



Hublot's Singular Idea

Carlo Crocco keeps to the straight and narrow

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"Consistency" is Mr Carlo Crocco's reply when I ask him to explain the enduring success of the Hublot line. It is as simple as that. "You have to be consistent so that people can understand you." And for Mr Crocco, fidelity is everything. The original porthole-inspired Classic (indeed, *hublot* is the French for "porthole") is still MDM Fabrication SA's best seller, and we have yet to see anything but black rubber on a Hublot strap.



A look through the porthole

Carlo Crocco does not welcome coverage about him personally as he is naturally a discreet man, but to understand Hublot you have to have an understanding of its creator. After reading about Crocco, the Italian who forged Hublot out of sheer determination and a lot of courage, I expected to meet a swashbuckling, gold-buttoned blazer wearer of a man. But this was not what I found at the MDM headquarters in Nyons, a lakeside medieval town half an hour outside Geneva.

Crocco is a man of quiet strength and gentle manners, and no gold buttons in sight; an animal lover who is more at home behind the wheel of his family Volvo than burning rubber in a Ferrari on a racetrack or flying his private jet. Hoping to find a hint of hedonism or a glint of jetsetter glitterati, I ventured a question about his holidays – but no, Crocco would rather stay at home with his wife in Lugano or travel to help the children of southern India, a project very close to his heart.

But his inner calm belies a tale of determination and success. What he has done in the watch industry has not been repeated. In the last few decades almost no one has managed to create an entirely new watch brand from scratch, start off a trend and, what is most astounding, survive the “fashion moment”. But MDM have, and have evolved over 23 years, basing everything around the one product: Hublot.

It is hard to imagine the apprehension that Carlo Crocco must have felt in 1980 when he stood at the Hublot stand at the Basel watch fair. No one had ever heard of this watch before and no one had ever seen a watch that looked like it. The minimalist, porthole-inspired, yellow-gold case with twelve screws on the bezel and the distinctive rubber strap was an all-or-nothing bet. Now comfortably settled behind his desk at the Hublot headquarters in Nyon, Crocco offers me a porthole-shaped chocolate, and recalls the nerves he felt at the time: “it was a strange moment and the reactions were very different.” At the time nobody, least of all Crocco himself, guessed the huge success that this watch line would become. This tearaway son of a family of Italian watchmakers – and the creators of the watch brand Breitling – had made a very bold move. But he had done his homework.

In fact, he had done 3 years of homework. The Hublot Classic was the result of months of research and investigation. Crocco distanced himself from the family business to create a watch that was refined yet understated, comfortable and practical. Crocco describes his aim as: “to create one brand around one image, one watch. And it was very strong because at the time most of the other Swiss watch companies had more than 200 models so they did not have a strong identity.”

A bold step

The story of how he came up with the idea of using a rubber strap alongside a gold case is one of those spark-of-inspiration tales. Legend has it that while Crocco was looking at the initial hand-drawn designs, he consistently struck them out with a thick black felt-tipped pen and came to like the contrast of the deep black strap with the warm gold of the case, that the only way of achieving this matte black was with rubber. And, as the saying goes, “genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration,” then came the long haul of finding a way of making rubber perform to Crocco’s exacting standards. The Malaysian rubber straps with reinforced steel plates in the tips took a long while to perfect. In the late 1970s there was no one who knew how to work rubber to watch-making standards, so Crocco looked to tyre producers to create the exact mix of rubber and steel for the thin, flexible and resilient strap. Possibly the genius touch was to add a subtle vanilla scent



Crocco can be credited with the current fashion for rubber in watch straps and jewellery, but he had to go to tyre producers to get the right mix of materials.

to mask the slight acrid smell of the rubber. The fact that we now see rubber so frequently in watch straps and jewellery can be credited to Crocco.

The improbable marriage of black rubber and yellow gold brought Hublot onto the jetsetters’ radar screen. It helps that this distinctive look is highly recognisable even through a fuzzy paparazzi high-powered zoom lens, and soon the Hublot became both the must-have accessory of the *Hola!* crowd and an essential fashion item in Italy overnight. No doubt its success was aided a great deal by the purchase King Constantine of Greece made for his brother-in-law, none other than King Juan Carlos of Spain. That good-looking, yacht-racing young monarch probably did more for the brand than any carefully orchestrated PR campaign could have hoped for.

There is more

So it would be easy to finish this story here and tick off Hublot as a successful exercise in watch-

making for fickle watch fashionistas. But there is more to tell. Today, Montres MDM Fabrication SA produces 15,000 watches a year – all Hublots of course – and has the enviable position of selling almost the same number of men’s and women’s watches. In fact, so strong is the Hublot name – which is the name of the watch model – that it overshadows the company MDM Fabrication SA (which stands for Montres Danielle Marie). And this, of course, was Crocco’s intention. Like Rolex’s Oyster or Audemars Piguet’s Royal Oak, one strong product associated with the company fixes the brand in the public’s mind. And it worked for MDM – or should I say Hublot...?

Crocco likens his approach to Porsche’s strategy: “Porsche are like Hublot: they are based on one product, the 911 model. The concept of our watches is very similar because it is the evolution of the line but the concept is the same. It is fantastic because we introduced the watch 23 years ago and it is still our best seller.” But there has been

Despite the fact that all Hublot watches are based around the original design of the Classic, MDM have produced many distinctive variations by applying their creativity to the cases and dials of their watches.

The meaning of Art

The Hublot Art Collection features timepieces with faces decorated with engraving, champlevé/cloisonné enamel or bas-relief, and is inspired by Urushi Ancestral Japanese Art, founded in Asia around 6,000 years ago. The Urushi techniques originally involved using gold, silver or mother-of-pearl inlays to beautify furniture, make-up accessories, toys and writing implements. Urushi was also used in Buddhist temples and in the making of armour, helmets and swords.



Urushi lacquer is traditionally made via a lengthy process of up to nine coatings of the sap extracted from the Urushi tree, and takes 3 months to prepare. Even now, none of these stages have been mechanized, meaning that the craftsmen's skills are still an essential part of the production. As the lacquer hardens it takes on a glossy sheen, making it look rounded, wet and deep. Interestingly, 7% of Urushi lacquer is actually natural rubber, a central component of Hublot watches.

one exception to this mono-product approach, which we are sure Hublot would rather forget. In 1988 Crocco launched a new watch called the Thorr, a retro-looking bubble of a chronograph on a Kevlar and steel strap. Five thousand pieces were made but, as Crocco himself admitted, "it was very difficult to create another brand. After this, we realised we had to keep the strategy to one brand." Not without a hint of regret, Crocco shelved the Thorr, but it is clear that this experiment was enough to convince him that sticking to Hublot was the way ahead.

Crocco is adamant that his approach is about the craft of watchmaking. But he will not for an instant claim that he aims to compete on a technical front and create complicated timepieces. Crocco confirms that his watches are fitted with ETA and Frederique Piguet movements. "We do not produce mechanical watches ourselves because there are so many who are very good at it." However, he believes that the art of watchmaking can also be applied to creation of the case and the dials. And the latest chapter in Hublot's history is the creation of limited-edition watches using skills that are still

rare, such as bas-relief, enamel, cloisonné enamel and incision engraving. He has tracked down gun engravers in northern Italy, Dutch and Swiss enamellers, Florentine miniature portrait painters and Japanese Urushi lacquer masters, and applied their skills to his Art Collection watches (see above).

Hublot worldwide

The next big market for Hublot is Russia, along with Japan. The Russians particularly appreciate the enamel work that Hublot have been developing, and have shown interest in the special-edition pieces. While touring the assembly areas, I spotted a specially commissioned series of "77" watches for the Japanese Tigers baseball team, confirming that this nation is showing more than a passing interest in Hublot. For many years Spain has been one of Hublot's strongest markets, something Crocco himself can not fully explain. The Hublot agent in Spain, Milan-born Marzio Villa, concedes that King Juan Carlos did help to raise the profile of Hublot, but this alone can not explain the enduring success of the brand. "After all," Villa explains, "the King has a lot of watches." Villa

credits much of their success to long-term thinking. "The Hublot phenomenon in Spain has not been an overnight sensation but a steady growth that has outpaced the usual big sellers. Hublot occupies the number 2 slot of luxury watch sales in Spain, after Rolex and above Cartier." Villa also recognises that timing was important to his success. "When I started distributing Hublot in Spain, there were few other watch brands in the local market. Rolex were here and Cartier and Omega were just starting to enter the market." Another reason for this success is the fact that Hublot, like the Spanish, prefer classic styles to changing fashions. This would account for why the Classic model still represents 80% of sales in Spain.

Every year new Hublot models are brought out, all being faithful to the original design but with new twists. Each and every one is instantly recognisable as an Hublot, whether the 1910 with a tantalum case and a meteorite dial, or the new extra-large SuperB chronograph – that Crocco himself wears – in pink gold and steel. Even the sparkling array of jewelled women's chronographs, including the Icy Diamonds models, are distinctively Hublot.

What next?

Crocco explains that this is a good moment for Hublot as there are no clear trends making themselves heard in the watch world. At times like these, a "classic" like Hublot does well. "In more mature markets, people like to have an Hublot as a third or fourth watch as it is still very different from other watches." Not a bad niche to have, and one that can hope to be maintained as more people become interested in watches.

As a wholly privately owned watch company with 45 staff, Crocco realistically expects growth to be around 10%–15% per year, which is admirable considering the product offering is based around one line of watches.

As we drove back to the airport past tractors trailing the grape harvest, I was shown the piece of land that MDM Fabrication SA have bought to house the new Hublot production plant and offices. Following the launch of the tantalum model, Crocco promises more innovations in materials used. But do not expect any change in the black rubber strap. That is here to stay. ●

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