

Crescendo

Watchmaking's latecomer makes up for lost time with a musical tour de force

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At the end of January this year, Geneva-based jewellery and watch firm, de Grisogono launched their finest horological creation yet. The 'Occhio' minute repeater not only embodies one of the most complex achievements in watchmaking, but, in the hands of flamboyant patron Fawaz Grousi, has taken on unprecedented form. *QP* was on hand to witness this accidental watchmaker stake a claim to the echelons of *haute horlogerie*...and not before time.



Launched in January this year, the 'Occhio Ripetizione Minuti', limited to 50 pieces, available in 18-ct red gold (pictured here; SFr.350,000) and blackened white gold and platinum. Working from a hand-wound minute-repeater movement designed by the Christophe Claret company, de Grisogono worked in tandem to develop an exclusive diaphragm subassembly. Its 12 ceramic blades double as both a dial and instantaneous window to the coordinated dance of racks, levers and springs set into play by the chime mechanism.



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The Occhio is certainly unusual, but then that should not be entirely unexpected coming from the man who has previously brought us the voluptuous Instrumento Uno chronograph, ruby encrusted ‘Lipstick’ watches on galuchat cuffs and of course, the black diamond. But perhaps more surprising than the Occhio’s pyrotechnics – more of which later – is Gruosi’s confession that in the past he “had no particular love for watches.” In a recent interview in the Geneva newspaper *Agefi*, he affirmed: “To my mind, they [watches] were little more than platforms to show the time on and I saw scant difference between a Swatch and a Patek Philippe.”

How things have changed. Nowadays, all things horological provide 37% of the firm’s turnover with a current production of around 5,000 pieces a year. Gruosi predicts that in the future watches will probably grow to around 50% of the business. This somewhat self-effacing attitude suggests that no one is more surprised than Gruosi himself by this success, particularly as the firm has only been established for 10 years – the watch aspect a mere four.

Eyeful

What makes the chunky, black-dialled Occhio so different is not just the bold contemporary styling. Nor is its mode of operation particularly unusual – like any other minute repeater, slide the side lever and it will chime the hours, quarter-hour and minutes on three precision-engineered ‘cathedral’ gongs. But here is the trick: at the same time as the gongs strike, the sleek black ceramic dial has a brief James Bond moment, flicking open like the diaphragm of a camera aperture, to



(Top) Fawaz Gruosi – President of de Grisogono. He founded the brand in 1993, after more than 20 years’ experience with jewellers such as Harry Winston and Bvlgari.

(Above) Launched in 2002, the Instrumento Doppio – a double-faced chronograph with a second time-zone on the opposing dial passing through the winding rotor (£28,650). Both displays are driven by a single movement and barrel. Eighty-three novel components were designed for the device, for which a patent was issued.



Instrumento No. Uno – the first de Grisogono watch, primarily designed by Gruosi himself (£10,250). Note the black diamond on the crown; the brand’s trademark gem. Imperfections in the crystal structure of the stone give rise to the dark hue.

reveal the bare mechanism in action. As soon as the time has been chimed, the twelve blades snap shut again and the hands of the watch continue their steady sweep, unperturbed by the tectonic shifts the dial has just undergone. Simple, but very clever.

A peek inside the case at the apex of this display reveals that the mechanism is none other than a hand-wound calibre from Christophe Claret, the specialist minute repeater master. As Gruosi explains, “There would be no point in me creating the movement by myself. I chose to work with someone who has already proven himself in this field which gives credibility.”

For all his skills, it is understandable that Gruosi has relinquished all technical duties to Claret. The movement is made up of 324 parts, with the diaphragm dial bringing the total component count to a daunting 414. A somewhat bulky case is required to accommodate all this, available in 18-ct red gold, or de Grisogono’s trademark blackened 18-ct white gold.

A big favour

Aurel Bacs, international co-head of Christie’s watch department in Geneva was on hand at the unveiling to help put this novel approach to minute repeaters into context. “De Grisogono came to me, very fond of the idea that using a diaphragm on a dial was completely unique. Usually, anything touted as unique has been done before, so I looked in the archives and auction catalogues of our firm and other sources. Certainly, I found all sorts of ingenious and playful automatons, perfume sprayers, enamels, singing birds and of course erotic clocks and watches. But nothing like this has been made over the last 300 or 400 years. De Grisogono has done a big favour for future generations of watch auctioneers.”

But you do not have to take it from Bacs alone that this watch is causing ripples throughout the rarefied world of high-end watches. Aply assisted by a troupe of long-legged models in top-hats, tails, high-heels and fishnets, a prototype of the SFr.350,000 timepiece was lowered from the ceiling of Geneva’s vast *Bâtiment des Forces Motrices* at the extravagant launch night. Before it had even landed, seven of the 50 limited edition pieces had already been sold. A further 21 were snapped up that very evening – several of them destined for the firm’s top market, Russia.

Something different

The morning after the high-gloss glamour and excitement of the launch, I entered Mr. Gruosi’s office. Surrounded by white orchids, delicately hued antique watercolours, his desk littered with books on art history and Donald Trump’s biography, the softly spoken Gruosi, 52, explained why he came to create the Occhio.

"I wanted to do something different. And a minute repeater is the greatest challenge in watchmaking. It is the most complicated problems that attract me the most. And I like to find simple solutions, which in this case was inspired by looking at the lens of a camera. Take for example black diamonds [the brand's trademark gem, 'rediscovered' by Gruosi in 1996, after decades of neglect by the jewellery trade]. When I first proposed the idea everyone said that I was mad, that I was a crook and that it could never be done. But without taking risks, without the black diamonds that really made de Grisogono there would be no Occhio."

Even more surprising is the fact that the success of his watches is down to women rather than men, with the vast majority of his watches powered mechanically. "When I started to make watches in 2000, they were big; intended for men. But women soon started to buy them. I added a few stones and they loved them even more. Initially some of my women's watches were quartz but I had a request from Italian women to stop treating them like fools – they too wanted a mechanical watch. Now 72% of my watches are mechanical, which is unusual."

No time to spare

Proof of the firm's horological success is evident at its Geneva headquarters, situated atop an industrial complex amidst the frankly unlovely environs of Plan-les-Ouates, on the outskirts of town. Passing by cardboard boxes marked with addresses in Doha, Madrid and Hong Kong, our guide explains that jewellery-setting departments were being relocated to accommodate more watch workshops. That they simply cannot keep up with orders for watches such as the recent 'Lipstick' jewellery piece is true testimony to the brand's success...as, indeed, is its appearance on the counterfeit market. Imitation is, after all, the sincerest form of flattery.

But despite the horological frenzy, not much watchmaking is actually done *chez de Grisogono* by the 80-strong staff, for most models, trusty ETA movements are used. De Grisogono neither machines nor polishes watch components in-house, having established close working relationships with specialist contractors. However, from initial design to final inspection, the entire production process takes place in-house: assembly of all components, hands-fitting, casing-up and exhaustive series of checks and inspections at every step. The company's eight watchmakers also carry out international after-sales servicing operations.



The hugely popular cylindrical 'Lipstick' watch. This pink gold variant with raspberry pink galuchat bracelet was launched for this year's Valentine's Day, set with 588 rubies (£27,750). Push-buttons feature at 3 and 9 o'clock.

With the escalating phenomenon of the watch as obligatory accessory, Gruosi maintains that the way ahead is combining strong design with respectable mechanics and – what the hell – the odd carat or two. "I believe that high-level mechanics do not have to be boring or classical. Take the Occhio: already, I am considering a request to introduce a diamond-set version, plus less complex and more accessible pieces in the next few years".

"So what next for de Grisogono?" is my last question to Gruosi. Resignedly, the President replies, "I have to cope with being a watchmaker, as it appears that I am going to be making a lot more watches. And I can't say that I am not happy!" ◉