

Form and Function

Ventura's startling design forces QP to reassess what is meant by 'haute horlogerie'

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A first glance at the v-tec Alpha unfailingly demands a second; the allure of its retro-futurist design and brushed metallic sheen commands fascination to the point of wanton desire. How has Ventura managed this? How has a company making conventional chronometers – success admittedly hinging on *avant garde* design – evolved via digital while retaining, nay *boosting* its prestige throughout the high-end watch market? QP takes stock, as Ventura yet again prepares to unleash its 'innovative idiom with regard to form' upon the crowds of Basel.



Hannes Wettstein's update on Ventura's first 'Watch' model, the SPARC px – the world's first self-winding digital watch (€995).

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It is telling that Ventura does not venture beyond the strength of the brand alone. Instead of touting itself as the familial cottage industry that so many young manufactures aspire to, Ventura lets the watches do the talking. Perhaps wisely, the only ambassadors ever ascribed to the brand have been Ventura's achingly hip designers – cannily recruited over the past 14 years to help mould its distinctive, yet eclectic aesthetic; an aesthetic that does more to sell watches than any amount of noble heritage or cosy anecdotes. As the publicity would have it: ‘Ventura has no past, but only a future.’

Digital roots

As a prolific manufacturer of COSC certified chronometers, it came as a surprise to many when Ventura launched its SPARC collection in 2000: the world's first self-winding digital watches. However, what they probably did not realise is that digital was exactly where Ventura started.

By the late 1980s, Ventura CEO Pierre Nobs had become frustrated by the industry he had helped shape, importing digital components from Japan for Swiss watches. “I was locked in an unbearable situation, where customers were dictating what they wanted from watch brands, rather than being challenged by new concepts and looking beyond designs of the past.” In partnership with his wife, Nobs founded Ventura in 1989 with a clear mission statement: “To do what I like!”

Inspiration was required, and Nobs found it not from other watches or jewellery, or even modern product design, but from early twentieth century architecture. “I was very impressed by the buildings of the 1920s, '30s and '40s – they reflected their time perfectly. I consequently decided that architecture was where I must look for Ventura, so long as I wasn't looking back; we would strive to encompass all that is contemporary.”

The first of the nascent company's prestigious collaborations came in the form of Flemming Bo Hansen, who designed ‘Watch’ in 1989. Such was the immediate appeal of Watch – be it genuine regard for form, or merely ironic fondness for its

retro-futurism – that Watch has since become a classic piece of product design, added to the permanent collection of the New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1990.

Universally regarded as successor to Watch, 2000's SPARC collection (£995–£6,690) definitively evoked the ethos of Ventura's long-term design mercenary, Hannes Wettstein – a leading protagonist of Swiss design and architecture and the key architect shaping the Ventura collection.

A to zed

Since joining in 1996 to develop Ventura's ever-expanding ‘v-matic’ range, Wettstein has practically established himself as an in-house employee at the Zürich-based manufacture.

He founded his legendary ‘zed’ design agency in 1991 and has since evolved a style that unashamedly adopts the old adage that ‘form follows function’, interpreting it in increasingly novel ways. In applying this philosophy to Ventura's brief, zed has managed to alter the company's design paradigm by relegating it to a primary form of expression.

Instead, the cutting-edge design house emphasises content and objective, giving the watches an appearance appropriate to their functionality. Wettstein's extensive research on the classic chronograph formed the basis of the v-matic's high concept: to replace cosmetic ornaments with bold architecture, and to restore the dial to its original function as a measuring instrument. The mechanical movement remains the only truly decorative element (but also, by its very nature, remaining a purely functional feature), enhanced by the cool shades of the specially hardened titanium material used for the cases and bracelets – Ventura's trademark-registered ‘Titanox’ material developed in 1995, perfectly timed for its harmonious application to Wettstein's vision.

Several design awards later, and Wettstein continues to sprinkle his magic dust. Last year's BASELWORLD watch fair saw Ventura's profile reach its zenith, bearing the fruits of a return to



digital horology and, interestingly, a collaboration between Wettstein and world-renowned Swiss typographer, Adrian Frutiger.

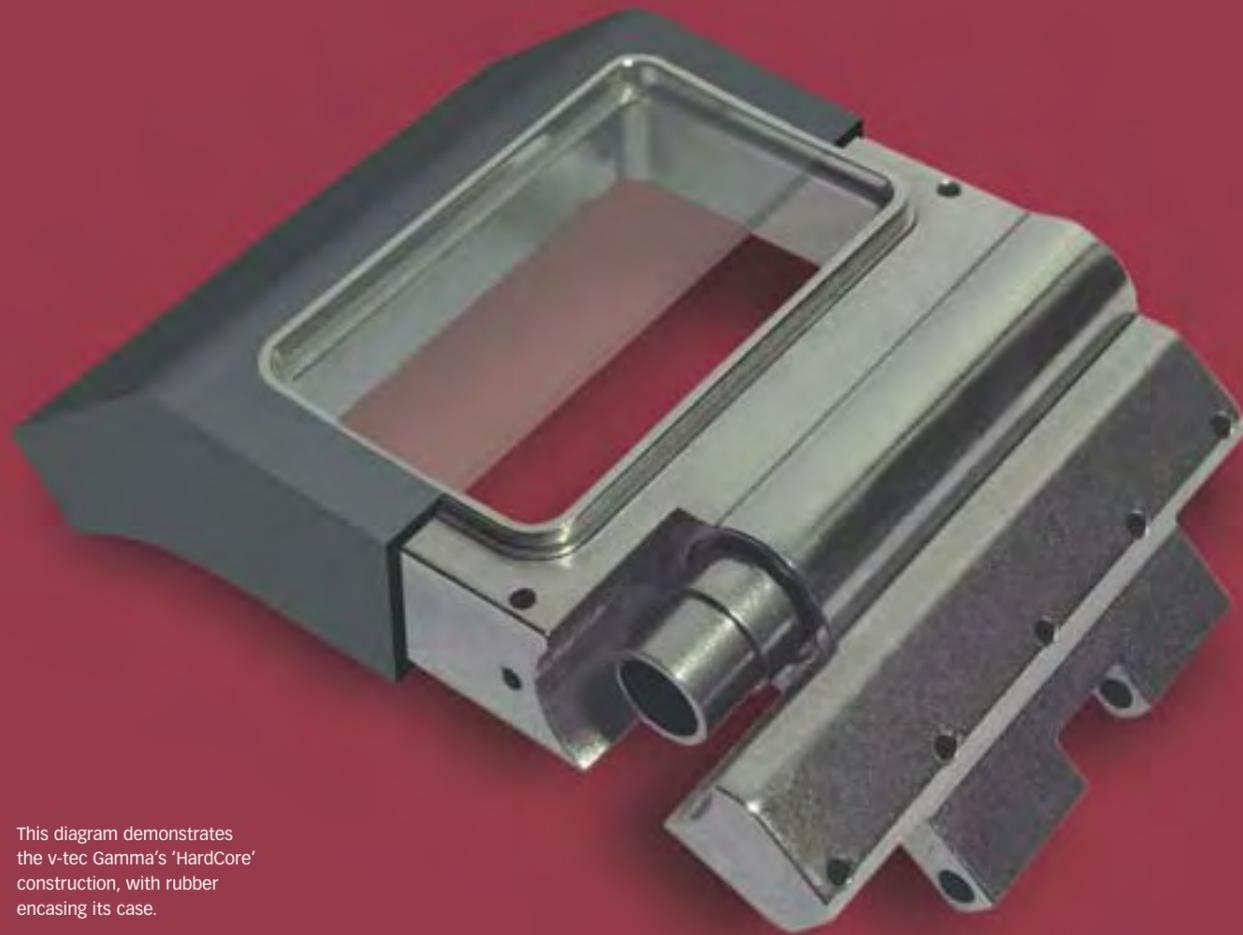
Last year's strikingly designed v-tec Alpha, with bracelet (£990).

Typography of time

Frutiger is somewhat of a legend amongst dedicated followers of fonts. His Frutiger, Avenir and Univers typefaces are as prominent throughout the publishing world as those throughout Charles-de-Gaulle airport and the Metro system in Paris, for which he was specially commissioned. Recently, the Swiss Federal Government announced the replacement of all national street signs with new ones based on a font by Frutiger.

It was somewhat of an honour on Ventura's behalf therefore, when he agreed to create a watch dial for them – a totally new and fascinating task for Frutiger. Searching for the most readable, well-balanced proportions within the constraints of Ventura's style must have been a challenge; especially considering its 13-year lineage of elegant, but simple dial typography. Nonetheless, exclusive to the project, he

Brown strap (£790) and black strap (£790) variations of the v-tec Alpha.



This diagram demonstrates the v-tec Gamma's 'HardCore' construction, with rubber encasing its case.

composed the 'Ventura' font for the myEGO Frutiger range (£1,790–£1,990). A distinct departure from the dials of Ventura's past, it lends a more classic and – dare I say it – conventional feel to the model. It seems to suit the brand just fine though, and plans are already afoot to uphold the fortuitous Frutiger–Wettstein partnership. "Frutiger gave us hundreds of ideas and elements to work with," says Nobs, enthusiastically. "We are really excited about what else we can achieve with him. Of course, the natural progression within Ventura is to digital, and we will be developing a new digital typeface with him very soon..."

Enter the v-tec

Despite Ventura's ongoing commitment to produce chronometers (obtaining certification for its entire output of mechanical watches), BASELWORLD 2003 saw an unpredictable

progression from the SPARC range: the v-tec Alpha (£790–£2,200).

Here was a bold and brash statement of intent, taking Ventura's well-nurtured digital format to the next extreme. Again, the minimalist 'retro-futuristic' style was inherent, love it or hate it. However, further complexity was introduced, with a system of such elegance that you wonder why no-one thought of it before. The patented 'EasySkroll' operating system combines two mechanical movements (scrolling and pushing) within just one crown-shaped control. This enables manipulation of three date formats, a countdown timer, chronograph, alarm, backlight, and of course the time on show.

Not much has changed for 2004's v-tec Gamma model, function-wise – perhaps testament to the beauty of the range's deliberately sparse features.



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But comparison of the Alpha and Gamma (what happened to Beta?) does yield one significant difference between Wettstein's designs that does not include the relocated scroller. The case of the new watch consists of a solid stainless steel core, encased by a thick, rubber-like, urethane cover, to protect the watch from heavy shocks. Wettstein compares the so-called 'HardCore' system with a chestnut: when it falls off the tree, the soft shell protects the hard but vulnerable innards.

It is perhaps such dedicated attention to detail, combined with a solid reputation for mechanical *haute horlogerie*, that allows Ventura to command such a prestigious reputation; an enviable situation, considering the brand has raised its profile through, and built itself upon, the traditionally scorned digital format. The right mix of

world-class design, space-age materials and ultimately innovation nowadays seemingly commands the desired respect (and prices) to gain acceptance from the wristwatch aristocracy.

"There are so many possibilities to explore with digital," enthuses Nobs. "With mechanical watches, you are obliged to 'dress up' the same old movement, working within fairly constrictive criteria. Using new, hi-tech electronic components for SPARC, we could define almost everything ourselves. With the v-tec Alpha, we had a completely blank canvas – a very liberating experience!"

New direction

Interestingly, Hannes Wettstein's agenda is set for a slight upset at BASELWORLD 2004, where

The new v-tec Gamma, being launched at this year's BASELWORLD. Available with a rubber band (left; €800) and hardened-steel 'Durinox' band (right; €1,000).



(Left) The my*EGO* Frutiger, employing the eponymous typographer's specially created Ventura font (£1,790).



(Centre) Hubert Verstraeten's angular case design was applied to an existing Ventura dial to create the *EGO* square (€2,000–€3,000). According to CEO Pierre Nobs, the *EGO* models are named as such in recognition of their design; meant to please the owner alone.

(Right) The v-matic_II chronograph; the latest update of Ventura's ongoing v-matic collection, started in 1996 when Hannes Wettstein first joined (€2,800). Despite a growth in size, the conical shape of the case softens its 'chunkiness'.



we will see Ventura's first deviation from the zed influence within the very watch range that it formulated and maintains. The design of the new v-matic *EGO* square (€2,000–€3,000) comes from Hubert Verstraeten, a young Belgian goldsmith and jeweller.

According to Nobs, the company has never considered square shapes for its mechanical watches before. "His previous designs for rings were amazing," says Nobs, "combining round and square geometry very gracefully. However, designers are notoriously reluctant to concentrate on details such as the dial, so it was wonderful that Verstraeten's case design 'clicked' straight away with the existing *EGO* dial. Somehow, all previous projects had come out as too trendy, too fashionable," he

continues. "This did not match our philosophy. However, Hubert convinced me immediately with his geometry."

And there the idyllic crux would lie, if only modern fashion could be so easily dismissable. Ventura has done well to remain at the cutting edge of 'contemporary' (whatever that means or encompasses), but it is a thin line between setting trends and following them. It has done well to inadvertently dictate current modes for watch design, in a similarly minimalist manner to Apple's recent home electronics revolution. 'Philosophy' or no, it is only a matter of time before the archetypal black roll-necked iPod owner adopts Ventura's latest, geometrically edgy timepiece. It is up to Ventura to keep moving the goalposts... ●

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