

# Lateral Thought

A watch–automotive tie-in with a dramatic difference

Simon de Burton



What you are about to read may inspire a certain sense of *deja vu* – but after years in the making, many titillating pre-production pictures, the odd glimpse of a prototype and lots of promises for a 2003 launch, it is finally here. The first completed version of Michel Parmigiani's Type 370 'Bugatti' wristwatch has finally and officially been unveiled, some way ahead of the Veyron supercar it complements. *QP* was in Milan for the spectacular unveiling of this bizarre take on traditional watchmaking.

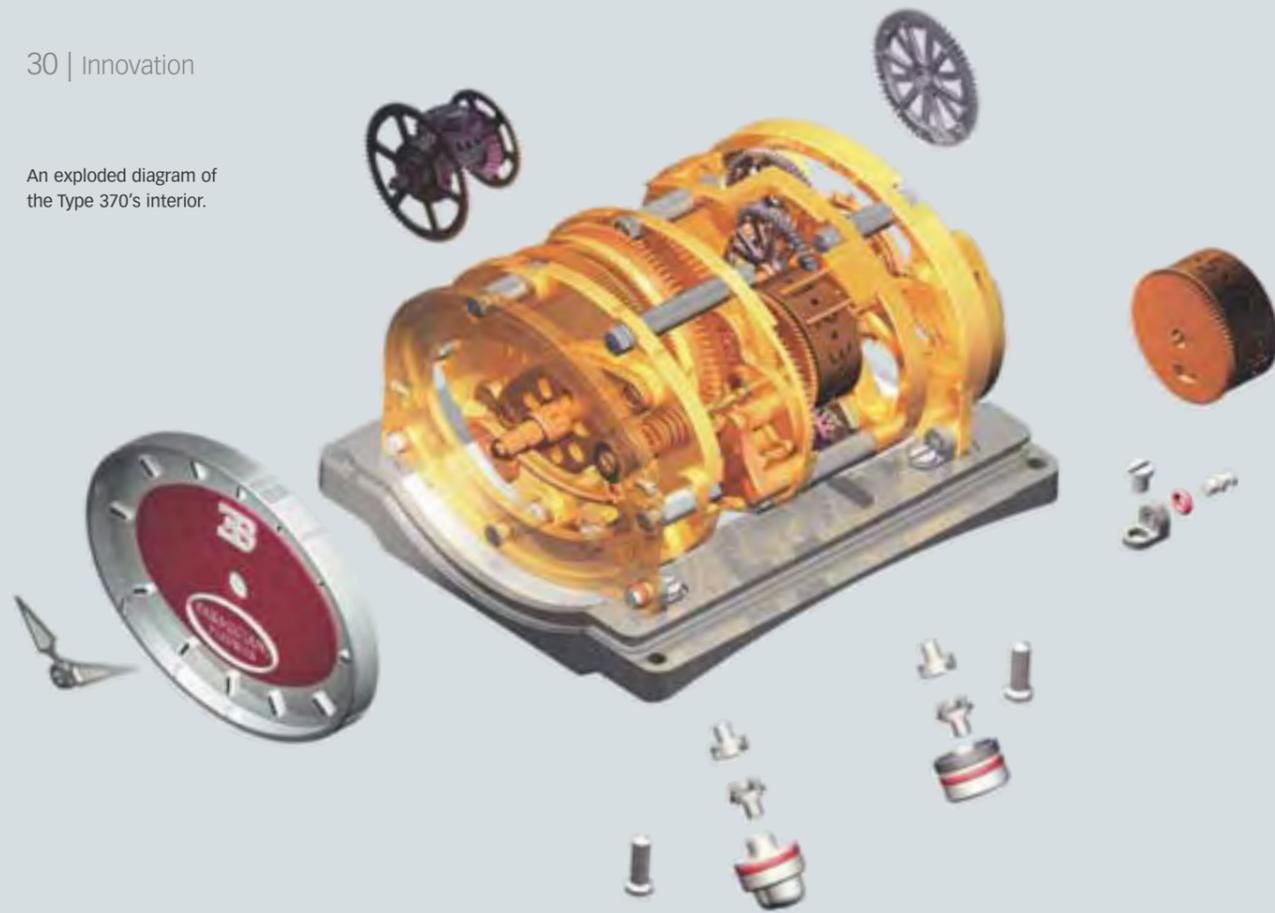
As many readers will remember, the alliance between Parmigiani and Bugatti was sealed in 2001 with the idea that the completion of the watch should coincide with the launch of the Bugatti Veyron supercar – a 250-mph, 1001-horsepower, 16-cylinder, €1m roadburner that would do thorough justice to the former glory of the brand now owned by Volkswagen.

Parmigiani, however, has beaten the Bugatti engineers hands down in the race to completion, because while the watch is well and truly ready, the car is not and will not be until late next year. The word is that harnessing the Veyron's massive power is providing Bugatti with major issues, such as overheating engines and spontaneously combusting brakes.



A view through the Type 370's 'hood' – an inward-curving sapphire crystal that exposes the length of the movement, including the date 'barrel'.

An exploded diagram of the Type 370's interior.



“It was never meant to be just a watch – more an engine block wrapped around your wrist. It is something extraordinary and extravagant...”

### In gestation

The original plan was to make the watches available initially to owners of the cars, only offering them for general sale if a Veyron owner did not exercise his or her option to buy.

That has now been changed and, it is said, the Type 370 (the number of the Parmigiani calibre) could be the first in a whole family of Parmigiani wristwatches to carry the Bugatti logo. Those future Veyron owners who do buy one, however, will still be able to have their car's chassis number engraved on the case of their watch.

Anyone who remembers the start of the gestation of the watch might also remember that it was expected to be priced around the £50,000 mark – but the development and creation of its unique, transverse movement by Parmigiani's

Vincent Berard, a case in which to house it and a high-tech tool with which to wind it up has meant that the price has been considerably revised to £139,000.

This has, apparently, done nothing to hamper sales – Parmigiani is believed to have taken firm orders for the first year's production of 50 pieces, with 50 more due to be made each year until 2007, all with white-gold cases, red, black or blue coloured dials and calfskin straps specially made by Hermès.

### Worth the wait

The official launch took place in September – a two-part event that began in Milan's Nobu restaurant where Michel Parmigiani, while still his considered and slightly reserved self, was clearly bursting with pride at the completion of the project. “When I introduced the idea for this watch

to the chairman of Bugatti in Germany he was very impressed, but he asked me why I had designed something which was not what most people would regard as being a watch,” Parmigiani told his audience.

“I replied that it was never meant to be just a watch – more an engine block wrapped around your wrist. It is something extraordinary and extravagant – in an age when you can read the time on everything from your mobile 'phone to your cooker, we had to make a watch which was a real breakthrough, something really futuristic. And that, I think, is what we've done.”

### Machine of miracles

It is only necessary to look at the Type 370 to appreciate that the watch really is something special. But when Parmigiani explained some of the problems



(Left) The balance wheel and escapement are visible through the Type 370's rear 'porthole'. (Centre) The Type 370 is designed to represent an engine block, lying across your wrist (£139,000). The movement and six sapphire crystals are set into a case made of 18-ct white gold. (Right) Winding the watch. The specially developed pen-shaped winding tool, or 'clutch' engages with the two crowns placed under the case. Setting the time is performed with the other end of the choke.

encountered in creating a movement that operates along a horizontal axis, rather than vertically, it is easy to understand why it took so long to perfect.

The eight-part case, for example, could only be constructed after a special jig had been designed on which the separate components could be soldered together, the problem being that gold has a 'memory' in which it stores its original shape – so, after heating, it naturally tries to reform. The jig prevents this from happening.

The six sapphire crystals forming part of the case also required special attention because of their complex, elliptical forms. The months spent on their conception were well worth it, for the enticing views that the 'portholes' offer into the movement's exploded layers.

Another innovation is the electric, pen-shaped winding tool, which makes light work of recharging the Type 370's 10-day power reserve. This horological première itself took more than three years to develop. Since the movement of the Bugatti Type 370 is mounted on 'silent blocks', there cannot be any fixed axis. As a 'choke', the winding pen engages with the two inner crowns allowing constant force delivery to the cardans winding stem. The cardans thus avoids a rigid connection between the movement and the case exterior. Time-setting (by disc-declutching with a tube spring mechanism) is done by means of manual rotations performed with the other end of the choke.

Even the box in which the watch is housed is something of a work of art. As large and lavish as we have come to expect the packaging of extremely expensive objects to be, it sports a Bugatti badge that, when pressed, causes the lid of the box to gently rise on miniature versions of the gas struts that are usually found supporting car bonnets and boot lids.

### Final product

The Nobu presentation culminated in Parmigiani presenting one of the first three completed watches to one of his best-known customers, fashion designer Giorgio Armani. The following day, during a photo session outside Milan's most celebrated horological emporium, Grimoldi in Via Manzoni, traffic and pedestrians came to a grinding halt – not because of the watch however, but because a Bugatti Veyron had also been brought along; the first time one had been seen on a public highway.

The dramatic removal of the car's dust cover rightly elicited gasps and gazes of amazement at the slumbering beast; its massive engine exposed, with manhole-sized exhaust pipe and muscular bodywork. What the passing crowds did not seem to notice was what we were really there for – to mark the completion of a feat of micro-engineering, which is in every way as remarkable as the car that inspired it. The difference is, Michel Parmigiani's little watch is finished – and it works. ◯

**Further information:** Argento Fine Products, 110 Gloucester Avenue, London NW1 8HX, Tel: 020 7722 2438, Email: [info@agfineproducts.com](mailto:info@agfineproducts.com), [www.parmigiani.com](http://www.parmigiani.com)