

Still ticking: The improbable survival of the luxury watch business

In an increasingly digital world, people are still willing to spend huge amounts on analogue timepieces. The question is, why?

by Simon Garfield

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n 17 March 2016, the watch manufacturer Breitling

opened a lavish new stall at Baselworld, the world's biggest watch fair, to show off its latest marvels. There was the Avenger Hurricane, a beefy black and yellow extravaganza in a special polymer casemade specifically to survive all extremes of superhuman adventure (£6,500). There was the Superocean Chronograph M2000 Blacksteel, with full functionality at a depth of 2,000 metres (£3,850). And there were at least 60 other items, each out-glistening the other in an attempt to demonstrate a new and expensive way to tell the time.

And then there were the fish. Above the entrance to the temporary shop – which, at 10 metres high, was really more of a pavilion – was a huge tank holding 650 jellyfish. The tank – really more of an aquarium – was the size of a new London Routemaster bus sliced down the middle. Empty, it weighed 12 tonnes; its 16,113 litres of water added another 16.5 tonnes. Because it contained so many fish and so much water, the tank's sides were made from a 13cm-thick layer of methacrylate, a transparent material similar to plexiglass.

Precisely what the jellyfish had to do with selling watches was a mystery, and it would remain a mystery until they were removed from the tank when the pavillion closed. Perhaps they represented freedom; perhaps they were a reminder of the sort of thing you could see if you purchased a Breitling diving chronometer. But the strangest thing about the tank was that most people who saw it just glanced up and swiftly moved on. Considering where it was, it didn't seem unusual at all.

For eight days each year, [Basel becomes the centre of the watch universe](#). The fair's organisers claimed 150,000 paying visitors and 1,800 brands spread over 141,000 square metres of exhibition space. Admission cost 60 Swiss francs a day (almost £50), for which one could have bought a nice Timex. Near the Breitling pavilion was an obelisk for Omega, and a palace for Rolex. TAG Heuer adorned its booth with a TAG Heuer-sponsored Formula 1 racing car. One could spend many hours walking the plush carpets here, and encounter many very handsome men and women promoting Breguet, Hublot, and Longines, and very many handsome men and women buying their wares, too. Some booths were also selling jewellery – including Chanel, Gucci and Chopard – and some brands were selling watches covered in jewels: symphonies of the unnecessary, such as the Harry Winston Premier Moon Phase 36mm, with mother of pearl and 104 brilliant-cut diamonds.

The show was a celebration of our mastery of timekeeping, and of the refinement and years of training that go into making objects of beauty and accuracy. But it was also a celebration of excess and superfluousness, of watches that exist merely because they can, like animal acts at a circus. Many worked on the most intricate levels to perform functions almost beyond usefulness: there were watches with a calendar that lasts 1,000 years; there were watches showing the phase of the moon in a different time zone. And then there were items such as the Aeternitas Mega 4 from Franck Muller, assembled from 1,483 components. This would announce the hours and quarter-hours with the same chime sequence as Big Ben. At its launch, it was heralded by its makers as the most complex wristwatch ever made, and a grandiose work of art. In addition to its 36 “complications” – a

complication is essentially a nice gimmick – was the ability to tell the time. Another complication was that it cost £2.2m.

And therein lies the mystery of the modern timepiece. These days, no one requires a Swiss watch to tell the time – or a watch from any country. The time displayed on our mobile phones and other digital devices will always be more accurate than the time displayed on even the most skilfully engineered mechanical watch, yet the industry has a visual presence in our lives like few others. The storefronts of the world's big-money boulevards glow with the lustre of Rolex and Omega; newspapers and magazines appear to be kept in business largely by watch adverts; airports would be empty shells without them. The export value of the Swiss watch trade fell by 3.3% last year, due primarily to a downfall in demand from the east Asia. But it is up 62.9% compared with six years ago. In 2015 the world bought 28.1m Swiss watches valued at 21.5 billion Swiss francs.

We live in uncertain economic times, but watch prices at Baselworld show no signs of making a cut-price concession to the unstable yen or rouble, or even the recent competition from the Apple Watch. Indeed, the opposite seems to be true: the higher the asking price, the greater the appeal, for cheapness may suggest a reduction in quality.

So the Rolex Oyster Perpetual Day-Date 40 in platinum (“The watch par excellence of influential people”) is on sale for £41,700, while the platinum Patek Philippe Split-Seconds Chronograph with the alligator strap (“For men who take accuracy seriously”) is £162,970. For some collectors, this would be considered entry-level: the most complicated limited-edition watches sell for £1m or more. These watches have a waiting list, as the world only contains so many squinting master craftsmen who can make them, and even they haven't found a way to extend the day beyond 24 hours.

But why do we continue to buy these over-engineered and redundant machines? Why do so many people pay so much for an item whose principal function may be bought for so little? And how does the watch industry not only survive in the digital age, but survive well enough to erect a 16,000-litre salt-water shrine to its continued mastery of an outmoded art? Far beyond the telling of time, watches tell us

something about ourselves. And so the answers to these questions lie within our propensity for extreme fantasy, our consumption of dazzling marketing, our unbridled and shameless capacity for ostentation, and our renewed reverence for craftsmanship in a digital world.

And perhaps there is something else ticking away at us – a feeling that the acceleration of our daily lives may soon prove overwhelming. When watchmaking began, we had no concept of packed calendars and unbreakable deadlines, much less of “quality time” or “me time”. Our days were not ruled by the clock. These days, having brought this ungovernable storm of rush upon ourselves, we may be grateful for anything – not least a beautiful windable timepiece – that reinstates at least an illusion of control.

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he Patek Philippe showroom at 18 New Bond Street has

been done up in a sophisticated palette of sycamore, brass and alabaster. Here we may find the revered Swiss company’s entire current Patek collection, stretching from the relatively modest Calatrava and Aquanaut models (beginning at around £5,000) to the ludicrous Grandmaster Chime Ref 6300 in white gold, fat as a fist, which costs in the region of £1.7m.

One enters the salon through a double-door airlock, ensuring that no one gets in who may not appreciate exquisite artistry, and no one leaves who has not settled their account. The showroom – at 400 square metres, the largest single-brand watch emporium in the UK – was not sufficiently large to host its own opening party in December 2014. The event was held in a glass pavilion in the courtyard of Somerset House, decorated for the night in a style that would not have

looked out of place in the heyday of Versailles, albeit a Versailles lit by LED lights on fake cherry trees.

The London salon is the most modern of Patek's three flagship stores, but they all share a similar retail psychology. The others, in Paris and at the company's home in Geneva, envelop the clientele in an identical citrus scent, and in all three, the piped music is as suave and alluring as 1950s Monaco. "There are a few subtle differences," the company's PR chief tells me. "In London you get biscuits with your coffee, whereas in Geneva you get chocolates."

In all three stores an imminent purchase is made more pleasurable, and more likely, with the arrival of champagne. The London outlet has a lower-ground area resembling a library, and a twinkling, softly lit "celestial room" where prospective buyers may examine watches with ultimate discretion. The entire showroom has purposely banished all facets of the digital world: there are no iPads or electronic tills, and the staff have undergone a course in calligraphy to enable the careful inking of customer receipts and guarantees.

"My expertise is making people happy and to create an environment my customers enjoy," said Ed Butland, the store's director. "We will show you any item suited to your needs and circumstance. Money is the last thing we want to talk about." On the day I visited, Butland was not wearing his usual watch, a manually wound platinum Calatrava with a two-tone dial, but conducting a wear-test on a stainless-steel ultra-thin movement porthole Nautilus that had just been serviced.

It's nearly the only jewellery we can have as a man. It's not only a watch, it's a piece of art
Ed Butland

"An iPhone has no soul," he said. "With most electronic devices there's just a screen and a back, and nothing that connects you with what's actually going on to make it work, and nothing's moving. There's no human element and no human emotional connection." This partly explains the longstanding appeal of a mechanical timepiece of any make. A few weeks before my tour of the showroom, I had visited Patek Philippe's headquarters in the Geneva suburb of Plan-les-Ouates,

where I talked to Thierry Stern, the company's president. He had his own thoughts on why the watch endures.

“We should never forget that it's nearly the only jewellery we can have as a man,” he said. “And it's something nice! We should never forget that. It's not only a watch, it's a piece of art. If they [our customers] want to keep it as something of value, fine. I would prefer to see them wearing it. It's also a reward I think. Yes, you could give a quartz or digital watch to your son for his wedding, but I do not think those types of items today will last. They will change every year, like phones, so should I engrave a [digital] watch like this and say ‘Happy Birthday from your dad’, and then what are you going to do the next year?”

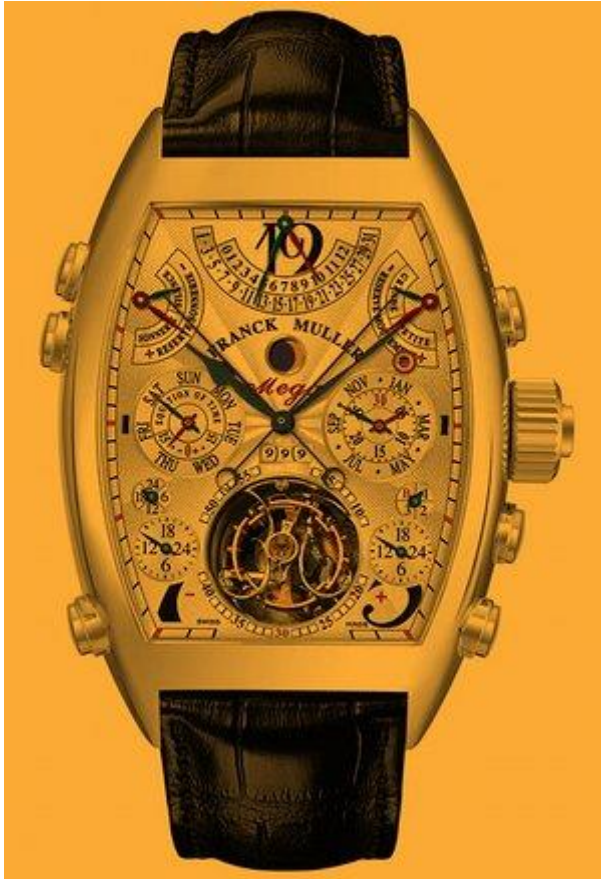
Patek Philippe prides itself on being the last independently owned watchmaker in Geneva. The company has been in the hands of the Stern family since 1932. Thierry Stern, who is 46, took over from his father Philippe six years ago. He is gently unassuming and comfortably portly, and quite lacking in the hauteur one may expect from the head of such a distinctive brand. He speaks softly and laughs easily – one has no trouble picturing him selling ties, or with a pot of fondue in front of him. He recalled a meeting he had recently in New York with industry leaders from Silicon Valley, and he was surprised to see how many of them wore Patek. When he asked them why, he told me, “They all said the same: ‘It brings us down to earth, and it's nice to have something mechanical when you've been working in the digital world for so long.’”

Jay Z has rapped about owning a Hublot and the 'big-face' Rolex ('I got two of those') he boasts in a duet with Kanye

In the last six years Stern has increased annual production from about 40,000 watches to 60,000, which is still a minuscule output compared to a Swiss giant like Rolex, which produces more than 700,000 watches a year. Exclusivity is a key to desirability. Stern maintained that he was not worried by a difficult start to the year and the impact of Brexit on sales; he had just approved the designs for the collection for 2028. When you're dealing with time, he suggested, it helps to take the long view.

Patek Philippe, which sold its first watch in the 1850s, has never been at the vulgar end of the market, and doesn't look for endorsements from star footballers and rappers the way other brands do. Jay Z, for example, who has rapped about owning a Hublot and the "big-face" Rolex ("I got two of those!" he boasts in a duet with Kanye West on their album *Watch the Throne*) might not seem the most likely customer of the more subtle Patek brand. But he is: he has been spotted at basketball games wearing a £120,000 Grand Complications model in white gold. Perhaps he likes the elegance and (relative) restraint of it, a 21st-century billionaire hankering for an updated 19th-century masterpiece. Either way, he is certainly an avid consumer of the brand's brilliant marketing.

Patek has run virtually the same advert for the last 20 years, and it contains a tagline that is both enduringly effective and highly annoying: "You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation." The line is accompanied by images of models in various stages of self-satisfaction: a father seated at a piano with his son, a mother laughing with her daughter over life's little luxuries. The photographs, taken by Herb Ritts, Ellen von Unwerth, Mary Ellen Mark and other artists whose work hangs in museums, are designed to stir a sense of responsibility and family obligation, of dynasty and heritage. They may appeal primarily to someone with new money aspiring to be someone with old money. Buy an expensive watch, they seem to be saying, and you will belong.



The Aeternitas Mega 4 from Franck Muller. Photograph: www.thewatchquote.com/mesIMG/imgStd/28276

Tim Delaney, the chairman of Leagas Delaney, the English advertising company responsible for the “Generations” campaign, told me that the adverts arose out of a desire to reflect Patek Philippe’s own sense of longevity and belonging – the fact that, unlike most watch brands, which are owned by large conglomerates, the company is independent.

I asked him why his campaign had lasted so long. “I think it’s a universal insight,” he says. “It’s not pushy – the thought doesn’t run down, it doesn’t become less intelligent the more you see it.” The photographs are an attempt “to show humanity and warmth. Truth ... It’s idealised. Everyone knows it’s advertising. You have a strong sense that it’s a natural bond between the two people, the father and the son, mother and daughter, so it’s palatable, but it’s not a photograph of a guy with his real son.” I asked Delaney whether there were any other watch campaigns he admired, and he thought for less than a second before he said “No.”

In the last century we have experienced the breaking of the

sound barrier, the invention of the atomic clock, radio-controlled timekeeping, the internet, and pixelated clocks pulsing inexorably on our computers and phones. And yet none of these developments has threatened the dominance of the Swiss watchmaking industry. Exports soared even during the second world war – with the rest of Europe in turmoil, the temporal reliability of neutral Switzerland assumed even greater significance. For example, the International Watch Company – a leading manufacturer based on the banks of the Rhine, in the northern Swiss city of Schaffhausen – sold its Big Pilot’s Watch to both the RAF and the Luftwaffe. Both sides were grateful for its massive dial, its huge glove-operable crown and its protection against sudden drops in air pressure as they tried to shoot each other out of the sky.

In 2014, the Swiss exported 29m watches. This was only 1.7% of all watches bought globally, but 58% of their value. This raises a string of questions. Why Switzerland in the first place? How did this unassuming, landlocked country come to dominate the industry? And how did it master the art of charging tens of thousands for an object that often kept time less accurately than an object costing £10?

The first mechanical watches were not Swiss. The earliest – first round and then oval-shaped, and worn as large necklaces – appeared around 1510 in Germany, the Netherlands, France and Italy. A small trade developed in Geneva a few decades later, thanks largely to artisans employed as goldsmiths; filigree and enamel work, and experience with intricate engraving tools, enabled craftsmen to turn their attention to miniature mechanics. There were 176 goldsmiths working in Geneva in the 16th century, and their emergent watchmaking skills were almost certainly aided by the arrival of Huguenot refugees from France.

None of this quite explains why it was Switzerland, rather than Germany or France, that gained the pre-eminent reputation for precision and beauty. But this is because that reputation emerged primarily in the 20th century. Prior to this, companies such as Breguet, Cartier and Lip in Paris, and many small firms based in Glasshütte, in the German state of Saxony, all produced prized specimens. (These regions still produce fine watches, they just struggle to compete with the cachet of being made in Switzerland.)

In England, which could justifiably claim to be the innovative centre of clock and watchmaking in the 17th and 18th centuries, the roster of premier craftsmen included names still celebrated at the Greenwich Royal Observatory and the British Museum: Thomas Mudge, John Harrison and Thomas Tompion. With the exception of Harrison, whose clocks enabled the calculation of longitude at sea, the names are now all but forgotten, owing to the habitual British practice of neglecting the concerns in which it once led the world.

But the Swiss just kept on going, occasionally buying up the most prominent firms elsewhere in Europe, and forming trade bodies and certification targets that increased the industry's reputation for quality and honesty. In the 19th century, the Swiss became masters of the increasingly flat mechanisms that enabled traditional pocket watches to evolve into wristwatches; a watch worn as a bracelet was particularly useful when riding on horseback.

The Swiss also made full use of new innovations, enthusiastically replacing the old method of winding a watch by key in favour of the modern stem-and-crown mechanism. In the early 20th century, they combined the new American-originated system of conveyor-belt mechanisation with the finest methods of local hand-crafting.

Today, the particular qualities that make a watch Swiss are the subject of strict legal definition, and are as closely regulated as champagne or parmesan cheese (the description on watches is always "Swiss made" or just "Swiss" rather than "Made in Switzerland", a tradition dating back to 1890). To qualify, a watch must meet certain strict criteria (or, according to the Fédération de l'Industrie Horlogère Suisse FH, where this classification originates, a watch must adhere to "The new

requirements stipulated by Swissness”). To classify as Swiss Made, a watch must a) have a Swiss movement (that is, the basic mechanism consisting of cogs and springs that make the watch tick) b) have this movement incorporated in a case that is made within Switzerland and c) be checked and certified in Switzerland.

All was going well until the 1970s, when something hit the hand-made mechanical watch trade like a mallet. As the decade progressed it seemed that the Swiss would not, after all, be telling the world’s time for ever. In September 1975, *The Horological Journal* – a well regarded trade publication founded in 1858 – announced “a milestone in the history of horology”. On its cover was a picture of a Timex, a watch that ran on quartz. It contained a tiny piece of crystal that resonated at a high and fixed frequency when powered by a battery. This steady signal was then transmitted to an oscillator, an electronic circuit that regulated the gears that turned the watch hands. The old mechanism of winding and power storage in a coiled spring was dismissed at a stroke.

The quartz movement had been around since the 1920s, but its miniaturisation had only been achieved in prototype by Seiko and Casio in Japan in the late 1960s. Its price had previously taken it beyond the general consumer, but now, through mass production at Timex and its main American rival Bulova, the electronic watch represented a change of philosophy – a piece of disruptive technology long before the phrase existed. It was solid state, with no ticking, and the new watch heralded the dawn of mass tech-based consumerism. Split-second timing, once the exclusive domain of physicists and technicians, was now available to all, and there was no better symbol of the seismic shift from the mechanical to the electronic world. Time itself was now flashing at us everywhere. No theatre visit was complete without half-hourly beeping from watches in the audience, alarms were now rushing us to every appointment.

The Swiss reacted to the digital disruption with a combination of denial and mild panic. Between 1970 and 1983, the Swiss share of the watch market fell from 50% to 15%, and the industry shed more than half its workforce. As one of Tom Stoppard’s characters put it in his 1982 play *The Real Thing*, “It looked all over for the 15-jewel movement. Men ran through the marketplace shouting ‘the cog is dead!’” But the days of the

Japanese digital watch were numbered. In the early 1980s, with doom on the horizon, the Swiss fought back with a new philosophy of their own, and something plastic, cheaper and powered by quartz and battery: the Swatch.

The Swatch – from its name onwards – injected colour, youth and fun into Swiss watches (God knows, the fusty industry needed it). The watches were sold in the company’s own shops and advertised on MTV, while artists and film directors, including Keith Haring and Akira Kurosawa, designed limited editions and made watches hip and desirable again for a new generation. With the panic over, the Swiss could once more concentrate on numbering their bank accounts. In 2014, gross sales of the Swatch watch amounted to more than 9bn Swiss francs. Today, the Swatch Group is the world’s largest watchmaking company, consisting of brands – including Longines, Blancpain and Rado – that once would have shuddered at the thought of being owned by an empire with such garish foundations. Swatch even owns Breguet, the company that claims to have made the first wristwatch in 1810.

Earlier this year, in an interview with the New York Times,

Brad Pitt recalled his time on the set of the second world war movie Fury. Pitt, who is a brand ambassador for TAG Heuer, remembered that Logan Lerman, the youngest actor in the cast, was given a watch to keep track of various activities during the film’s rehearsals. “One day he came to me and said the watch has stopped, and I said, ‘You’ve just got to wind it.’ He came back literally 15 minutes later and said, ‘Wait, how do you wind it?’”

For those born into the digital age, making a watch start may seem as distant and implausible as crank-starting a car

For those born into the digital age, the prospect of making a watch start may seem as distant and implausible as crank-starting a car or changing the ribbon on a typewriter. But it is precisely this process – the end of a feat of infinitely intricate human engineering – that appeals to the watch connoisseur. It also explains why a fine watch costs so much.

Making anything really small by hand tends to be extremely expensive. In the watch industry, the precision of the tiny parts is one reason for the great cost (even the tiniest screw costs eight Swiss francs, precisely because it is such a tiny screw). But the major contributory factors are human and old-fashioned – the wisdom, handed down through centuries, required to make something beautiful and functional from an otherwise inanimate assemblage of metal and stones. In each of the magnificent Grande Complication watches made by the International Watch Company (IWC) there are 659 parts – 453 more than there are bones in the human body.

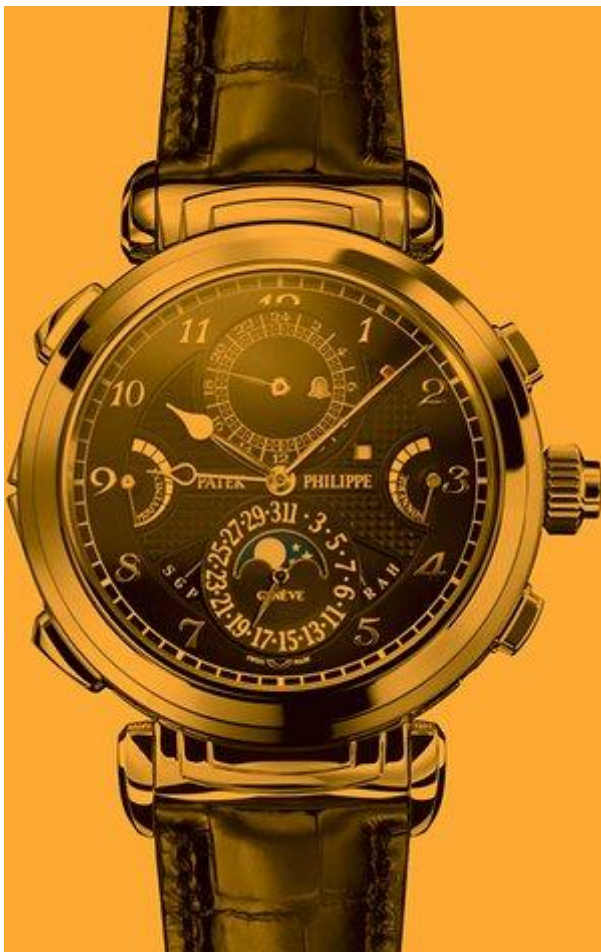
But this is nothing compared with the Patek Philippe Grandmaster Chime, which holds 1,366 parts within a 16.1mm-thick case. This is the one with the £1.7m price tag, and I handled one for a brief minute when I visited the Geneva headquarters (how time flies when you're enjoying something you know will soon be taken away from you). The watch did actually feel expensive. It had a dual-face, a power mechanism running at 25,200 semi-oscillations per hour, a perpetual calendar, a strikework isolator display, a moon phase, and a Grande and Petite Sonnerie (internal chimes and alarms with tiny hammers striking polished gongs when activated by a side lever to let the wearer know the time in the dark).

It was as heavy as any wrist would bear, and was without question a masterpiece of horological art. But the thing I liked most about it was that after nine years on the drawing board, and as many at the manufacturer's workbench, you still had to wind the damn beautiful thing by hand.

It's the God complex, or the Frankenstein complex. You have the white overcoat, and you're creating life.”
Watchmaker Christian Bresser

The greatest wonder of all is that this watch has a mechanical movement, much of it adapted from pocket watches created in the 17th century. The precision tooling and some of the fitting may be done by machine now, but the design and final assembly – the tiny screws, springs, plates, wheels and jewels, the weights on the edge of the balance wheel, the ratchets that mediate the power supply, the interconnected barrels that create an energy reserve, and the pallet fork attached to the escapement wheel that causes the ticking sound – are done by brain and hand.

A master watchmaker at IWC Schaffhausen named Christian Bresser once told me that making a watch made him feel omnipotent. “It’s the worst thing to say, but it’s the God complex, or the Frankenstein complex. You have the white overcoat, and you’re creating life.”



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The Patek Philippe Grandmaster Chime. Photograph: Jean-Daniel Meyer/Patek Philippe/JD Meyer

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reating life from pinions and pivots and tiny screws may

be the easy part. One then has to sell the thing. With so many watch companies producing only slight variations of the same product, how should the well-heeled buyer make a choice in this crowded market? Should we rely, as we increasingly do in our modern world, on guidance from celebrities?

At Baselworld in 2015 I squeezed my way into a launch of a new watch at a pavilion designed for Hublot. A flashy newcomer on the scene, Hublot was set up by an Italian in 1980, based itself in Nyon, a town in south-western Switzerland, and was owned by the French luxury goods conglomerate LVMH. Hublot prides itself on its timekeeping for leading sporting events, and its recent brand ambassador was José Mourinho, manager of Manchester United and a keen watch collector.

Brand ambassadors are a key element of watch salesmanship, and the fact that they do not usually wear a watch at all while achieving their greatest feats is not a major consideration. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo have signed for Audemars Piguet and Jacob & Co. Alongside Mourinho, Hublot also has Usain Bolt. Breitling has John Travolta and David Beckham, Montblanc Hugh Jackman, Rolex Roger Federer, IWC Ewan McGregor, and Longines Kate Winslet. Patek Philippe has shied away from celebrity endorsements, but it did once boast that its clients included Queen Victoria.

When Mourinho appeared at Baselworld in 2015 he was still manager of Chelsea. He was wearing a grey raincoat over grey cashmere, and he accepted his watch with light applause and a short speech about how he has been part of the “Hublot family” for a long time as a fan, but now it had all been made official (ie he had received his bank transfer).

His watch was called the King Power Special One, almost the size of a hockey puck, 18-carat “king gold” with blue carbon, a self-winding Unico manufacture Flyback Chronograph with 300 components, an immense 48mm case, all the mechanics exposed on the dial side, blue alligator strap, a skeleton dial, a power reserve of 72 hours, an edition of 100 and a price in the region of £32,000. The promotional blurb claimed that the item was just like Mourinho himself: “The watch is provocative ... the robust exterior hides the genius below.” It was both stunning and hideous at the same time.

But the most remarkable thing about the Hublot King Power was not that it looked like an armoured tank, but that it did not keep very accurate time. When the popular American magazine WatchTime conducted tests on an earlier model, it found it gained between 1.6 to 4.3 seconds a day. Extra time: yet another thing for Mourinho to dispute with the referee.

But accurate timekeeping has long ago ceased to be the point. And this, with deep irony, is another reason why the global watch industry survives. Once you can afford to spend even entry-level prices for a Patek Philippe or a Hublot, your watch has begun to represent status and one-upmanship. A watch is a statement of achievement, and also of intent. (It is also one of the easiest ways to export money from one country to another.) Something glittery on your wrist says something about your earning power and your taste, much as an expensive car can do; it is not always an attractive trait. It’s a delusion, of course, but the fatter and more complicated and expensive the watch, the more the wearer may assume control of the universe, the still centre of a spinning wheel.

Baselworld 2017 has already announced itself as “a fairground for the senses”. Next March, the show will feature an expanding array of smart watches, items that suggest the leading brands are not prepared to suffer another debacle comparable to the quartz crisis. Many companies initially dismissed the potential impact of the Apple Watch and similar devices that act as a synced companion to the mobile phone, but they have been forced to reconsider; when Apple began offering a watch in a gold case for several thousand pounds more than

the standard model, and Hermès began making £1,550 straps for it, the luxury market began to feel a little uneasy.

So Breitling will be offering its Exospace B55, enabling its chronograph to engage with any smartphone. And TAG Heuer will have its Connected Smart Watch, promising audio streaming over WiFi and all manner of fitness tracking. It claims it marks “a completely new era ... the world’s first wrist-worn computer”.

But the watch has always been a computer; the difference now is what it computes. A dial that once etched out our lives in hours and minutes, its accuracy dependent on our capacity to set it in motion and wind it, may now keep us connected with the rest of the earth, via GPS and overnight wireless charging. Yet the remarkable thing is not the emergence of texts and emails on the wrists – that was always going to come at some point – but how robust the traditional and mechanical wristwatch has proven itself alongside the new technologies. Alongside the absurd complications of the fattest new timepiece comes something we are evidently keen to hang on to – a belief that beauty and refinement are ends in themselves, and that the workbench of the skilled engineer is still revered more than the production line. A beautiful ticking timepiece gives us something back – transporting us, perhaps, to an imagined time when time was still our friend.

[Timekeepers: How the World Became Obsessed With Time](#), by Simon Garfield, is published by Canongate at £16.99. To order a copy for £13.93, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846.