

# Future Classic



**Bell & Ross are fast gaining a past. QP talks to Carlo Rosillo**

Josh Sims



If your impression is that serious recognition for a watch brand necessarily includes generations of patient development or at least a lone genius producing exquisite one-offs, then Bell & Ross should give you pause for thought. Already ranked highly among watch aficionados for their products' design and craftsmanship, already worn by the discreet for their stealth-wealth understatement (much like IWC, with whom the comparison is most obvious), already sold in exclusive stores throughout 45 countries and already displaying their own benchmark innovations, Bell & Ross are only now approaching their 10<sup>th</sup> birthday.



The Type Démineur has a niche market, its non-magnetic and anti-magnetic properties making it ideal for bomb disposal operations.



Vincent Calabrese, the master watchmaker who helped design the Vintage JH, Bell & Ross' wristwatch with jump-hours and power-reserve indicator.

What is even more unexpected is that their founder and CEO is still only 38. Carlo Rosillo (the "Ross" in the brand name) studied business at a French university, and within 4 years of leaving had followed his love of watches and joined up with design manager Bruno Belamich (the "Bell") to launch the company. "It was just a passion," says Rosillo, "and a passion is hard to resist. Although starting the company was risky, I'm now very glad that I did."

Indeed, Bell & Ross have established an enviable position in the watch world. Being young, they have so far been able to follow their philosophy without wavering, giving their collections a coherent, signature style and unadorned good looks. Unadorned because that is the essence of these watches: stripped down, precise, functional and fully water resistant. They have exceptionally clear, large dials – the current taste for larger watches suits Bell & Ross nicely – "though while at these prices you probably don't buy a watch to tell the time, we think it's a little strange if you can't when you want to," adds Rosillo, mentioning no names. This has, he jokes, given his company a particular popularity among the 60- to 80-year-old bracket.

The Diver 300 chronograph features 300m water resistance and screw-down crown, pushers and case back.



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The watches are classic rather than fashionable. In fact, Bell & Ross deliberately intend not to be fashionable. "Fashion watches are in and out in 6 months," explains Rosillo. "Like Jeeps in the car world, technical watches last in terms of looks as well as build. For us it's all about not having superfluous detail. There's nothing on these watches that is useless. You might say there's not much colour on them, for instance, but until we find that multiple colours have a real function, we won't be using them."

### A brief history

This Bauhausian "form follows function" aesthetic stems from the company's origins. In 1992 Bell & Ross began by collaborating with the Sinn company to design and make instrument panels and clocks for the aeronautic and space industries, its products finding a warm reception from professionals such as astronauts, pilots and divers, who depended on clear timekeeping. Two years later Bell & Ross decided that there was room to turn this into a watch business, which they began by launching the Space 1, a re-edition of the first automatic chronograph worn in space (the German astronaut Reinhard Furrer wore it in 1983 on Spacelab).

Indeed, such was the company's growing reputation among adventurous types that 2 years later Bell & Ross were asked by the French security service to create the Type Démineur for its bomb-disposal teams. With its anti-magnetic case (a magnetic one might, inconveniently, trigger the bomb), this not only gave Bell & Ross some expertise in making exceptionally good-value watches (government agencies are keen not to spend too much on their personnel, and Bell & Ross watches retail from €1,000 to €20,000), but was the company's first watch innovation.

"We even like to think that, while heritage is held in high esteem by much of the watch industry, a lack of heritage is actually an advantage for us," adds Rosillo. "Heritage can be a burden, especially if you have a back catalogue with a few bad designs. It can create an approach you feel compelled to follow. We've been free to start

with a clean product and a clean operation. This gives room for innovation."

In 10 years there has been plenty of that. Aside from watches that are beautiful for their utter simplicity – such as the Vintage 123, which is part of the company's best-selling collection – Bell & Ross' hi-tech manufacturing plant in La Chaux-de-Fonds has produced a highly attractive watch with a jump-hour mechanism and power reserve (the Vintage JH), designed in collaboration with master watchmaker Vincent Calabrese. Another new model, the Space 3, features a telescopic crown system by which the screw-down crown descends entirely into the thickness of the watch case. Bell & Ross have also created a diver's watch (the Diver TE) with a capsule that shows the amount of moisture absorbed by the intensity of its colour, and, most recently, the Hydro Challenger and Hydromax models, which ingeniously have cases filled with a special oil-based liquid that not only makes these diver's watches completely water-resistant, but prevents refraction, allowing them to be read accurately at any angle underwater. And that, by the way, is a long way underwater: the Hydromax, despite not specifically being designed to go anywhere near 20,000 leagues under the sea, holds the world record for water resistance with a rating of 1,110 atm (11,100m).

### Maintaining values

Next up will be a model called the Mystery Diamond, the company's first watch for women, which is due for launch at the end of the year and is, for the moment, under wraps.

"We know women love diamonds but we're not making another diamond watch, or at least not one that uses a diamond for decoration," adds Rosillo, teasingly. "If you follow trends closely, be it for bright colours or diamond embellishments or whatever, you can send a company crazy.

Besides, that just wouldn't be us. We didn't want to launch women's watches if it meant losing our philosophy, so here a diamond is essentially functional. But that's all I can say..."

At least not everything is under wraps. Recent models that have been uncovered include new Pilot models inspired by aviators' watches of the 1950s, a new version of the Space 3 chronograph in titanium together with a new minimalist bracelet, and two new army-green military watches (again, taking their cues from the post-war era) on wide leather bracelets, the chronograph being a limited edition. While a rigorous adherence to the principles of utility and ergonomics might prove a straightjacket for designers, Bell & Ross so far seem to be overcoming the tough demands of staying within their self-imposed boundaries while also offering their fans something new. Rosillo promises a flow of new ideas and new solutions to old watch-making and watch-using problems.

"The launch of Bell & Ross was difficult for much of the industry to understand, I think," he says. "What were we about? Where had we come from? But we quickly managed to capture the interest of people who really love watches, and that has always been motivating. I mean, does the tradition of a watch brand really depend on how long you've been around, or how quickly you consolidate your philosophy? I don't know the answer. But I do know that we're often thought of as being much older than we are. And then you look at a lot of other companies that have been around for decades and you wonder where they're going. In troubled times you have to keep your direction, whether it seems to suit those times or not." ●

The Space 3 incorporates the T-Crown system whereby the crown is telescopic and retractable, allowing it to be integrated into the thickness of the watch case.



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