

Fusion

Jean-Claude Biver takes to Hublot's helm with characteristic gusto

Nicholas Foulkes

On June 2nd this year, Hublot Montres MDM proudly announced the recruitment of a watch industry legend. Audemars Piguet veteran, Blancpain saviour and long-serving Swatch Group guru Jean-Claude Biver has finally severed all ties to Nicolas Hayek's empire to join Carlo Crocco's singular brand as Executive Managing Director. *QP* finds out why this eccentric genius is more excited than ever by the challenge confronting him, and how Hublot's fresh approach to fusion is lending Biver a new lease of life.



Yellow-gold variant of the Hublot Regulateur, launched at BASELWORLD this year (£7,300). Originally developed for 18th century seafarers, the regulator function employs three separate dials for indicating hours, minutes and seconds.

Biver has been doodling on the tablecloth with a marker pen for 10 minutes. The result looks like an illustration from a new-age science textbook: "There," he says, putting the finishing touches to a sun with a grin. "This is Hublot. This is fusion in watchmaking."



(Facing page) A startling departure from traditional Hublot fare, the Subaquaneous (£2,600) utilises the ingenious 'Turnlock' system, whereby two lugs at 3 and 9 o'clock are rotated anticlockwise and clockwise to release and lock the bezel respectively. Water resistant to 200m, this is a stylish, but highly functional divers' watch.

(Above) Three examples of the Classic range, with trademark screwed-down bezel representing a porthole, or 'hublot'. (Left to right) Classic with combined steel and 18-ct yellow-gold case (£2,150), Classic 'Grand Quantième' with yellow-gold case (£7,700), Classic with 18-ct yellow-gold case (£5,250).



Carl Crocco's new right-hand man, Jean-Claude Biver, fresh from a year's sabbatical away from the Swatch Group village.

Jean-Claude Biver is sitting in the chic London restaurant Riva. He has been drawing on the tablecloth with a black marker pen for about 10 minutes. The result of his doodling looks like an illustration from a new-age science textbook: there is the sun, two clouds, a tree, the Earth's crust; arrows pointing up and down; the words 'HOT', 'COLD', 'FUSION', 'YIN', 'YAN'; the figure '1980' and various other arcane symbols seemingly borrowed from a TV weather forecaster's chart.

"There," he says, putting the finishing touches of eyes, nose and mouth to the sun with a satisfied grin. "This is it; this is Hublot. This is fusion in watchmaking." If I had not known Jean-Claude Biver for 10 years, I would have concluded by now that the grinning, shaven-headed man sitting across the table from me was a recently escaped lunatic or, at best, a harmless eccentric released on a suspect 'care in the community' scheme. But seeing him for the first time since the announcement of his role as Managing Director of Hublot, I would have been disappointed if he had not conjured some far-fetched metaphor or recondite quasi-mystical analogy to explain his plans for this, the first modern luxury watch to be worn on a rubber strap.

Changed attitudes

Biver is a genius. Born in Luxembourg, where he was recently awarded the Legion d'Honneur by the Grand Duke, he was educated in Switzerland, no

stranger to the Vallée de Joux even then, jogging and skiing there. He started working for Audemars Piguet in the mid-1970s when the world of luxury watches was a much cosier place.

"The biggest change has been in the luxury market," he says, recalling the top end of the Swiss watch industry 30 years ago. "You only really had four brands: Piaget, Patek, Vacheron and Audemars Piguet. Much less competition but still as difficult to sell as today; we had fewer customers and people could not understand how you could buy a steel watch for £2,000," he says of Audemars Piguet's iconic Royal Oak.

Indeed, it is fascinating to hear him talk of the Royal Oak's early years and how this now-legendary timepiece almost never made it beyond prototype stage. "The Royal Oak was totally new – only three or four years old. At the time, it existed only in steel, in one size. Nobody really believed in it except three markets: Swiss, Italian and French. If those markets had not agreed to buy the minimum quantities, it would not have happened. Until then, luxury watches were always yellow gold, white gold... This was steel, with visible screws."

"People did not understand expensive watches," he says of the time. "Today, we have a lot of competition but also lot of customers and in that respect I would say it is easier today because the customer has been

educated." Biver himself was part of that education process and now he feels the customer is ready for another lesson.

Phoenix from the ashes

After a spell with Omega, Biver resurrected in 1982 one of the most influential watch brands of the late 20th century. Blancpain was founded in 1735, but no watches had been made by the time Biver took it over; it was just a name. A name from which he created – excuse the pun – a movement.

"The benefit was that we were able to work on the traditional side of the brand. Because it was the oldest watch brand in the world and because no watches had been made for so long, the reputation was clean and we were able to build on that. The name was like a virgin."

In a manner Hublot are no doubt banking on, Biver imprinted his powerful personality upon the brand. He would appear at the Blancpain factory long before dawn, go for early morning runs with his employees and even claimed to have been contacted by

the ghost of the founder one evening in a graveyard. Business-wise, Biver's concept was to use the antiquity of the brand to establish it as a reference. He used the memorable slogan 'Since 1735 there has never been a Blancpain quartz watch and there never will be one.' As a soundbite and a mission statement it was genius; it established Blancpain as a marque with pedigree stretching back over centuries, positioning it as a guardian of traditional craft skills unaffected by the stigma of quartz.

Clean slate

The idea that a dormant brand is 'untainted', offering something of a *tabula rasa*, is an appealing one. Following a spell working as an internal consultant across the Swatch Group (an experience he likens to being a eunuch in a harem) and an attempt to work with talented but troubled Franck Muller, he seems to feel that he has found another *tabula rasa* with Carlo Crocco's Hublot.

Hublot watches have a most distinctive identity. Interestingly, one that has led to a strong following in Hispanic countries.



The three new Floréale ladies' watches from Hublot – each set with precious stones arranged as flower motifs and with dials of matching coloured stone: Lavender Mist (Bottom) with purple sapphire and amethyst dial; Narcissus Poeticus (Middle) with yellow diamonds and yellow citrine dial; Mentha Silvestris (Top) with green tsavorite and green tourmaline dial (all £2,800).

While other brands have taken off on wild, testosterone-fuelled tangents, creating ever bigger, more macho timepieces, Hublot has been characterised by a sporty restraint – imparted by its watches' trademark, vanilla-infused rubber strap and the eponymous 'porthole' case shape. Despite this solid brand essence, Biver still feels there is much more potential to be unlocked. Which, of course, brings us to the complex climatic diagram on Riva's tablecloth

"You have to go to 1980," he says. "In 1980, we had the sun and clouds, the sky, the trees and inside the Earth we had gold." Yes..? "Hublot brought down rubber from the tree and brought up the gold from underground and they made the first fusion; the first fusion in the watch industry; the fusion between rubber and gold." At this point Biver's barely suppressed enthusiasm for this new rubric is unleashed. There is the strong sense one would have to go back to the book of Genesis to find a story of similar significance.

A Messianic look comes over his smiling features, fixing me with the sort of gaze that makes Coleridge's Ancient Mariner seem positively evasive. "And you know the sky is cold, the Earth is hot; the sky is white, the Earth is black. More than a watch, it is a concept of fusion and tension; of ying and yang. That is brilliant for me."

Hublot's 'Elegant' range offered softer lines to the harsher aesthetic of the Classic's screwed-down bezel. The '1910' Elegant range offered a larger case (41.6 mm), with curves emphasised by a rounded glass. Pictured here is the new 'Perlé' dial variant of the 1910 collection, with circular grained x dial (£2,000).

Facelift

Then suddenly the beatific glow leaves his features and he becomes slightly less excited. "The concept is still valid but the product has to be facelifted in the direction of fusion. The second thing I want to do is that I want to make the fusion between the traditional way of doing a watch (that is Blancpain) and the modern."

Among the contemporary watchmakers working in field of fusion he singles out Richard Mille with particular praise. Like Mille, Biver is a maverick in an increasingly corporate world. Biver is – to use the sort of hyperbole he himself is fond of using – a bright, fast-moving meteor illuminating a gloomy, night sky. At 55, it is almost as if he is starting adult life again. Indeed, he recently had a rebirth of sorts, surviving a near-fatal bout of Legionnaires' disease. He has a second family and a toddler upon whom he dotes, and now he has a brand new professional challenge that will easily see him into his sixties. He clearly thrives on it.

"I am happy now. In fact, I can't think of being happier. I want to lead the future to the tradition, or the tradition to the future. Tradition and future...that is what we are starting now." ◉

