

## A TimeZone Exclusive Interview

### Beat Haldimann

#### Zen and the Art of Watchmaking

by [Michael Friedberg](#)

Translation by Hartmut Kraft

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*Beat Haldimann is a rising star on the Swiss watchmaking scene. While under 40, he is considered among the "20 most significant horologists" by the magazine Chronos. His introduction of the H1 –a central flying tourbillon-- at the AHCI exhibit during the 2002 Basel Fair caused a sensation.*

*In this exclusive interview for TimeZone, Herr Haldimann shares with us a philosophy of watchmaking that combines Zen thought together with historical watchmaking tradition. At the same time, his work reflects technical expertise and innovation of the highest order. The end result has been a remarkable wristwatch.*

**MF:** Michael Friedberg - TimeZone.com  
**BH:** Beat Haldimann

**MF: How did you first get interested in watchmaking?**

**BH:** When I was a boy, my way to school passed by a watchmaker. I always stopped and pressed my nose against the window of his shop. I guess the watchmaker must have seen my large amazed and asking eyes and must have taken my continuous interest seriously. That very watchmaker later became my teacher, who knew to nurture my interest in watchmaking.

**MF: What was your first job in watchmaking?**

**BH:** Daily practice as well as the studies of historical movements.

**MF: When and why did you decide to form your own business?**

**BH:** I wanted to bring my own ideas to life. After some years of "shopping around", I founded the company Haldimann Horology in 1991.

**MF: What was it like at first to "go out on your own"?**

**BH:** My first income came from the production of diverse prototypes and the developments of patents and inventions for a renowned Swiss company. In retrospect, I have to say that I never lost focus on my goals. I am very much convinced that anyone can achieve whatever he finds to be his calling and what he desires with all of his heart.

**MF: Could you tell us about the first tourbillon that you made. First, when was it?**

**BH:** The central tourbillon H1 "flying" was

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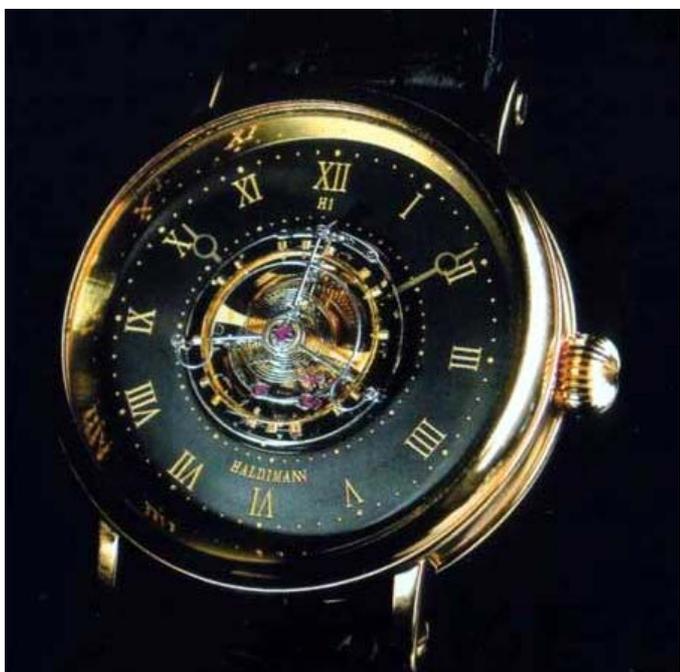
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first introduced at the Basel show in 2002. One should not forget, though, years of searching and finding preceded that presentation. I didn't have the capacities and resources of a large company.

**MF: Why did you do it?**

**BH:** My primary goal was to create a wristwatch with the sound of the traditional Breguet pocket watches: this fascinating voice that speaks of ancient times and that gives a watch its very own heart.

**MF: How long did it take?**

**BH:** It took about three years from the first idea to delivery of the first watch.

**MF: What was the experience like?**

**BH:** I was filled with deep satisfaction and gratitude. I guess this must be the feeling of a woman after bearing a child.

**MF: You've also done a lot of work with pendulum clocks. How does the watchmaking differ from clock making?**

**BH:** The work in our atelier strictly follows along the tradition of Breguet, Harrison, Bürgi and Janvier and we are keen to uphold their values. We are eager to further develop traditional and innovative watchmaking in the present era. The difference between building a wristwatch and building a pendulum clock is basically that we don't use enlarging tools like microscopes or loupes for the creation of a large clock.



**MF: It seems like your central tourbillon reflects a very clear philosophy and set of values.**

**BH:** Throughout my studies of the Japanese philosophy of Zen, I felt this growing desire to create a watch that would embody the Zen values of "concentrate on the essential" and "focus on your center".

**MF: Technically, in a normal movement the balance is not in the center of the movement. How did you get the balance in that position?**

**BH:** This peculiar central arrangement that doesn't sacrifice the dimensions of the movement is indeed a pretty crazy construction. We had to break with known tradition to achieve our goals which required a diameter of the movement of no more than 14 lignes (31.58 mm), a huge cage of 16.8 mm with a large balance of 14.4 mm in a case with a diameter of no more than 39 mm and a thickness of the watch of no more than 10.5 mm.



**MF: I would think that achieving all those goals must be much more complicated than leaving the balance in its normal position.**

**BH:** If we are talking about a wristwatch with classical features-- that is, a dial design with central minute and hour hand, with a regular power reserve and regular dimensions-- the way to create such a watch is historically predominated. Crown wheel, barrel spring, wheels, balance and escapement are all placed around the center of axis of the minute wheel. The wheels for the hands are placed beneath the dial, all complications, be it a date, a perpetual



calendar, a chronograph or the rotor for the self winding movement could be construed on top or beneath the base caliber.

However, if you want to replace the center minute wheel with a flying tourbillon right in the middle of the watch, you have to break with the traditions in order to achieve your goals – there are no historically-given defaults.

**MF: The tolerances appear to be unusually close and the center wheel needs to be replaced –is this all to achieve the visual result of a tourbillon in the center?**

**BH:** In order to realize the visual appearance of the central tourbillon, we needed to “push the envelope” of what might be technically possible.

**MF: There certainly is an aesthetic difference. But is there any functional difference?**

**BH:** We aimed *not* to have any functional differences compared to traditional hand wound wristwatches: that is, we wanted winding and setting the hands with one crown. That actually was one of the greatest challenges.

**MF: Is the “point” of the H1 tourbillon to demonstrate horology as an art?**

**BH:** Indeed. We primarily aimed to create a wristwatch with the melodic sound of the historic Breguet pocket watches. The H1 meets this goal. The name of the caliber, “Cal. H. Zen – A” is another aspect that alludes to the correlation between art and watchmaking. It generally refers to the center, the central, the Zen-like focus on the essential. That’s why the philosophy of the H1 could very well be described as the focus on the essential.

**MF: May I ask how long does it take to produce these beautiful watches?**

**BH:** All watches that we create in our atelier are individual and unique pieces. We build on quality not on quantity and as such we recognize individual requests of our customers. Each customer has to wait about four to six months for his individual watch.

**MF: Do you make all the movement parts yourself? Even screws? But not springs?**

**BH:** Principally, we are able to produce every single piece of our watches in our own shop, except hairsprings, mainsprings, rubies and sapphire crystals.

It is one of our core principles to do our own research, design and development, and then to create various prototypes and manufacture our wristwatch and clock movements almost exclusively ourselves.

**MF: Where do you see you and your company going over the next few years?**

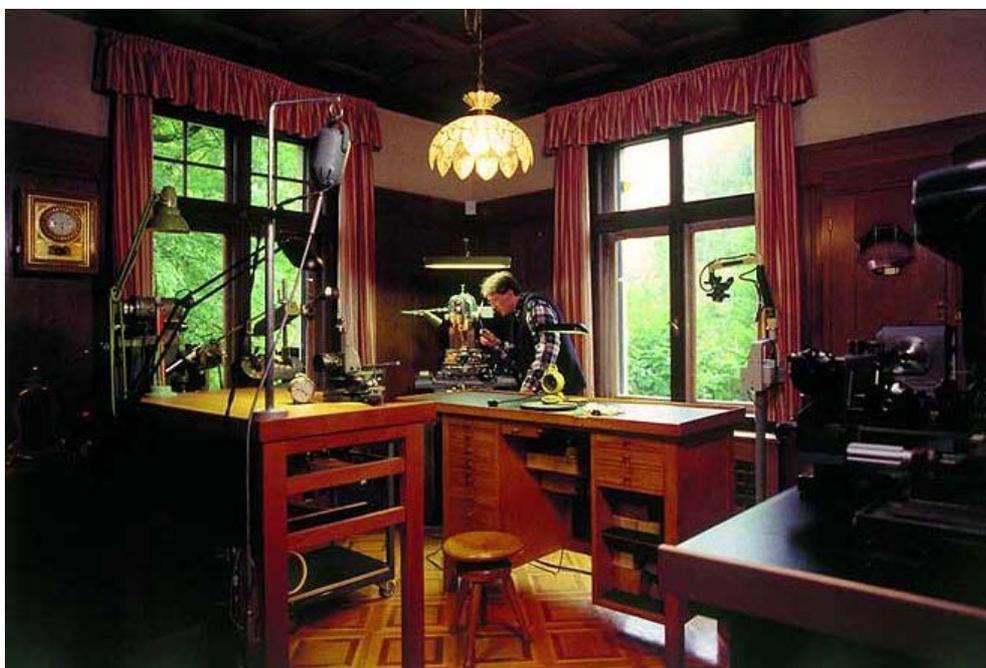
**BH:** We will always try to follow our calling.

**MF: What greetings may I extend from you to watch collectors and lovers at TimeZone?**

**BH:** I am always very pleased and excited that there are people who concern themselves with the in-depth study of watchmaking.

**MF: Thank you. I can assure you that our readers are equally pleased and excited that you have shared so much with us.**





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Images courtesy of Haldimann Horology

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