



# Vital Signs

## April's watch fairs showed an industry in rude health

James Gurney



Following recent years' relatively muted offerings, it was encouraging to see that, once again, it was business as usual at BASELWORLD and Geneva's Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie, 2004. The fresh crop of launches, from all corners of the industry, was nothing if not eclectic – with opinions to match. With the dust finally settling, QP's regular contributors choose their favourites... and not-so-favourites.

Expectations ahead of this year's Basel and Geneva shows were, unsurprisingly, a little on the downbeat side. There seemed a general assumption that the plans laid down two or three years ago – that being a typical lead time in the design and realisation of new watch models – would be refined of all interest by nervous marketing departments. As luck would have it, we were almost totally wrong.

Two thousand and four saw normal, that is, frantic business resumed. From Rolex through to Academy stalwarts such as Peter Speake-Marin, the objective was to persuade press and retail buyers that the watches on show had what it takes to entice the buying public at the sharp end of the business.

### Show-stopper

So who created the biggest waves and how? The most uncertain guide to finding the star of the show is almost always the pre-publicity (A Lange & Söhne being an exception), so recipients of TAG Heuer's invitation to witness the press launch of the 'Mechanical Movement of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium' were excused for not losing too much sleep in anticipation. How wrong we were. There had, of course, been some chatter prior to the fair that TAG had something up its sleeve. But no one quite realised that, for once, a watch company was not exaggerating. Even the least horologically pure of observers tend to see TAG Heuer as more 'brand' than watchmaking substance, at least in public. However, this year, everyone was talking about TAG Heuer's Monaco V4.

The clear lead established by the V4 in the impact stakes did not mean that the rest of the field were left entirely behind. Against admittedly depressed expectations, there was an impressive level of creativity on display. The story, it seems, is that the watch companies realise they need to stake out their identities, or else risk becoming commodities. This translates as taking a few risks with some



Making waves: TAG Heuer's Monaco V4 (see page 64).



(Top) Divider of opinions: Rolex's leopard-print Daytona Cosmograph (£28,320).



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models – even if on a ‘loss-leader’ basis. QP’s straw poll of contributors’ views on the best five watches at Basel and Geneva threw up a surprisingly mixed result.

### From apple-green to leopard-print

The next talking point for many at BASELWORLD was Rolex and this time it was not just about the sheer size of their stand at Basel. Very few could have predicted that Rolex – that most conservative and impenetrable of brands – might have created the waves that were felt.

While the true Rolex cognoscenti were excited by the return of the Turn-O-Graph, it was the new Cosmograph that caused most comment – not all of it entirely complimentary. Bill Prince cast it as the Bet Lynch (one of Britain’s most famous and brassy soap opera characters) of the Rolex cast; another wondered if you were supposed to wear it with matching lingerie. Ken Kessler merely made the point that a picture is worth a thousand words. But as Simon de Burton noted, with one retailer instantly placing an order for eight pieces, that makes it a hit, not a miss.

As is often the case at Basel, the Patek Philippe name was on many lips, but not for any horological *tour de force* this year – merely for a simple but exceptionally attractive and ‘right’ annual calendar, at the heart of its 2004



(Above) The new Omega Railmaster chronometer (£1,600).

(Top right) Blancpain’s Equation Marchante, with two minute hands indicating mean and real solar time respectively (£69,700).



Double-axis ‘Gyrotourbillon’ from Jaeger-LeCoultre (SFr.390,000).

(Right) Gerald Genta Tourbillon Perpetual Calendar Moon Phase (SFr.166,850).

(Far right) The 'calibre DB15' with perpetual calendar and revolving moonphase from De Bethune.

(Below) Zenith's twist on its Open range: Star Love (£3,795).



Artist's impression of the Chopard Steel Wings Tourbillon (€74,790) – restricted to 30 pieces, with the first sold at Antiquorum's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary auction.

collection. It was ably supported by numerous small additions that added emphasis to Patek's determination to remain at the top of the heap.

Jaeger-LeCoultre rides high in the poll, on the basis of multiple nominations for a double-axis tourbillon that actually looks like a watch you might want to wear, to a baguette-set Reverso – “Bling at its best,” said Nick Foulkes – and the apple-green Compressor for women. As Maria Doulton noted, “Jaeger has shown that there is life beyond the Reverso and that mechanical correctness doesn't have to be prim.”

Others of the bigger brands that managed to impress their way into *QP* writers' top 5 include Glashütte, Omega for the Railmaster, IWC, Zenith for its Star Love (“enough to melt the heart of any sane woman,” said Claire Adler) and, of course, Cartier, whose Santos 100 caused instant love/hate reactions.

### Bringing up the rear

Smaller companies that wish to inhabit the top end of watchmaking must impress. So it was noticeable that both JeanRichard and Roger Dubuis caught the attention of writers, while Harry Winston drew an interesting reaction – several writers had its watches as their favourite and least favourite!

Of course, this straw poll only touches on the myriad of watches on show. Many of these and others are naturally *en route* to these pages in more detail, as they become production realities, rather than one-offs to be manhandled by an over-enthusiastic press.

Finally, for me, there was the pleasure of finally seeing a company I had increasingly regretted missing in 2003. De Bethune did not fail to please, with their quiet and rare mix of horological expertise and elegant design. ○