

# Basel 2003

## The World Watch and Jewellery Show

by James Gurney



HALL OF ELEMENTS  
HALL OF UNIVERSE



'BASELWORLD', as we must learn to call it, looks to be fertile ground for those seeking signs for the year ahead both in terms of economic confidence and emerging trends within the industries concerned. This year also sees the show adopting a new format, with 'unbranded' exhibitors and national pavilions exiled to Zurich; as MCH, the organizers of the Basel show, would have it: "One Show – Two Locations". It is a move that will certainly free up much-needed room in the Basel halls.

The shadow of war in Iraq looms over Basel as a trade fair in a stronger and more immediate sense than would be the case with other industries, particularly as a significant proportion of the buyers expected at Basel are from the Middle East. As *QP* goes to press, it seems that a point of denouement may well have been reached by the time the fair opens its doors to the world on April 3<sup>rd</sup> – a state of affairs for which the organizers are, no doubt, praying earnestly. The current uncertainty, both economic and political, will have already hit visitor numbers, as has been recognised by MCH. Nevertheless, they remain "optimistic about both the quality of visitors and the high level of business that will be conducted over the 8 days of the Show." The evolution of the show over the last few years has happened during a period of what now seems unreal prosperity, so it will be interesting to see how far the changes go toward buffering the impact of current events.

### **Business as usual**

Hopefully, those present at this year's Basel show will find that the outside world will, as usual, seem a little irrelevant in the face of the traditional kaleidoscope of brands and their wares. The long cycle of product development should mean that there is as rich a display of new watches and developments as ever – although no doubt some of the more risk-laden ideas will be held back for another year. As far as the watches are concerned, there is every sign that creativity and variety are still alive, particularly as Bvlgari, Gérald Genta and Daniel Roth have now joined the fold.



As for discerning and predicting trends at this level of the industry, the only safe path is to wait for BASELWORLD. However, you might expect to see the continuing dominance of larger watch cases, along with their use in housing a wider range of small complications than has traditionally been found. A minor quirk that has taken off over the past year is the popularity of offbeat displays such as retrograde hands and asymmetrically designed watch faces. The last year has also seen the announcement of several developments on the movement front as companies such as Eterna have contemplated resurrecting their former expertise. It will naturally be interesting to see whether progress has been made in this respect.

### The main attractions

This year should also be the year to see whether the recent acquisitions by groups such as



Bvlgari, LVMH and the Swatch Group have developed according to plan. In this category, one of the most exciting to watch is Zenith, whose transformation under the direction of Thierry Nataf has been quite startling, particularly after his conscious attempt to push the value of the brand ever higher. Perhaps the most keenly examined name in this class will be Breguet, who will be attending their third Basel show as part of the Swatch Group. Given that Breguet is the single most respected name in the world of horology, all in attendance will be expecting to be impressed and amazed. Indeed, all eyes will be watching Breguet very closely to see whether there has been any slip from their usual high standards.

The last few years have seen the growth of a number of smaller independent watch-making companies whose lack of industrial clout is more



than made up for by their ability to create and inhabit niches of their own devising. These companies represent a broad expanse of tastes and styles, and include such diverse brands as Frederique Constant, Hublot and Ulysse Nardin, the latter being particular specialists in revealing show-stoppers.

The most competitive area of horology in recent years has been what is referred to, sometimes derisively, as the fashion sector. Where once there seemed a certain disdain for the markets they court, many established fashion brands have, over the last few years, integrated the watches produced under their names with their core activities. Gucci has long followed this route, and the watches shown on Christian Dior's stand last year were far closer in style and approach to the clothes that their models showed off on the catwalk.

The one place guaranteed to reveal surprises and gems is the Academy of Independents (AHCI)'s stand. Always a Mecca for those collectors who visit the Basel show, the presence of watchmakers as diverse in origin, style and outlook as Peter Speake-Marin, Kiu Tai Yu and Svend Andersen promises treasures aplenty.

Being concentrated in a relatively small area, the Swiss watch industry has a strongly village-like atmosphere, particularly where gossip is concerned. This naturally extends to the directions that watch designers are moving in. Unsurprisingly, the activities of competitors attract a great deal of attention, and efforts are made to predict the trends and styles that will dominate. For all this second-guessing, the only real certainty is that BASELWORLD will, as ever, surprise, amuse and, no doubt, also frustrate us. ○