



Off The Wall

Zenith unveil a decidedly off-beat variation on the tourbillon theme

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⌚ Under the guidance of Thierry Nataf – certainly not your standard model of a leader of a traditional Swiss watchmaking house – Zenith has been caught up in a whirlwind of changing attitudes and perceptions. Its new Grande Chronomaster XXT Tourbillon does nothing to quell this march of innovation, with a brand new movement and an aesthetic debt to Picasso.



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An off-centre hour hand, aerodynamic tourbillon bridge and spiral hour markers around the tourbillon cage all lend an exceptional look. Zenith compares this effect to the cubist paintings of Picasso.

The once-respected, but ever so slightly dusty Zenith has seen the ante raised across the board, from design and presentation through to a controversial and aggressive hike in retail prices, with the result that Zenith is now a much edgier proposition. Where others in the watch industry were content to treat Zenith with a certain unconscious but patronising disdain – non-threatening in any real sense – the attitude towards Zenith is a much more coloured phenomenon with not a little fear included.

While Nataf is unlikely to allow the dust to settle again at Zenith, there is a certain uncompromising clarity concerning the space Zenith now intends to inhabit and the confidence in its direction. Nataf was certainly in bullish form following a tour round global markets: “The response to the collection we are presenting has been excellent, right through the collection from the Tourbillon to the Elites.”

Enter the tourbillon

To prove the point, witness the Grande Chronomaster XXT Tourbillon. As a concept, the announcement of the watch was not one to ignite excitement, for several reasons. Firstly, the name is a near definition of bombast, though if grandeur or appellation were the criteria, then this watch would clearly be the winner. Secondly, though it should be difficult for anyone enthusiastic about watches to be left cold by the appearance of a new tourbillon watch, the recent spate of such watches has done something to remove the prestige such watches naturally attract. In compensation, there has to be a hint of the ‘X-factor’ that rekindles the enthusiasm. Luckily, first sight of the Zenith Tourbillon is enough to immediately dismiss any lingering derision of the name; ennui vanishes with equal finality.

The technical basis of the movement is, however, exemplary, though Zenith’s patent claim for making the tourbillon co-exist

successfully with the fast (36,000 vph) suggests that the concept was somewhat quixotic to start with; you would not choose the high rate / low torque option if you were designing from first principles. Nevertheless, the combination of the El Primero movement – with its ability to time intervals to one tenth of a second and a tourbillon revolving over a 60 second period – is fascinating in itself and it was this challenge that Thierry Nataf believes justifies their Tourbillon. “There are very few people actually making tourbillons, so almost every brand that uses one has essentially the same watch. With chronograph tourbillons the story is different – it is an incredible niche that is technically very difficult to achieve. Currently, the only other companies in this niche are Audemars Piguet, Breguet, Girard-Perregaux and, soon, Franck Muller. We are, of course, the only ones who are doing this with a movement that runs at 36,000 vph.” One unusual touch is the integration of a date disc between the main and tourbillon bridges that revolves counter to the tourbillon – an unusual arrangement but neatly done.

Abstract inspiration

For all the technical virtue encompassed by the mechanics, the element that sets the Zenith Tourbillon apart is the dramatic design. Clearly following the stylistic cues of previous watches in the Grande Chronomaster series, the Tourbillon is still another step beyond. Details such as the off-centre placement of the hour hand, graduated hour markers that sweep around toward the tourbillon cage and the aerodynamic tourbillon bridge all make the watch stand out as exceptional.

Zenith compares this effect to the cubist paintings of Picasso – a comparison that invites further accusations of bombast, despite retaining a kernel of truth in it; at least enough for the Picasso Foundation to permit the reproduction of ‘Bust of a Woman Wearing a Striped Hat’ (1939) in Zenith’s promotional material. On this subject, Nataf’s personal enthusiasm and belief in the comparison is evident. “Picasso wanted to love his subject across every facet and this asymmetry is reflected in the tourbillon’s spiral design.”

(Left) Eighteen-carat white-gold variant of the Grande Chronomaster XXT Tourbillon.

(Centre) Rose-gold case variant of the Grande Chronomaster XXT Tourbillon, with Guilloché silver dial.

(Right) Pablo Picasso’s ‘Bust of a Woman Wearing a Striped Hat’ (1939). The asymmetrical elements of Zenith’s new tourbillon were apparently inspired by Picasso’s abstract cubism.

(Previous page) A close-up of the tourbillon at the 11 o’clock position. Note the distinctive, aerodynamic bridge design.

Further information: Zenith UK. Tel: 020 7371 6160, www.zenith-watches.com