

All they make is *Treasure*

Within a decade of launch, Greubel Forsey was producing what many believed to be the world's best watches. It was a reputation that became fact in 2011. *RICHARD BROWN* discusses the remarkable achievement with self-effacing company co-creator, Stephen Forsey



WHEN A WATCH wins the coveted Aiguille d'Or award at the annual Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève – meaning that the most important judging panel in watchmaking has deemed it to be the best overall creation of the previous year – it enters the history books as one of the greatest watches of its time.

When that watch comes courtesy of a company that, back then, had yet to celebrate its sixth birthday, the achievement is something quite spectacular indeed.

In 2010, the prize for the finest watch from all categories – a name added to a list that already included Vacheron Constantin's Tour de l'Île and Patek Philippe's 5102 Ciel Lune – was Greubel Forsey with its Double Tourbillon 30° Edition Historique. The watch was made to both conclude and commemorate the line of timepieces with which English ex-watch-restorer Stephen Forsey and French calibre-creator Robert Greubel launched their eponymous company in 2004.

The following year, the duo submitted the Double Tourbillon 30° Technique – a precursor to the Edition Historique – to the International Chronometry Competition, the most rigorous independent testing board on the planet. After 45 days of subjecting the Technique to shocks, extreme temperatures and shifting magnetic fields, the judges deemed it to be the most precise mechanical time-telling device ever created. It remains so to this day.

For a seven-year-old brand, operating out of a tiny workshop in La Chaux-de-Fonds, to go up against the industry's most illustrious heavyweights and triumph, was, to use Forsey's words, "like building a car in your garage, taking it to the 24 Hours of Le Mans and winning." ►





Greubel Forsey's GMT in titanium



timekeeping capability of a watch by negating the disruptive effects of gravity. It does so by placing the regulating organs of a timepiece – the balance, hairspring and escapement – in a continually rotating cage – meaning that the forces of gravity imposed on a watch are effected at a nearer continual rate, rather than changing as the position of a watch changes. So difficult was a tourbillon to create, that for 200 years, fewer than 1,000 were ever produced.

By the 1990s, million-dollar investment in micro-engineering techniques meant that most major watch marques were able to offer at least one tourbillon somewhere in their collections. But, as Forsey explains, “these wrist-watch tourbillons were still traditional, miniaturised versions of pocket-watch tourbillons. From a performance point of view, the movement wasn’t really adding much from what it did 200 years ago.”

Stephen and Robert wanted to reinstate the status of the tourbillon. Having met during their time at high-performance calibre creators Renaud and Papi – now known as Audemars Piguet Renaud and Papi – they combined in 2001 to form CompliTime, a purveyor of complicated movements for some of Switzerland’s most prestigious brands.

They established Greubel Forsey three years later with the aim of improving the most revered movement in watches under their own name. “We wanted to look at the subject from a fresh angle,” Stephen explains. “To see if there was

a way of bringing back the tourbillon to the summit of watch-making.” The duo’s first invention inclined one tourbillon mechanism inside another, something that had never been done before. Slanted at a 30° angle, the first tourbillon rotated every 60 seconds inside the other, which rotated every four minutes. The effect was to average out the disruptive forces of gravity to an extent previously unseen.

The Double Tourbillon 30° wowed the industry, with the Edition Historique winning the Aiguille d’Or, and the Technique version being named the most precise mechanical watch ever created.

But Stephen and Robert didn’t stop there. Their second invention was the Quadruple Tourbillon – a world first for incorporating four tourbillons within one watch – while its third was the Tourbillon 24 Seconds, the first timepiece to rotate its tourbillon at the speedy rate of once every 24 seconds, another successful attempt at negating the effects of gravity. “We set out to produce the most flawless tourbillons there had ever been,” Stephen says. “And we achieved that.”

Since 2006, Richemont Group – parent company to Panerai, IWC, Vacheron Constantin and Jaeger-LeCoultre,

engraved inscriptions and plates are painstakingly bevelled and polished by hand. Just one of the company’s Quadruple Tourbillons – of which only five or six are produced annually – requires nearly a year’s worth of man hours to make.

“We spent our first years focused on the tourbillon because there was so much to do,” says Stephen. “It was such an undeveloped and unexplored story. But there are other things to explore.”

So, what of the future? Stephen won’t be drawn into specifics. “Our motivation,” he insists, “will always be original creation. Our motivation is adventure.” ■

Greubel Forsey watches are stocked exclusively in the UK at Marcus, 170 New Bond Street, W1, marcuswatches.com

The level of attention with which the brand approaches form is almost peerless

amongst others – has owned a minority stake in Greubel Forsey. Yet the brand has refused to relinquish control of the business it has built. “We have a story that we want to tell and as a creator you need freedom in order to do something different. If you have to explain your ideas to someone, it can neutralise the originality of that idea.”

For Stephen, who takes inspiration from 17th-century grandfather clocks and the genius of late British horological legend George Daniels, Greubel Forsey will always be about original creation. “We create things that will last for decades, for generations, for hundreds of years. This is our mission.”

It is, perhaps, the commitment with which Greubel Forsey takes to this mission – a completely uncompromised and artisan approach to the marriage of modern technology and centuries-old mechanics – that has won it the most admirers.

As well as its success at perfecting function – it makes the world’s best tourbillons, fact – the level of attention with which the brand approaches form is similarly almost peerless. Bridges are frosted with specially made compounds, casebands feature micro-



The Tourbillon 24 Seconds Asymmetrical in red gold



The Tourbillon 24 Seconds Asymmetrical