, as Genta had a fantastic past of making movements, and Roth was specialised in finishing movements to an extremely high standard. The two have fed off each other very beneficially."



Heralding a new dawn in the Daniel Roth style, 2005's Ellipsocurvex Papillon (€32,750). The platinum case overlaps the silvered gilloché dial, which features a unique retrograde minute counter.

Butterfly effect

Though Daniel Roth was established 16 years ago, it has retained its straight-laced image throughout, despite all the corporate upheavals. "Daniel Roth's customers are conservative people, with conservative - but obviously discerning - tastes," says Roden. "They are not 'show-offs' like those who wear Genta. I only wear my Genta watch on special evenings, for maximum impact!"

Virtually all Roth pieces sport Roman numerals (with the odd lapse into Breguet numerals), most possess exquisitely finished complications (a mixture of in-house, Girard-Perregaux and Frédéric Piguet), and all are housed in that signature neo-classical double-ellipse case. It is a case-shape that evokes polar opinions among watch fans, but again, Roden does not beat about the bush; his is a disciplined brand: "We will not deviate from the double-ellipse contour shape. I am asked this every six months, but we are quite firm on the matter. Not every brand sticks to one distinctive shape, but we do - we play to this strength. Some don't like the shape, but we don't mind - this leaves plenty who love it! It is a strong, basic shape that we can play around with considerably."



Managing Director of Daniel Roth and Genta, Gerald Roden - custodian of the two brands since Bvlgari bought them from The Hourglass in 2000.



The Athys uses an IWC Portuguese 952, manual winding, hand-bevelled Lépine movement, from a box accidentally discovered in 2000 when Roth and Genta moved its after-sales service.

And play around they have, heralding a fresh new direction for Roth this year, for the first time since its establishment in 1989. Indeed, the brand's quiet evolution verges on spectacular with the Ellipsocurvex Papillon. "We are finding that Roth's strict conservatism can attract a younger target audience, just with some adjustments on the dial and the introduction of the curved contour case. This is best exemplified by our Papillon model."

The look is unlike anything else in the Roth canon. The platinum case extends down over the top half of the dial, like a gleaming visor with the jumping-hours window forming the eye-slit. The exposed retrograde minutes dial forms the eponymous 'butterfly' shape, centering on the small seconds dial. Closer consideration of the retrograde indicator reveals the most intriguing feature of this watch, however. The triangular hand does not flick back over to '0' once past '60', as you would expect. Instead, a second triangle folds out from beneath the central platinum circle as the one at '60' folds back underneath. The tidy efficiency of this dance is a joy to behold.

This stylistic transformation is affirmed in rather less dramatic - but by no means less significant - terms by two other releases this year: the Ellipsocurvex Minute Repeater and the Perpetual Calendar with Phases of the

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Moon. Both these pieces employ predictable complications, but the difference is the facelift. One cannot help sensing the influence of Gérald Genta in the typography.

The numbers game

Daniel Roth's evolution is more than just updated design. The brand's appeal to the younger audience will no doubt be boosted by this year's tentative steps towards an 'entry-level' range. Tentative in as much as the 'cheaper' Athys piece was limited to just 35 pieces and had sold out by the end of Baselworld 2005! But it was sheer luck that the Athys - a huge model with Roth's trademark three-armed sectorial seconds hand - was made at all: “When we moved our after-sales service to our new premises in Geneva in 2000, we literally stumbled across a box of old IWC Portuguese pocket watch movements! What was even more surprising, however,” continues Roden, “was that IWC were willing to play the game, even supplying us parts to use in the Athys!”

But aside from this anomalous 'limited edition', it is still difficult for Roth to expand production beyond 2,000 per year, not to mention unfaithful to the exclusive nature of the brand. “There is an automatic ceiling on production numbers, given the scale of our operation,” explains Roden. “In some ways, it is sad, because many of our customers have to wait more than a year for their watch. But 'small' is our philosophy - we can never create more than 300 pieces over three or four years for each model.”

This niche has served Roth well, thus far. But obviously some things do have to change, especially when you have a multinational giant like Bvlgari as your custodian. Roth's brand integrity is far from being compromised by the modern corporate



(Above) Perpetual Calendar with Moonphase, with white-gold case, two-level white-gold dial with white enamel base and black guilloché centre (€45,500). A release from this year that demonstrates Roth's newly modernised approach to dial typography.

(Below) This year's strictly limited edition Athys (€31,200), with trademark three-armed, sectorial small seconds dial.





(Left) The exposed movement of the Instantaneous Perpetual Calendar (€53,200). Note Roth's typically exquisite finish.

(Right) A watchmaker working on the Tourbillon Retrograde Date (€84,850). Note the Breguet numerals, rather than Roth's usual Roman numerals.

approach (indeed, the contrary), but it could not help adapting to the modern sales approach. "When we first started, I spent far too much time on the phone to unhappy customers whose watches needed repairing. Our after-sales service had to improve and expand to accommodate this.

"I think the difference nowadays is that people actually *wear* their complications; they are not just locked away in a dusty safe by investors and collectors. We needed to adjust to this shifting pattern of usage." Daniel Roth now offers a first-rate after-sales service. Incoming repairs have dropped dramatically, allowing the company to deal with the task in hand and concentrate on the future of the brand.

The road ahead

But where does such a young brand go, with such a comprehensive canon of complications already under its belt? To a spectator, it seems no stone has been left unturned over the course of Roth's recent lease of life. M. Roden: "Originally, when we started at Le Sentier, we were working through the archives we had inherited from the past. We revamped both Genta and Roth with a great deal of respect for their heritage. We have been reinventing the past.

"But now that we are more established, it is time to get more creative. Something like the tourbillon has changed dramatically over the past few years and many brands are evolving the concept in all sorts of



Daniel Roth's tentative nod to bling-bling: the Tourbillon 8-Day Power Reserve, with white-gold case, crown and buckle set with 100 baguette-cut diamonds, and a tourbillon bridge set with sapphires (price on request).

directions - double axis, triple axis... But I want Daniel Roth's watches to change in a more functional context, to reflect their raw usage. We will improve their regulation, the power reserve... Most importantly, there will be no gimmicks. We will not be dictated to by marketing strategies. Our customers demand certain standards, and we cannot afford to deceive them."

"What will happen next in the industry is hard to say," confides Roden carefully, when quizzed on what lies beyond the horological horizon. "I think we will have to redefine the term 'haute horlogerie'; to question and clarify its meaning. There should be nothing to hide."

Inevitably, Roth's future also involves the ever-topical matter of integrated movement manufacture. Somewhat refreshingly though, I get the impression from Roden that he is less preoccupied by the thorny issue of in-house 'Manufacture' status than one would expect. Rather, it comes back to quality control: "The only way to master our products' quality is to be in control of everything - to be there from the start. Which means the eventual manufacture of 100% of our movement output. Luckily, Bvlgari understands that Rome was not built in a day. The move from adapting existing movements to hand-making them is very slow. Give us another five years..." ○

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