



Essence

Design flair is at the heart of the Gérald Genta brand

Theodore Diehl



A period of stability underpinned by the support and resources of Bvlgari has allowed Gérald Genta to build a reputation based on serious horology with a serious twist. *QP* talks to President Gérald Roden and the maverick behind the drawing board, Jeremie Senggen, about Genta's new line of typically quirky wristwatches. Garish as they may at first appear, we soon learn that there is a dogged method behind this mild madness, as well as a near-reverential respect for the eponymous master's legacy of design.

Still under wraps during BASELWORLD 2004:
Gérald Genta's brand new Octo Retro Tourbillon,
with retrograde hour indicator (price upon request).



The Octo Worldwide Time perpetual calendar with moonphase (price upon request).

Near on 34 years ago, a designer named Gérald Genta was working into the early hours, preparing last-minute sketches for a new watchcase to be presented that day. At 3am, inspiration came: a diver's helmet with a screwed-down glass visor. The rest is history: Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak was born that very morning and, with it, watch design began to be recognised in its own right. Following this watershed, Genta went from strength to strength, with designs for Patek's Nautilus and Golden Ellipse, IWC Ingenieur SL and the 'Bvlgari Bvlgari'.

Enter Bvlgari

Such heady stuff was good for a house in Monaco and a Ferrari on the drive, but it could not satisfy the soul. And thus, the inevitable step – a watch brand under one's own name – soon emerged. Alas, like so many others before him, brilliant artists (and occasionally watchmakers!) do not always successful businessmen make and restlessness soon got the better of Genta: the time was ripe to

sell the brand. The lucky bidder was the Singaporean company, The Hour Glass, which had just bought Daniel Roth – suffering similar problems to Genta. The Hour Glass eventually sold both brands to Bvlgari.

Whether it was a spark of genius, a twist of fate, mundane economics or a combination of all three, we will never know, but both brands were rather fortuitously placed under the same roof at Le Sentier. Daniel Roth flourished and Gérald Genta blossomed like never before. As BASELWORLD 2004 proved beyond a shadow of a doubt, Gérald Genta has been taken to a new level.

In with the new

The man responsible for such a positive state of affairs is Gérald Roden, who became President of both brands when one of Bvlgari's directors suddenly vacated his position. An intellectual man of broad tastes, with knowledge of the arts and business savvy to boot, Roden began his career as a lawyer. Quickly becoming bored of the stultifying world of legal wordplay, he decided instead to get his hands dirty with watches. "You know, philosophically speaking, it's not an easy task to develop and protect a legacy associated with a great designing talent who's still alive today. If I had known how difficult this was going to be, I wouldn't have done it. You have to somehow find the key properties of their ideas and then let these ideas flow organically towards the future. You must go



forward, even with that history hovering at the back of your mind."

One of the very first steps Roden initiated was the creation of something completely new to Gérald Genta: an in-house manufactured movement. Its development profited greatly from the synergy created between Genta and Daniel Roth, which was addressing the same issue in parallel. The collector and watch enthusiast of today is quite different to the one of, say, 35 years ago. They can still appreciate good looks and design flair, but nowadays demand that the movement itself reflects quality, class and exclusivity.

"For me it was a two-sided front," explains Roden. "On one hand, building a manufacture – even a small one – means heavy investment and total reorganisation (and the reorganisation here was painful, but a must). On top of this, I was seeing large numbers of Genta pieces coming back for repairs that should not have been necessary. It was absorbing all of the company's time and attention,



and our clients really deserved much better. Without solving this kind of tedium, no watch company can expect a great future."

Bvlgari's wisdom in allowing Roden to proceed as he saw fit has been proven by the results. The present movements are second to none and the service department is first rate, with the number of repairs plummeting to levels more typical of high-end makes. This cleared the way for the future.

Rejuvenation

With new means of manufacture come new possibilities for design. But how does a company president, however erudite, choose a designer to continue a legacy such as Genta's? How does one know if a person has the flair to pull it off? "We had been through a number of designers before we found this balance," admits Roden. "As well as being able to use a computer and various design programs, designers in today's industry must also possess a visceral connection with wristwatches. When Jeremie Senggen applied to join our design

(Left) Launched within the hallowed confines of the Bvlgari hall at BASELWORLD this year, the Octo Bi-Retro (price upon request). Note the separate, retrograde 24-hour hand and minutes hand – the latter divided into 5-minute 'blocks'.

(Right) From the Arena Sport Collection, Gérald Genta's new GMT Perpetual Calendar (€42,900). The top subdial shows the second time-zone, while the lower one indicates the date.



Gérald Roden (left) talks through Jeremie Senggen's latest designs at the studio in Meyrin, Switzerland.



What to expect in 2005: Senggen's designs for new Octo variants.

team, I gave him a pencil and paper and asked him to make some sketches of one of the Gérald Genta models, then to change some details here and there. You could feel and see him sensing the issues and balancing the form in his fingertips as he worked. I think that's the key; you must be able to sketch, even if you later use the computer for further idea development."

Senggen completed his studies in Milan at the prestigious European Institute of Design before joining design colleagues Jean Marc Salemie and Jonathan Paul at Genta. Senggen has been concentrating on the Octo series – the first new Gérald Genta series since the Bvlgari takeover – and he has already mastered its angles. As Senggen himself explains, "A good design has to have basic shape elements that work for the eye as well as for legibility and the wearer's comfort. But it also has to be able to change character with different colours, metals, dials and all the rest, yet still retain its identity at a distance." (Indeed, this could have been a quote from Gérald Genta himself – just look at all the Royal Oak varieties through the years that still look fresh even today.)

At the risk of stating the obvious, the Octo and the Royal Oak have one thing in common: eight sides (of the case and bezel, respectively). This geometrical commonality defines one of Gérald Genta's essential concepts, yet the Octo could not be more different visually. This is by no means an economical new look, as the Octo cases are a virtual nightmare to make; each side of the case has an extraordinary number of complicated, even nervous facets and profiles, despite a tranquil first impression. The dials for the 2004 models allow precise use of segmentation with hi-tech ceramic coatings, paint and other treatments, making them extremely versatile within a design context.

Although the entire Octo series makes extensive use of the *en vogue* retrograde indicator, it does so in an unusual fashion: the outer ring defines 5-minute 'blocks' of time, with the inner ring indicating minutes, coinciding nicely with real life: we naturally 'feel' time in 5-minute units (I personally cannot recall a single occasion when someone was ever '28 minutes late' – can you?), which makes this segmented retrograde layout a pleasure to behold.

Virtually all the movements in the Octo series are in-house manufactured, and range from versions such as an automatic with hour, minute and date, to a combined grande and petite sonnerie, tourbillon retrograde hour and tourbillon perpetual calendar GMT.

Arena

The Arena collection, of rounded case and fluted side, was also inspired by earlier Genta designs and has again been given a 'complicated' treatment. New models include a tourbillon with retrograde hours, a two-time-zone GMT perpetual calendar and a



(Left) The movement for Gérald Genta's upcoming addition to its Octo range, the Grande Sonnerie minute repeater. Note the 'GG' rotor motif. (Right) Adding the finishing touches to an Arena Sport Bi-Retro's 'stencil' dial (€7,800).

The Arena series combines outrageous colour combinations and high-tech mechanical layouts without ever going over the top.

tourbillon perpetual calendar moonphase, as well as new dials and colour combinations for the basic bi-retro models. The GMT and tourbillon perpetual calendars of the Arena series combine particularly outrageous colour combinations with high-tech mechanical layouts, using materials that perfectly suit their sporty character without going over the top.

The use of open-cut 'stencil' discs to show the months and days of the week is a fantastic design 'find' that adds more than a subliminal hint of 1930s nostalgia. Utterly 21st century, both these models represent a summit of legibility for a 'designer' complication. When you see them for the first time, a big grin and a sense of wanton desire simultaneously overcome you.

For their next trick?

There are some secrets still, but the Octo line will be extended next year with a new retrograde variant with a geometrically patterned dial and a newly developed minute repeater. Gérald Genta is taking a great deal of care over the new repeater's sonic qualities and volume – always points of contention with such exorbitantly priced and grand muses of horology. With an A Lange & Söhne minute repeater also waiting in the wings, Gérald Genta is readying itself for the inevitable musical battle. With all this activity, it is clear that the legacy left in Gérald Genta's wake is healthier than ever, occupying that thinly populated segment of the watch market capable of combining great design with manufactured movements. ○

Further information: Gérald Genta, Chemin du Grand-Puits 42, Case Postale 382, CH-1217 Meyrin 1.
Tel: +41 (0)22 719 1717, www.geraldgenta.com