

12 TO WATCH

DISCOVER A DOZEN AMAZING TRAILBLAZERS

TEXT BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

START With complete freedom to blaze their own trails, independent brands often do incredible work and produce amazing watches, but they are also among the least well known players in the crowded global watch market. Even dedicated watch aficionados may not have heard much about them in spite of the fact that their watches exhibit many of the qualities that make collectors' hearts beat faster. In case they seem unfamiliar, here are 12 independent makers that are well worth watching.

01

ARMIN STROM

Claude Greisler
Serge Michel
Armin Strom



Master watchmaker Armin Strom made his name specializing in one-of-a-kind, hand-wrought skeletonization. His watches are magnificent and highly valued masterpieces of mechanical art. Strom built up his eponymous brand on the foundation of this skeletonization, but changes have been in the works. Recently the Armin Strom brand opened a new facility and introduced a new in-house movement, the ARM09, to power a line of production watches called Armin by Armin Strom. "Independent brands have to work even harder at setting themselves apart and conquering markets—Armin Strom has invested tremendously in its own production capacity and its ability to generate creativity from within," says Serge Michel, CEO. "Since 2006, the effort has been placed on building a manufacture, gathering a top-notch team and creating, one by one, calibers fully made in house."



EXAMPLE ELEMENTAL APPEAL

One of four watches in the One Week limited series, the Armin by Armin Strom One Week Fire uses manufacture ARM09 with seven-day power reserve, cased in rose gold. The open dial with off-center time indication reveals a portion of the mechanism, including the crown wheels. Production is limited to 100 examples in each version. \$33,900, 888.894.4255, arminstrom.com

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02

LADOIRE
Lionel Ladoire
Richard Piras

The fairly traditional nature of the mainstream watch industry leaves the door open for newcomers to enter the market with wildly imaginative things. Lionel Ladoire and his eponymous brand are avant garde to say the least. Ladoire started out in the jewelry business and then decided to apply his rock 'n' roll aesthetic to watches. "I am not pretending that I am bringing something important to watchmaking," Ladoire says. "I want to play, have fun. Watchmaking is very traditional, and I am trying to revisit all the codes and classics and do it in my own, personal way. It's really a personal challenge."



EXAMPLE PUNK PERSPECTIVE

Ladoire's RGT Punk Rock supports displays of hours, minutes and seconds via rotating discs on ceramic ball bearings and GMT via a central hand using the 26-jewel automatic Caliber Calvet/01/RGT with microrotor winding. The all-black three-part titanium case is 56 mm wide. It is engraved with highly textural Clou de Paris front and back, and its crown is placed at 8. \$134,700, 888.894.4255, ladoire.ch

EXAMPLE FAIT ACCOMPLI

Urwerk's UR-103 Mexican Fireleg in stainless steel treated with an aluminum-titanium-nitride alloy is one of two limited edition versions of the maker's iconic model to appear last year at the completion of the model's run. The UR-103 ceased production at the end of 2010. Its orbital cross ingeniously uses the hour indicators to display the minutes as each of the rotating discs moves across the minutes scale in turn. The caseback control board allows for precise time setting and fine tuning of the movement via a user-adjustable screw. \$70,000, 310.271.0000, urwerk.com



03

URWERK
Felix Baumgartner (pictured)
Martin Frei

Founded by Felix Baumgartner and Martin Frei, Urwerk turned watchmaking on its ear with its original time displays and complications that include telescoping hands, do-it-yourself time regulation and more. "Our watches give a new feeling of conceiving time," says Baumgartner. "We combine new mechanisms, new complications, new indications of time within a concept that had never been seen before in an expensive watch." Urwerk started up the way a garage band does—in its founders' spare time. The duo built new watches on a shoestring budget, barely making ends meet. Now, the brand is a going concern that has maintained its character. "Our watches are unique because each has been conceived as an original work," Baumgartner details. "This is what makes them valuable and rare. Above all, we want to explore beyond the traditional horizons of watchmaking."

EXAMPLE DRUMMED UP

The rose gold Cabestan Winch Tourbillon Vertical displays hours, minutes, seconds and power reserve on rotating drums. An additional drum conceals the mainspring. The movement—visible through Pyrex crystals—has 1,352 components and features an accuracy-enhancing vertical tourbillon and a fusée-and-chain transmission. Winding is achieved using a miniature winch, concealed in the deployant buckle of the alligator strap. \$360,000, 41.21.845.7186, cabestan.ch



04

CABESTAN

Jean-Francois Ruchonnet [pictured]
Eric Coudray
Timothy Bovard

Realizing that, at a certain level of watchmaking, the work is less about helping people tell time than it is about "satisfying the human need for bold originality," Cabestan focuses on emotion. That's according to founder Jean-Francois Ruchonnet. Cabestan features a sensational vertical movement made in its own manufacture in the Vallée de Joux, where Switzerland's top watchmakers carefully produce each piece by hand. "The Cabestan Winch Tourbillon Vertical is best known for its amazing design centered around the vertical movement," says Cabestan's CEO, Timothy Bovard. "But what is less well known is that this timepiece is one of the most accurate in the world. That is why many collectors consider it an extraordinary piece of fine mechanical art."



05

CHRISTOPHE CLARET
Christophe Claret

The hills surrounding Le Locle, Switzerland, in the heart of the Jura Mountains, have been home to some of the most famous watchmakers the world has ever seen. One of the most prolific and successful is certainly the workshop of Christophe Claret. It is here, in a state-of-the-art facility, that some of watchmaking's most beautiful and complicated movements have been created—all from the mind of Christophe Claret. Claret labored for years in the relative shadows, making incredible complications for well-known brands. With his own DualTow and other creations, Claret is now showcasing his company's phenomenal abilities, while at the same time creating something new and interesting.



EXAMPLE

VIRTUOSO PERFORMANCE

Christophe Claret presents an entirely new timepiece, the Adagio, a minute repeater—sounding the hours, quarter-hours and minutes on cathedral gongs—with grand date, GMT and day/night indication. Manual-winding mechanical Caliber SLB88 is built from 455 components, including 46 jewels, and offers 48-hour power reserve. It is cased in rose gold, white gold or platinum. CHF 268,000–318,000, 954.610.2234, claret.ch



06

DEVON WORKS

Scott Devon [pictured]
Jason Wilbur

As a US brand making watches in America, Devon is a rarity. When the brand launched in 2010, it promised to make watches and other luxury goods such as no one had seen before. The company's first watch, the Tread 1, is a piece that keeps that promise. According to founder Scott Devon, "The Tread 1 is a daring and inventive watch that not only provides the function of telling time but also represents the expansive and exploratory American spirit." Devon established his company as a design lab to produce his own designs and to foster the projects of designers with interesting ideas. Designer Jason Wilbur is the talent behind the Tread 1, which uses multiple moving belts to display the time. "Devon is really about allowing us to create something that has solid emotional value to it. He's open to these new ideas," says Wilbur.



EXAMPLE STRATEGIC MERGER

Merging watchmaking and electronics, Devon's Tread 1 uses a lithium polymer cell that runs for two weeks on a single charge. Driven by miniature microstep motors, the hair-thin belts of the time display seem to float inside the watch. The five-part case is stainless steel, fitted with a scratch-resistant, anti-reflective polycarbonate crystal. \$15,000, 888.901.0081, devontimepieces.com



EXAMPLE OPEN BOOK

The Maitres du Temps Chapter One with black dial and white gold case is a limited edition complicated timepiece that emphasizes legibility and novel displays while maintaining a traditional aesthetic. Its manual-winding tourbillon movement incorporates a monopusher chronograph and supports numerous functions and displays: hours, minutes, retrograde date, retrograde GMT, chronograph minutes counter and day of the week and moon phases indication on rollers. Only 11 examples produced. \$439,000, 570.970.8888, maitresdutemps.com



07

MAÎTRES DU TEMPS

Steven Holtzman [pictured]
Chapter One collaborators:
Christophe Claret
Peter Speake-Marin



Steven Holtzman has been in the watch business all his life. His father was a watch distributor, and Holtzman followed suit, handling a number of brands over the years before deciding to establish his own, Maitres du Temps, which brings a fresh concept and a unique design style to high-end watchmaking. "Maitres du Temps embraces the philosophy of pursuing excellence," Holtzman explains. "This is what will allow us to write our page in the history of horology. We work with the greatest independent watchmakers of our time to create collections called Chapters—each Chapter represents a different story in our journey. As a result, we create classic watches that will be appreciated today and for many years to come."



EXAMPLE
POLISHED PRESENTATION

The Grand Date Tourbillon by Roger W. Smith is a commissioned piece produced in 18-karat rose gold with an engine-turned and hand-engraved silver dial. The movement features a Daniels co-axial escapement and a one-minute, two-arm flying tourbillon for enhanced accuracy. Throughout the watch, every part made of steel or gold is black polished to a mirror finish. Price on request, 44.1624.897.888, rsmithwatches.com



ROGER W. SMITH LTD.
Roger W. Smith

A classically trained English watchmaker, Roger W. Smith originally traveled to the Isle of Man to work with and learn from legendary watchmaker George Daniels. He has been on the island ever since, creating his own uniquely English timepieces. "We have gilded and frosted pieces, so the aesthetic is very English," Smith explains. "We have raised barrel bridges, where we hide the winding mechanism, which is a very English feature. We have black polishing throughout the pieces, and the watches are very three-dimensional, with lots of different layers and levels. I pay the same attention to every part. Components under the dial are as important as the case and the dial. Many of my clients say they sense a personality in my watches; all I know is that when I'm making them, I am creating each one for myself."



HAUTLENCE
Guillaume Tetu and the Hautlence College

Co-founder and managing director Guillaume Tetu conceived Hautlence in 2004 as an alternative to mainstream brands. The brand name is an anagram of Neuchâtel, a center of watchmaking in Switzerland and home to the brand, which focuses on redefining how time is displayed. Using interesting movements, exposed structural elements and locomotive-evoking details, the maker's watches draw on the highest quality in watchmaking and materials. "Hautlence is associated with various images and concepts," Tetu explains. "Our symbol is the Möbius loop, representing infinity. This is the sign of perpetuity the brand has been blessed with since its foundation. The symbol is placed at least once on each watch we create. As an independent brand, owned and operated by its founders and partners, we work hard to distinguish ourselves."



EXAMPLE **ROUND TWO**

Playing on the repetition of circles, the Hautlence HLc02 combines jumping hours with retrograde minutes on circular scales inside a round case. Details such as bilevel, laser-cut numerals for minutes and a honeycomb dial lend depth to the design. The case is black PVD-treated titanium with rose gold lugs, bezel and crown. \$48,400, 888.894.4255, hautlence.com





10

LINDE WERDELIN
Morten Linde
Jorn Werdelin

The trouble with serious technical sport and adventure watches is often the way they look; many are plastic, quartz watches with lots of buttons. Co-founder Jorn Werdelin, for one, himself an avid skier, was tired of wearing one watch for skiing and another watch when he went out to dinner afterward, and he set out to change that. "We wanted to do a well made, high-quality, beautiful, mechanical Swiss watch, with a very distinctive shape, and we also wanted to be able to attach instruments for different activities, but only when you need them," Werdelin explains. Linde Werdelin is the only watch brand on the market that offers a highly crafted mechanical timepiece to be used in tandem with a top-of-the-range digital instrument for diving or skiing when required. Says Werdelin, "We bring together the best of Danish design ingenuity and Swiss watch craftsmanship with focus on functionality and quality."



EXAMPLE KNOW THE DRILL

Linde Werdelin's SpidoLite SA All Black Titanium DLC features a lightweight 46-mm-wide titanium case made lighter by selective drilling. The screw-down sapphire crystal caseback reveals the new-old-stock 1970s-vintage automatic movement with blue gold winding rotor, modified for Linde Werdelin by Andersen Genève. The watch is water-resistant to 300 meters and accepts Linde Werdelin's Reef and Rock electronic instruments. Production is limited to 88 examples. \$11,870, 888.894.4255, lindewerdelin.com



EXAMPLE IMPOSING PRESENCE

The Grand Robusto chronograph lives up to its name in a 50-by-38-mm rose gold case weighing more than 100 g. The watch is powered by self-winding Caliber 7750RM3S. On the carbon fiber dial, small seconds at 9 are counter-balanced by power reserve indication at 3, and chronograph counters at 12 and 6 take the form of two-tiered segments with propeller hands. VVS1-quality diamonds totaling 4.18 carats decorate the case. Only 99 examples will be produced. CHF 67,000, 41.22.771.4060, antoine-prezioso.com



11

ANTOINE PREZIUOSO
ANTOINE PREZIUOSO

Master watchmaker and brand owner Antoine Prezioso is a student of the history of watchmaking, but he's quick to explain that he's not trying to repeat history; instead, he's trying to use it to advance today's watchmaking. As the head of his self-named brand, Prezioso does a little bit of everything—and produces a bit of everything: production watches, limited editions, *pièces uniques* and restorations. Unlike many other manufacturers, who wait for orders before starting production, Prezioso, like an artist creating a painting, builds his watches according to his own creative impulse, and then begins to talk to buyers. He says, "The watches depend on the moment of creation, then I wait for the people who appreciate my art."

12

ARTYA
Yvan Arpa



Operated by industry provocateur Yvan Arpa—who also conceived the Romain Jerome Titanic DNA watch and the Black Belt watch—Artya brings one-of-a-kind timepieces to the masses by offering them at prices equivalent to those of entry-level watches from many established brands. In his first series of egalitarian unique pieces, each one was struck by lightning, which deforms the case, making each one different. "Created by artists, crafted by watchmakers, our one-of-a-kind artistic creations are each distinctly made; none can be duplicated or replaced," says Arpa. "Difference, not conformity, is the hallmark of this maverick collection. Imagination running wild leads the artist, and the watchmaker has no choice but to follow."

EXAMPLE LIGHTNING STRIKES

The 316L stainless steel of the Artya Tesla Squelette Quadri-Rotor is battered by up to a million volts of electricity. The result is a uniquely deformed and colored case. Inside, a 25-jewel, Swiss-made, automatic mechanical movement powers the time display, surrounded by copper wire. A toadskin strap provides the finishing touch. \$7,200, 41.22.752.4940, artya.luxuryartpieces.com

