



La Legione Italica

The quiet invasion from
across the Alps

Maria Doultou



It might not be the first country that comes to mind when you think of watchmaking, but you might be surprised to learn how much Switzerland owes its Mediterranean neighbour. *QP* investigates the impact of the Swiss watch industry's very own 'Little Italy'.

We have all heard the joke about what it would be like if the Swiss were the lovers, the Italians the engineers and the English the chefs. As over used as these stereotypes are, it is surprising to learn of the extent of Italian involvement in the watch industry; a sector where cool-headed precision engineering seems more appropriate than Latin passion. Indeed, a roll-call of the key players in the Swiss watch industry reveals a strong contingent from south of the border: Bvlgari, Officine Panerai, Parmigiani Fleurier, Genta, Zanetta, Macaluso, Bodino, Trapani, Crocco, Bonati, Cologni, Papi, Massacesi. These are names that beg to be read aloud with accompanying hand gestures and seductively extended vowels; it is obvious that they could be from no other country than the *Bel Paese* itself.



(From left to right) Paolo Bulgari, chairman of Bvlgari; Luigi Macaluso, president of Girard-Perregaux and the Sowind Group; The Richemont group's art director, Giampiero Bodino has worked with the Group for over 10 years and plays a key role in the design of many new products, across many varied, brands.

“In the last 30 years, the Italians have changed the essence of the wristwatch from a small instrument that tells the time to a status-revealing factor.”

A strong tradition

Watchmaking did not begin in Switzerland; rather, it was born in England, Italy and France. And the Italian renaissance in the 14th and 15th centuries was a hotbed of horological activity – even Leonardo Da Vinci tinkered in clockmaking. So it makes sense that, with their heritage, the Italians should still be involved.

One of the first names that comes up in any conversation linking Italians and watch design is Gerald Genta, who for 30 years designed some watches we have come to regard as classics. His designs include the first high-end steel watch – 1972's Royal Oak for Audemars Piguet; IWC's Ingenieur, the Patek Philippe Nautilus and then his own line of watches that have turned tradition on its head by introducing Mickey Mouse to *haute horlogerie*.

Giampiero Bodino, currently a board member and group art director of the Richemont group, has a pivotal role in the look and feel of many of the watches we see today. He started work in the 1970s in the car industry, which he explains as a natural thing for a boy from the city of cars. “I was from Torino so I designed cars,” he explains matter-of-factly. “To design a car, a dishwasher or a watch is the same: it is about an idea.” His

design skills are based not on an agenda, but on understanding what a client needs. Since Bodino likes to “dive into the DNA of each brand” and treat each project uniquely, he was able to transfer his skills to other fields. His migration from cars to watches started when, as a student, his work was spotted by Bvlgari, who offered him the chance to begin designing jewellery in Rome – which naturally led to watches. Since then it is probably easier to describe his prolific portfolio by naming the watches he has *not* been involved in, suffice to say that his creativity has made its mark on brands such as Gucci, Baume & Mercier, Cartier, Officine Panerai, Versace, MontBlanc, Dunhill, Van Cleef & Arpels and Vacheron Constantin.

And when Italians combine their design flair with good business sense, the results are very distinctive. Luigi Macaluso, at the wheel of Girard-Perregaux, dared to be different with his audacious designs that combine a deep respect for the 200-year-old Swiss watch house with his eclectic background of rally-car driver and architect.

Fellow Italian, company leader and genius watchmaker Michel Parmigiani is an Italo-Swiss hybrid, born in Italy, who declares himself a “Neuchâtel-ese.” He believes that Italians have a

heightened visual sensitivity and so were the first to realise that a watch should be considered part of your outfit. Parmigiani successfully brings together Swiss precision and Italian sensitivity and flattery cannot come much higher than from the maestro of style himself, Giorgio Armani, who recently purchased two Parmigiani Fleurier watches. A large, framed photograph of the eternally tanned and boyishly blue-eyed Armani, arm draped around the Milanese jeweller Anselmo Grimoldi, flashing his Parmigiani, graces the entrance of the Fleurier headquarters. A double compliment considering Armani himself has a top-selling range of fashion watches.

“Watches, especially for a man, are still the most expensive and expressive things he can wear,” according to owner of DeBethune, David Zanetta. “In the last 30 years the Italians have brought about a major change in the essence of the wristwatch, from being a small instrument that tells the time to a status-revealing factor. Today, your watch says whether you are wealthy, young, minimalist, up-to-date, nonchalant, a connoisseur and so on.”

Setting trends

And such is Italy's commitment to horological style that it is the Italians who are considered the unofficial global weather

vane of trends. “If a watch gets the thumbs-up from the Italian watch magazines, the Asians who buy Italian watch magazines will buy the watch,” says Cristina D’Agostino of Parmigiani Fleurier. But the Italian love of watches is not a passing whim: Roberto Grimoldi, watch retailer in Milan and son of Anselmo, explains that Italians have been collecting watches and reading the plethora of watch magazines on offer for the last 30 years – so they know all there is to know about the subject.

Ask Carlo Crocco, founder and president of Hublot, who explains that the vital initial success of his watch line was thanks to the Italians falling in love with his first offering, the Classic, with its bold, matt black rubber strap and yellow-gold case.

And it is not just a boy thing. IWC can owe some of the success of the Portuguese chronograph to the ladies of Rome and Milan, who were trailblazers in wearing outsized men's watches in 2001. And this year, Italy is IWC's number one global market. When Breitling first launched the Chronomat in 1984 its first watch was for the Italian aviation team, the Freccie Tricolori, and the line has now become one of the firm's international best sellers. Italians are fans of Zenith's



(Left) Anonimo's brand new dual time zone watch, the Firenze Dual Time, to be launched this year at Basel. (Right) Parmigiani Fleurier will be launching this, the Forma XL Répétition Minutes, at Basel (approx. £135,000). It strikes the hours, quarters and minutes on request using two gongs.



(Left) An unusual variation on Panerai's legendary Luminor range, with left-handed crown and power reserve (£3,200). (Right) Bvlgari's new Diagono Professional Regatta (£3,400) with dial indicators designed to aid seafaring navigation.

El Primero movement, as, contrary to the stereotype, the Italians value mechanical precision and perfection as much as their Swiss cousins.

Leaving home

And what of the Italian brands themselves? According to Jean-Marc Jacot, consultant to the Swiss watch industry, homegrown brands, like fresh pasta, do not travel well. "Apart from Bvlgari and Officine Panerai, no other Italian watch company has managed to break beyond the bounds of being a local brand. Bvlgari has been so successful with its watches because it adapted jewellery designs to watch designs, which is the right way round to do it."

Bvlgari, the giants of jewellery, has led the way in marrying style and watchmaking. Bvlgari has been making watches since the 1920s, but it was the Bvlgari-Bvlgari line of the 1970s that made waves. Paolo Bulgari explains the magic formula: "Bvlgari has brought to the world of Swiss watches a combination of distinctive style, technical expertise and attention to detail. As far as Bvlgari watches are concerned, style and beauty coupled with technical prowess are appreciated as an irresistible combination."

And Officine Panerai is the Italian golden boy that others aspire to. Founded in Florence in 1860, it based its approach on the

Luminor watch it designed for the Italian Navy divers during World War II, and has helped bring outsized, clunky styling to the watch world. Panerai truly espouses Italian style, a great story, sound mechanics and marketing flair.

But what of the other, less well-known Italian brands? Such Samsons pitting their wits against the Swiss Goliath include Locman from the island of Elba, whose first watch included a wooden bezel. From these humble beginnings, Locman has now developed a successful range featuring trendy bright dials and aluminium cases set with diamonds. And Anonimo, who like Panerai is based in Florence, is showing how a small player can combine innovative technology with a strong, functional style and grow in popularity.

Passion

So what will the next trend in watches be? Well, no one can be sure of course, but it would be a shrewd bet that an Italian will be involved. Claude-Daniel Proellocks, the CEO of Vacheron Constantin, although not Italian himself, says that passion is at the heart of his company. "Although the Italians are not as organized as the French or the Swiss, they make miracles. In Italy everything is possible, because they work with instinct, not logic. If you think only with your head you cannot do the impossible. And the Italians do the impossible." ◯