

# Autonomy

A look into Girard-Perregaux's past reveals their vision for the future

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What happens when you put together a 200-year-old watch house, an architect turned rally car champion and a three-bridge tourbillon? The answer lies amidst a unique blend of art deco and high technology at Girard-Perregaux's new watch-making facilities in La Chaux-de-Fonds. QP takes a unique peek into Luigi Macaluso's prestigious institution, where this unlikely combination of heritage and revolution seems to be paying off for the man at the helm.



The Richeville Lady Tonneau automatic chronograph – a new jewellery watch with diamond-paved case & mother-of-pearl dial.

(Below) Views of the interior of Girard-Perregaux's art deco building in La Chaux-de-Fonds.

(Bottom) The best-selling 1945 Vintage collection was launched in 1995, inspired by a 1945 model sent in for servicing.

I did not wish to appear ignorant to Willy Schweizer, my guide through the world of Girard-Perregaux. Shifting my weight from foot to foot, the honey-coloured parquet floor creaked in the Villa Marguerite library, but I had to confess that I could not bring to mind any Luis Joseph Chevrolet associated with watchmaking. That, of course, was the intention. At the end of a long rosary of names of the great and famous of La Chaux-de-Fonds, Schweizer dropped the name Monsieur Chevrolet. He was, of course, referring to *that* Mr Chevrolet who,

rather than staying in watch valley and creating pocket-sized mechanical marvels, upped sticks and took up automobile manufacturing in Brooklyn, NY. This was but the tip of the iceberg of Schweizer's detailed knowledge of his beloved home town, and, more importantly, Girard-Perregaux, whose heritage he was about reveal to me.

### Starting point

Girard-Perregaux, founded in 1791, are a watch house steeped in history. This, according to

Mr Schweizer, was the reason the tour should start in the Villa Marguerite museum, a much restored, turn of the century house replete with smiling cherubs and *trompe l'oeil* stone work. Inside, case after case reveals Girard-Perregaux triumphs: the first three-bridge tourbillon pocket watch, dated 1857; the 1798 wafer-thin quarter repeater; Lady Hamilton's novelty, 2 mm-thick watch hidden inside a Florentine ducat of 1826; an 1828 jumping-hour repeater; the dazzling 1880 foudroyante chronographs and automaton repeaters; and the 1906 Grande Complication with perpetual calendar, split-second chronograph and minute repeater. On top of these achievements, Girard-Perregaux claim to have produced the very first wristwatch, or rather the first watch to be conceived and produced as such, meaning that it was not a pocket watch put on a ribbon or used as a jewellery bracelet. This sizeable round gold watch with a chunky protective grill ended up on the wrists of German naval officers in 1880.

However, the enormity of Girard-Perregaux's history became apparent as I stood in front of the 1899 La Esmeralda, a gargantuan pocket watch rippling with an engraving of three wild horses galloping across its case. This watch belonged to General Porfirio Díaz, the charismatic Mexican dictator who in 1876 began his 30-year rule over Mexico. And that this forceful character of Latin America turned to Girard-Perregaux for a timepiece is no coincidence: it is because Girard-Perregaux had established a presence in the Americas long before the thought had occurred to other, less adventurous watchmakers. When demand closer to home had waned, the enterprising Girard-Perregaux turned in 1860 to Buenos Aires – not New York as you would expect – and set up their first overseas sales point. But Buenos Aires was not the only outpost these intrepid watchmakers called home; not surprising if you consider that Yokohoma was an earlier flag on the Girard-Perregaux trading map as far back as 1854.

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like a Boy's Own tale. Girard-Perregaux's is a fascinating history: these are men whose crossed the globe, survived economic downturns, the Great Depression and even the quartz revolution in the 1970s. In fact, so plucky were they that rather than shun the quartz onslaught, they took on the challenge. At the Basel fair of 1970, the conglomerate of Swiss watch producers (including Rolex and Omega) known as the CEH (*Centre Electronique Horlogere*) proudly unveiled their joint masterpiece: the Beta 21 quartz calibre that vibrated at 8,000 Hz. At the same show, and independently of the CEH, Girard-Perregaux presented their quartz Calibre 350 that vibrated at 32,000 Hz and, what is more, could be produced at a fraction of the cost. But when quartz developed into a commodity product, Girard-Perregaux switched their attention back to mechanical watchmaking.

### Maintaining the pace

This did not mean settling into the complacency of tradition. Girard-Perregaux are constantly on the move, especially since Luigi Macaluso bought the firm in 1992 and floored the accelerator of progress, kindling the spirit that set the brand apart. Not that the heritage is ignored though. Every year, an Opera masterpiece is unveiled that pays tribute to Girard-Perregaux's *haute horlogerie* heritage. The Opera 2003 is a watch with a music box mechanism that, if you so wish, will entertain you with a choice of either Mozart or Tchaikovsky on the hour. Almost impossibly complicated, this piece involves 1,500 hours of work and has already managed to log orders that will not be fulfilled until 2007.

However, such ingenuity in watchmaking is not the only trick up the Girard-Perregaux sleeve. More realistic offerings include the Sports Classique Seahawk range launched in 2002, which combines rugged performance with impeccable mechanics for the more horologically sensitive diver, and the curvaceous Richeville line also launched in 2002, which is helping to open up Girard-Perregaux to women buyers. In contrast, the *pour Ferrari* line is where high-octane meets impeccable mechanics. Introduced 10 years ago, these sleek watches set

the precedent of mixing motor racing – Macaluso's passion – with *haute horlogerie*, and continue to be a strong line for the house.

It is, however, the funky 1945 Vintage collection that has become their best seller, with its chunky profiled rectangular case, swooping curves and unexpectedly large lugs. This retro but edgy collection, launched in 1995, was directly inspired by a 1945 Girard-Perregaux design. The story goes that Mr Schweizer was visiting their after-sales centre and happened to see a 1945 model that had been sent in for servicing. Snapping it up, he took it to Macaluso who applied a voluptuous touch to it and thus the successful 1945 Vintage collection was born. The owner of the original 1945 never got his watch back but was rewarded with a brand new 1945, which, we hope, he feels is a fair exchange.

### Onwards

Today, Girard-Perregaux manufacture five basic mechanical calibres and three complicated calibres. The Sowind Group, who encompass both Girard-Perregaux and JeanRichard, manufacture movements and components such as tourbillons for the JeanRichard brand as well as respected watch companies outside the group. But from 2004 their plans are to limit their production to their own brand and JeanRichard, which will help free up resources and increase their autonomy.

Walking down the hill from Villa Marguerite to the new manufacture along the aptly named rue du Succes, Schweizer explains what happened when the need for a new location for their workshops became apparent. Instead of doing the obvious and creating a new facility on an anonymous industrial estate on the outskirts of La Chaux-de-Fonds, Girard-Perregaux looked in the heart of the town and bought an abandoned art deco building from 1918. Still partly under scaffolding, the stone floors and stained glass windows lead to workshops where 21<sup>st</sup> century technology

happily sits next to traditional watchmaking techniques. Automated case-cutting and baseplate machinery grinds away on the floors below the attic atelier where several master watchmakers silently assemble the 76 parts of the famous Girard-Perregaux tourbillon and perform other horological feats of acrobatics. You will not find this kind of environment at many other watch houses, but then again, Girard-Perregaux are not the sort to follow the crowd. ◉



Further information: Time Products. Tel: 020 7416 4160, [www.girard-perregaux.ch](http://www.girard-perregaux.ch)