

# Postcards from Basel & Geneva



It is hardly news to report that this year's shows in Basel and Geneva were somewhat overshadowed by world events. The concentrated display of luxurious indulgence can seem a little insignificant at the best of times, but with the Iraq war finally breaking out and the SARS virus generating panic on an unprecedented scale, the prospect of going to the shows palled a little. The generally gloomy economic picture also meant that hopes of seeing exciting or risky creations were on the low side anyway. So why bother going? Well, several members of the QP team did and, as you will see, are very glad that they made the effort.

While external events certainly did have an impact and some people stayed away, those with real business to do at the fairs were there. The importance of these two pivotal events in what is a significant business by any standards meant that life had to go on. Certainly, by what was on show, there was some evidence of reality kicking in – only the truly confident dared show their more risky ideas.

One real surprise at the Basel show, apart from its rebranding as "BASELWORLD", was the relevance of the BASELWORLD Forum. After several false starts, including a lecture that promised the immediate end of physical retail stores, the organisers managed to combine utility with comprehensibility. Despite the rather odd overall title of the forum, *When Diamonds Shine Through Fog*, Michael Silverstein of the Boston Consulting Group and Paola Durante of Merrill Lynch Italy both managed to impart useful opinions on the world inhabited by the watch industry. Such outward-looking activities still seem a little odd at such an introverted event as a trade show.

As for the watches, surprise, disappointment and satisfaction were to be found across the board. Who would have thought that Zenith would win plaudits for the risky design of their watches?

# Girls & Boys

**Maria Doulton likes what she sees**

From a very selfish point of view, the most welcome innovation seen at the two shows is the rise of mechanical watches for that other 50% of the market: women. The first I came across was Patek Philippe's mechanical Twenty-4 with its manually wound movement, with more to follow. Girard-Perregaux's luscious Richeville ladies' tonneau, Cartier's smaller ladies' Tortue, Zenith's Chronomaster Star and Jaeger-LeCoultre's Master Diadem are confident that women do not necessarily need a spoonful of diamonds to help the mechanics go down – though the odd sparkle does not go amiss. Chanel were in Basel showing the fruits of their new atelier in La Chaux-de-Fond, and are aiming to bridge the fashion-watch abyss with offerings like the ceramic J12 that combines white – this season's new black – with an automatic movement.

Vacheron Constantin, Patek Philippe and Jaeger-LeCoultre are a few of the manufactures upgrading or increasing their

production processes, and more marques are striving to increase their manufacturing autonomy. I counted no fewer than 20 men's watches freshly pumped up with steroids to measure up to the not-so-new outside trend, but let us hope that no one tries to outdo Audemars Piguet's 57-mm-case Royal Oak Offshore Terminator 3. Stranger things have been seen, but Locman's tarantula-sized Latin Lover takes some beating, though I experienced the same wonder when viewing Ebel's tearaway Tarawa line, and I still cannot pronounce it.

The watches that have managed to get under my skin are the curvaceous Vacheron Constantin Egérie for women (mechanical of course) and Piaget's slim and sublime Emperor Tourbillon. But probably my favourite piece has to be the stunningly simple and hugely complex IWC Portuguese Perpetual Calendar.

# My First Time

**Ken Kessler recounts his first ever visit to the Basel and Geneva watch fairs**

Nothing can prepare you for the two trade shows that dominate the watch (and jewellery) industry, and I had avoided them for years because I am not, by nature, a masochist. Window-shopping to me is a form of torment. The thought of sitting at a table with 15 Roger Dubuis Golden Squares and Sympathies... I survived it, just.

But reality soon takes over, and suddenly you appreciate that you are there for a reason: to gather as much information about the year's forthcoming watches as you can, because these are what you will be hearing about, selling or coveting over the next 12 months. And you must use every second wisely, because there are, categorically, more brands than you could ever hope to visit.

BASELWORLD is the massive five-halls-and-hundreds-of-stands affair, equivalent to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas or the Detroit Motor Show. If you were there for the entire week, you would still struggle to visit every stand, save for fleeting calls to grasp a catalogue or press kit. And before that week ends, the "rival" show at Geneva starts, and you have to change cities to make your appointments.

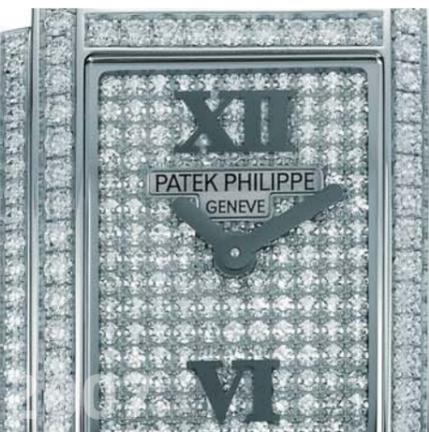
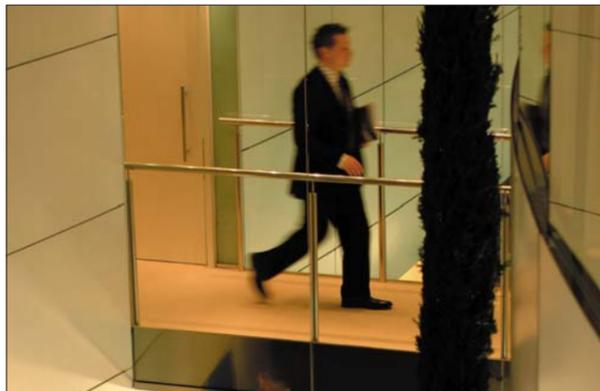
Although they are, ostensibly, rivals, the two events do not compete because Basel is a monster of a show with everything from the Swatch Group, Rolex and Patek Philippe, to strap makers, fountain pen companies and gemstone vendors. Geneva, on the other hand, is an exclusive event of only around 20 exhibitors, and is small enough to cover in a day, in depth. But every hour features a different conference, so you tend to stay a bit longer than the catalogue's floor plan suggests.

## Big and small

Although this was my first Basel/Geneva experience, losing my "virginity" was not painful. I have covered the Consumer Electronics Show around 20 times and it dwarfs Basel in every respect. Basel's biggest stand – the Swatch Group display – would be swallowed by those of Sony or Panasonic, and Las Vegas itself would probably swallow Switzerland. With shorter distances and smaller stands – watches take up less space than home theatres – I managed to visit every brand on my list, while enjoying the discoveries of marques new to me. Rest assured, no matter how deep your love of watches or how many magazines you read, you will find new brands, obscure brands and brands that distribute their wares to so narrow a market that you are unlikely to have heard of them.

What I wanted to avoid writing about here, though, was two sets of "the usual suspects", given that I would be reporting on a mere slice of the action. The first set contains the obvious brands, such as Patek Philippe, Cartier and Rolex, names so famous that every magazine will cover their new products in depth. However, I also wanted to avoid the solipsism of waxing predictably lyrical about the brands I adore and/or collect, such as Officine Panerai, Roger Dubuis, Arnold, Grimaldi and Graham.

In the eyes of the show visitor, and especially a member of the press, all brands should be equal. But they are not. Personal prejudice – and I am a watch extremist – colours your perceptions. I like chronographs, I like steel cases, I hate useless complications, I detest gems on the outside. So, one of the few disappointing things about Basel, more so than



Geneva, was a preponderance of nauseating “bling bling” brands for whom the number of diamonds on the outside is far more important than the number of rubies on the inside.

An example of the bling bling factor, and the way it seduces the unwary (including those who ought to know better), took place at the launch of a brand I need not name. Suffice to say, the company sells sizzle, not steak. To a roomful of hacks, the spokesperson boasted of the brand’s watches being on the wrists of a couple of hundred Hollywood celebrities. The assembled hacks cooed with admiration. Er, duh: those “stars” were given those watches, shmucko.

“Bad taste” aside, there were few, er, bad tastes. Everyone was professional and charming, wearing brave faces despite the prevailing world conditions. So plentiful were the fat catalogues that I had to ship home two large boxes. But they will keep me busy until next year’s events. Which I wouldn’t miss for anything.

### On a personal note

My personal highlights? Let’s make this more specific: aside from the stuff I knew I would like – new Panerai’s, new IWC Portugisiers – the surprise element for me was the host of watches I was not expecting, ones I would buy without hesitation if I had the wherewithal. Someone else can tell you about the new Patek Philippe Tourbillon, the Franck Muller Crazy Hours, Lange & Söhne’s Lange 1 Moonphase for the Australians. Which they will. My (alphabetical) selections are the ones that do not deserve to slip through the net.

Anonimo may be too Panerai-ish for some of you, but hey, I cannot get enough of the big stuff, and I do not mind wannabes like Anonimo and Buti if they’re also Italian. The Anonimo Model 6000 is a chunky limited edition that I would give wrist space to, with its 45-mm-diameter case, highly visible numbers and a helium valve I would never live to use. It is so butch it should be supplied with every Hummer.

Chronographe Suisse is an old name, familiar to collectors for a range of relatively common, fairly decent chronographs from the early 1950s that are always good value at flea markets. The name has been revived with a series of hefty chronographs, too new even to be accompanied at Basel by basic literature. I hope this brand succeeds, because they struck me as offering exceptional value, somewhere in between Oris and Breitling; functional, unpretentious and as handsome as a 1950s RAF Lemania.

De Bethune was one of the new names that made my heart skip a beat. Founded by one of the principals behind the revival of LeRoy, De Bethune is firmly of the “classic” mould, producing exquisite dress watches with magnificent details including Breguet hands, “pointy” lugs, ultra-clear dials, peerless craftsmanship and – for me – a star in their range in the form of a slim, vintage-style, single-button chronograph that you just know would have been worn by Ettore Bugatti had De Bethune launched it over 80 years ago. Along with Chronographe Suisse, possibly one to, er, watch.

Jorg Hysek makes precisely the sort of watches I normally hate – quartz, rectangular, and oh so modern. But the V-King? It must weigh a kilogram – I was hooked in a second. It is cool beyond words, with a bracelet that has the structural integrity of an ammo belt. The trouble is, you will build up an imbalance of muscle wearing it. Seriously.

Omega is, for my money, the most underrated brand in the world, and its Museum Collection has yet to received the acclaim it deserves – why, I do not know. Maybe it is uncool to compliment the Swatch Group, who are regarded as the Microsoft of the watch world. Whatever. I love the latest in the Museum Series, the breathtaking 1945 Officers’ Watch chronograph. But that is not all: I will go one stage further for Omega. This year’s best buy for a do-it-all, sport-cum-dress watch has to be the Seamaster Aqua Terra with Co-Axial Escapement, black dial, broad-arrow hand and Arabic numerals – at 3, 6, 9 and 12 o’clock only, of course. ○

