



WATCHING THE WATCHMAN

STORY BY
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After graduating with a degree in micro-technology engineering, you spent seven years in the senior management team at Jaeger-LeCoultre and another seven at Harry Winston Rare Timepieces. Would you say you chose your career or did it choose you? I've followed my gut and taken a ton of risks to become the man I am. Watchmaking more or less saved my life. Coming out of college, I was about to sign either with Procter & Gamble or with Nestlé and, luckily for me, a man believed in me much more than I believed in myself (Henry-John Belmont, the then MD of Jaeger-LeCoultre). He asked me, or more or less coerced me, to join his team 24 years ago, when nobody wanted to work in the watch industry in Switzerland; the whole industry was bankrupt.

What's been your proudest achievement during your time at both companies? When I entered Jaeger-LeCoultre, there was no money and no glamour in

any of the watch brands, it was virtually dead. And it gave us a meaning. We were there to save a company. We were there to save an industry. Most people don't have that when they work, I was really lucky. Seven years later, when I was headhunted to head up Harry Winston Timepieces, I didn't actually know that it was virtually bankrupt. At the beginning it was extremely tough, I thought I'd never manage. But I did, and going through those tough times and being able to get through them gave me the courage to create my own brand.

MB&F is known for creating radical, surprising timepieces that sit somewhere between beautiful and conceptually 'out there'. Do clients wear your creations or preserve them? Everybody I know (and I know at least 30%-40% of all the owners of MB&F), they all wear them. What's very interesting is that MB&F owners are really special breed of people. You need courage and you need guts to own and wear one of my pieces.

FOR A FULL LIST OF MB&F STOCKISTS ALONG WITH DETAILS ABOUT THE BRAND, MAX AND THE M.A.D. GALLERY, VISIT WWW.MBANDF.COM

How would you describe an MB&F owner?

The MB&F owners are not show-offs. Which might seem confusing because the pieces are so 'out there', so the assumption is that owners clearly want to parade them. In my view, if somebody wanted to show off they'd want their watch to be recognised, they'd want everybody to like it. Whereas with MB&F, everyone around you will ask: 'What the f is that?' and, 'you actually paid money for it, are you insane?' People don't know the brand so they have no idea what the value is – they're likely to criticise and judge you. People who buy an MB&F are extremely strong-minded.

We make about 280 pieces a year and around half of those are repeat customers. It's a community of thought – when someone loves what we do, they love everything about the brand. MB&F owners are patrons of my company. They not only enjoy wearing an incredible piece they love, they're also helping us create the next piece, and that really means something.

Your approach to watchmaking seems very different – you work with individuals or small partnerships making limited numbers of expensive watches for elite groups of clients. Is that the way the industry is going now – more boutique than the large watch houses? It's very, very polarised and it's going to become even more so as time goes on. Today it's either the giants, who generate anything between £400 m to £4 bn a year, or the super-small artisan brands like ours. Basically you don't want to be in the middle. You're either a big brand or you're a very small artisan, if you're in the middle you're not going to exist for long. We're not the only artisans – there's a certain amount out there, although most are struggling because it's an extremely complicated and difficult business.



You founded MB&F in 2005 and are therefore unencumbered by confines of heritage. Do you still consider yourself as 'aliens' in the horological sector? It's extremely complex, I must admit. When I created my first piece, I'd never in my life created a watch for myself. I'd spent all those years analysing the market, the trends and the competitors, and creating a product which would fit into the marketing mix, and suddenly I was being asked: 'Forget about that, what would you really like?' Actually MB&F is one of the closest things I've done to psychotherapy. I'm expressing myself every year with my new creations. You also have to accept that certain people are going to hate what you do.

Your range is stocked at the Marcus watch boutique on Bond Street, which holds some of the world's rarest and unique watches. How long have you been working with him and how did that come about? I've been working with Marcus since about 2009, so while we didn't start at

the beginning, it's been six years and he had the guts during the crisis to take on a new brand like mine. The man has guts like no one else in this industry. If he sees something exceptional, something which is extremely well done, even if it's very particular, he'll go for it. And it all started that way in 2009.

Watches today have been freed from their functional obligations. Would you say that watchmakers now are as proud of unveiling a new 'métier d'art' – whether that's in the form of sculpture or clever visual illusion – as they once were when launching a new complication?

Yes, try to explain to me why 99% of my colleagues are continuing to do round, rectangular or square complications with the same old dials and hands. I just don't get it. Since 1972 and the quartz era there is absolutely no practical reason for all the craft in the mechanical timepiece, it's 10,000 times less precise than quartz. It's more expensive and less reliable. You must be

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delusional if you think you're buying a mechanical watch just to tell the time. I totally respect tradition, I love historical timepieces, because a real beautiful tree needs to have really solid roots and we have great roots in watchmaking. But I think it's time to start sprouting a few other branches and MB&F is my answer to that.

You launched your gallery and retail space in 2011 in Geneva, the MAD Gallery, to coincide with the unveiling of the LM1. What was the reason for it? The reason I created MAD Gallery is that originally, even now actually, most people don't get what I'm trying to do – they say: 'But it doesn't look like a watch.' But by assembling all these mechanical art pieces, we actually make people understand why we exist. People who come into the gallery start understanding. Not all of them, but some of them start getting what we're trying to

do. When the practical reason of a piece has been taken out, it's still so beautiful and incredibly well made with passion. The designers are not thinking about how they can please other people or make money, they just have a need to express themselves.

Why the name? Melchior came about because for at least 500 years the eldest son in my family was always called Melchior Brüser; his eldest son would be Baltaazar Brüser, the next eldest son would be Melchior, and so on. My grandfather, however, was Melchior and hated it so he had everybody call him Max, which is why I became Max two generations later. I actually love the name and I'm trying to convince my wife that if we have a son we can use it – she basically said, over my dead body. So instead, I called my robot Melchior for my 10th anniversary. ●

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aximilian Büsser is no stranger to criticism. "You need courage and you need guts to own and wear one of my pieces", he explains when we meet. It's fortunate then, that he's a man with vision and when it comes to watchmaking he's not about to curtail to conformity. Making no excuses about his maverick approach, the entrepreneur-owner of Swiss watch brand MB&F has carved a successful niche in creating timepieces that sit somewhere between beautiful and totally nuts. When you look through his collections what greets you is a surprising mix of machinery and art.

What's not surprising is that MB&F has been making waves in the watch world, because breaking the mould is what Büsser does best – and his refusal to pander to market trends or other people's preconceptions has earned him a cult following since he set up the company in 2005. He tells me that on the release of the HM4 (the 'Thunderbolt') in 2010, six months before he showed it to anybody he had the prototype in his hand and turned to his team, saying: 'Guys, I don't think anybody's ever gonna buy this.' But he went ahead and released it anyway.

I was scared like I've never been scared. And I'm proud I came out with that piece, (because) it was probably the fastest sellout in the history of MB&F. People went ballistic and every piece we delivered sold almost immediately. I thought: 'Really? People are following me there?'. That opened a door for Büsser. He admits it was like being told: 'OK, customers have followed you way further than you ever thought they would, you're now allowed to go much

further, so don't be scared anymore.' And since the HM4, no one could accuse him of being scared. 'I know that one way or another there will be somebody out there who's got the same weird outlook or creativity as ourselves.'

It's hard to look at one of MB&F's creations without marvelling at the work. They're designed in such a way that one cannot quite tell where the machine ends and the art begins. The Legacy Machines echo the classic designs of a century ago but with some visionary twists – balance wheels appearing to float above the dial and, in the case of the LM1 in collaboration with Chinese sculptor Xia Hang, the power reserve is indicated by a tiny aluminium man. The man sits up straight when the movement is fully wound (Mr Up) and gradually slumps over as the power diminishes (Mr Down).

Six years ago, when watch aficionado and connoisseur Marcus Margulies selected MB&F to be part of his eponymous steel-and-glass boutique on Bond Street, he saw something in Büsser's collection that resonated. It was a collaboration that now seems inevitable because at Marcus Boutique, if you're after a normal watch, then you are in the wrong place. At that time, in Max's own words, MB&F's contraptions and art installations were 'considered as aliens' in the horological sector. In many ways, they still are. But displayed between the idiosyncratic and intensely personal collections in Marcus's store, it seems likely that MB&F's crazy constructs and unique approach signify a rebellion where beauty is to be found in the obscure. And with Max behind it, people are sure to follow.



MB&F IS ONE OF THE CLOSEST THINGS I'VE DONE TO PSYCHOTHERAPY. I'M EXPRESSING MYSELF EVERY YEAR WITH MY NEW CREATIONS

