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Watch brands polish image of in-house skills

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Horological Machine 1 by Maximilian B? & Friends, MB&F, has two overlapping circular faces, one for minutes and the other to show the hours, a tourbillon cage inspired by the battle-axe of a Japanese Manga hero, and a stunning black polish, one of the most difficult finishes to execute.

The horological equivalent of a Bugatti sports car, the \$140,000 watch was officially introduced in September ? by which time all 30 of the first year's planned production run had been pre-sold to six retailers around the world, solely on the basis of the design.

"We want our creations to generate emotion, and as such they are very polarizing: you either hate it or love it," B? owner of the new brand, which is positioning itself as a concept label, said in a recent interview.

"The first reaction is always that of awe, because the collectors have never seen anything like this, and have therefore no referential," B?said. "It takes a while to adjust, but the watch has been very well received in Asia. The Singapore and Tokyo retailers have both already presold the entirety of their first year's order with us."

Each year, B?plans to invite a different group of independent artisans, engineers and master watchmakers ? the "friends," as the company calls them ? to come together for "one incredible, world-premiere achievement in horology," which will be produced in a limited edition.

The first, HM1, was conceived by the designer Eric Giroud, the movement engineer Laurent Besse and the independent watchmaker Peter Speake-Marin. A total of only 100 watches will be made.

This may be MB&F's first design, but B?is no stranger to watch collectors. As the managing director of Harry Winston Rare Timepieces in Geneva for seven years, he transformed the New York jeweler's small watchmaking division into a highly respected brand by pushing the in-house integration of design, research, development and manufacturing.

"This allowed us to ensure that our products would be manufactured, in times when our suppliers were not able to deliver due to much larger orders from bigger brands," he said.

Attempting to appear more exclusive to discerning collectors, some luxury watch brands have in recent years tended to make their own in-house movements, a movement being the ensemble of a watch's principal parts.

"Nowadays, anybody can become a watch brand by just buying a movement and then designing a case around it," said Patrick Tan, head of a watch promotional body set up by a luxury retailer, Sincere Watch, in Singapore.

"Hence the appeal of in-house manufactured movements, where a movement is created specifically for a watch," Tan said. "If you are buying a Porsche and open the hood, you expect to see a Porsche engine inside, not something else."

Still, some collectors are skeptical. Harry SK Tan, a law professor by day and an avid watch blogger by night, warned that claims to in-house, artisanal production often amounted to little more than marketing hype. While some companies design their own movements, others buy them in, modify them slightly and pass them off as in-house design.

"When a brand says it's doing everything in house, I always take it with a pinch of salt," he said. "In reality, it is unheard of and completely ineffective for everything to be made in house."

Experienced collectors look for a movement that is original and cohesive in concept and execution, and a case that is carefully finished ? preferably by hand ? by the watchmaker whose name appears on the dial. The finest and most sought-after watches are those that have been designed from scratch, with casing and movement developed in tandem and fully integrated.

For connoisseurs, only a few brands stand out: Patek Philippe, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Girard-Perregaux among them. The main reason is the initial investment needed to develop a new movement, which can take as long as six years from start to finish, depending on its complexity. That compares with perhaps 8 to 10 months from design to production for a timepiece with a pre-existing, relatively generic, movement.

B? for example, said that the research and development costs of HM1, which had a completely new movement, came to around \$1.5 million, even before adding in the huge cost of manufacturing, finishing, assembling and regulating the 376 components of the movement ? some thinner than a hair and finished with micron-scale precision.

Willy Schweizer, curator of the Girard-Perregaux Museum, said that his company invested 15 percent of its annual turnover in research and development just to create in-house movements.

Watch making encompasses many different skills, Schweizer said.

"We are like an iceberg: there is the visible part, the brands, and the invisible one, the companies supplying the machines, the tools, the raw material, specific components like the jewels, the shock-absorbers, the gears, and whose names never appear to the public," Schweizer said.

B?said luxury brands should come clean about who is doing what on their watches.

"One of the tenets of MB&F is to battle against the injustice done to all these incredible, independent artisans," he said, "watchmakers and creators who are never credited for the work they do for the most prestigious watch houses.

"Let us not forget that the whole Swiss watch industry has been built over hundreds of years on small companies and artisans, who would work in their small workshops and deliver their product to the brands who would assemble and sell the completed timepiece."

"Even today, the Swiss watch federation counts over 650 companies involved in watch making, and less than 20 percent of them are brands," B?said.

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