



The Artisan in the Alps

Headquartered far from the usual Swiss watch centers, independent watchmaker Beat Haldimann takes pride in making a style of timepiece that is distinctly his own.

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PHOTOS BY VALENTIN BLANK

Contrary to accepted wisdom, horological talent in Switzerland is not solely concentrated in the Jura Mountains and in the city and canton of Geneva. Beat Haldimann, born in 1964 in Oberdiessbach in the Emmentaler Valley, is living proof. The area where he grew up enjoys worldwide renown not for its watches, but for its hard cheeses, distinguished by their uncommonly large holes (*Emmentaler* is what most Americans know as Swiss cheese). Haldimann's lineage hints at no genetic predisposition toward micromechanical prowess. At the time of his birth, his father was a postal worker and his mother a psychiatric nurse. His recent ancestors were almost exclusively civil servants and farmers. The year that Beat was born, the Haldimanns moved to Uetendorf, in the canton of Bern, where his father had taken a job as postmaster. They took up residence in a spacious house that would soon accommodate a family of seven. Beat (pronounced "beh-awt") grew up under the watchful eyes of three older sisters and was trailed by one younger brother. He was naturally "adopted" by the three girls, who also challenged him to learn everything they had, including the skills of cooking and knitting.

THE SOUND OF HIS
WATCHES IS IMPORTANT
TO HALDIMANN: THE
H1 WRISTWATCH WAS
MADE TO TICK WITH
THE EXACT SAME SOUND
AS A VINTAGE BREGUET
POCKETWATCH.

Haldimann's first
wristwatch:
the H1 with central
tourbillon



Haldimann can thank his grandfather for his first significant contact with watchmaking. Ninety years old at the time and no longer able to read comfortably without a loupe, his grandfather knew that the nearest source for one was the village watchmaker, Paul Dällenbach. Haldimann, who was on the threshold of choosing a career, became fascinated by the work Dällenbach did in his atelier, and asked the master watchmaker if he could do an apprenticeship under his tutelage. Dällenbach agreed, but insisted that the young man undergo a complete apprenticeship that would eventually qualify him as both watchmaker and *rhabilleur* (repairer of watches).

One of Haldimann's duties in his apprenticeship was to spend a week each month attending specialized classes at the school of watchmaking in Solothurn. The focus there was on theory, but it also taught practical skills, such as how to regulate, turn pivots, and repair electrical clocks. Haldimann completed his four years of study and was duly awarded the Eidgenössischer Fähigkeitsausweis, the Swiss certificate of competence, in 1985.

Anyone who chose to pursue a watchmaking career in the early 1980s must have been very strongly motivated, perhaps even crazy. Those years were the worst depths of the so-called quartz crisis, which was devastating Switzerland's watch industry. Traditional watchmaking was viewed as a profession headed for extinction. But Haldimann refused to be dissuaded. He stayed with his teacher for an extra year, completed his compulsory service in the Swiss military, and in 1986 found a job in ETA's research and development department in Grenchen.

WITH THE CHANGE of scenery came culture shock. Haldimann left a village watchmaker's workshop and suddenly found himself in the midst of a gigantic business operation, where everything ran according to bureaucratic protocol. As Haldimann saw it, ETA functioned very efficiently in the area of production, but administration consumed more than its fair share of the budget. He felt the reports that had to be written and rewritten were useless, and that far too much time was wasted sitting in unnecessary meetings.

Nonetheless, Haldimann was not unhappy with his situation. ETA at this time was under the direction of competent managers, led by the legendary Ernst Thomke and Anton Bally. But the ongoing quartz crisis led to continuous restructuring and the closures of entire departments. In ETA's laboratory, Haldimann busied himself with climatic experiments and measurement of temperature curves. His colleagues were physicists and engineers. For a while, Haldimann even seriously considered the possibility of studying physics, but he ultimately decided to remain loyal to watchmaking. He left ETA in 1989 and joined Chronometrie Bangerter in the city of Thun, near his childhood home of Uetendorf.

While continuing to work in his chosen profession, Haldimann attended classes in Solothurn for his certification as a master watchmaker, with the goal of going into business for himself as soon as possible. He realized this dream in 1991 at the age of 27. He named his business Haldimann Horology and



The two balances in the H2 reciprocally synchronize one another for extreme precision.

chose for its logo a dozen balls arranged to form a circle. Haldimann set up the company in the top floor of a chalet directly beside the Lake Thun. Here he built prototypes and advised well-known watch brands about technical questions, but made most of his income restoring antique timepieces.

He also signed a 10-year contract with a well-known watch firm whose identity he prefers not to divulge. His job was to conduct developmental work for complicated watch movements, in the course of which he devised numerous patented inventions. His contract included a non-compete clause that prohibited him from making any wristwatches or pocketwatches of his own.

Table clocks, however, were not mentioned in the contract, so Haldimann initially concentrated his independent work on those. He developed the so-called “Haldimann escapement,” which he installed in the first table clock that he built himself. As a member of the AHCI (Academy of Independent Creative Watchmakers), he introduced his double-pendulum clock at the Basel watch fair in 2000. This invention consists of two identical weight-powered movements, each of which is equipped with a Haldimann escapement, that stand side by side in identical, glass-panelled housings. The two pendulums are linked through the boom in their suspension, so they gradually come into resonance and run synchronously. What one sees first are the motions of the two pendulums; only on closer examination does one notice the dials displaying local and world time. This design



Haldimann is very independent: even the wheels and pinions are made in his own atelier.

The double-pendulum clock with two Haldimann escapements



*HALDIMANN MADE HIS
DREAM OF OWNING A
BUSINESS COME TRUE AT
AGE 27, WHEN HE FOUND-
ED HIS OWN FIRM,
HALDIMANN HOROLOGY.*

results in a significantly more accurate rate than can be achieved with only one movement. It also makes clear the influence of Abraham-Louis Breguet on Haldimann's work, though the latter puts more emphasis on playful, artistic aspects in his timepieces.

The philosophy that permeates Haldimann's wristwatches is that they should primarily be dynamic artworks with rhythmical motions that stimulate delight and instill serenity; the bare-bones physics of timekeeping is secondary. He builds timepieces intended to bridge the gap between technology and art, simultaneously existing as both. For example, to enhance its owner's enjoyment of his double-pendulum clock, Haldimann delivers it with his "Haldi Chair," a foldable chair of his own design, consisting of slats that form a grid.

HALDIMANN BECAME free of his contractual obligation to that unnamed watch company in 2001, and could then begin transforming his long-cherished wristwatch ideas into realities. He had annually invested a portion of his earnings to enlarge his library and to augment his machine park, so it was becoming increasingly crowded in the chalet. In 2002, Haldimann Horology moved into a nearby house built during the Art Nouveau era. Haldimann and his family still live there today.

Thun is an unusual area for a watchmaker like Haldimann to set up shop, but it also has its advantages. Because of its scenic location at the foot of the Bernese Alps, customers and others who pay him a visit can combine their trip with an excursion to the Jungfrauoch or other Alpine tourist attractions. The most important tool in Haldimann's horological arsenal is a little black book that he carries with him everywhere, in which he jots down ideas and illustrates them with hand-drawn sketches before working things out in greater detail on a computer.

Needless to say, Haldimann Horology is equipped with a complete spectrum of hardware and software. But there's one item he neither owns nor intends to own: a numerically guided CNC machine. It would improve the efficiency of the production process, but this would not impress the connoisseurs who seek out Haldimann's watches, which customarily sell for six figures. On the contrary, these customers appreciate the fact that each of Haldimann's timepieces is individually made and that no two watches in his small series of 10 to 30 pieces ever look totally identical.

Haldimann strives to acquire the most precise analog machinery available. Each machine is operated and guided by hand, which is the next best thing to manual lathe turning and filing. The specialists at Haldimann Horology consider it a challenge to achieve the same level of precision with analog machines as their colleagues elsewhere do with CNC machines, upholding tolerances in the 1/1,000-millimeter range. Doing so takes a bit longer, but Haldimann's demanding customers seem to be perfectly fine with it.

Independence is very important to Haldimann, who strives, wherever possible, to personally make each component of the movement and its accoutrements, all the way down to the screws and the folding clasps. Of course, he orders jewels and sapphire crystals from outside specialists, along with mainsprings, hairsprings, and the leather straps. All in all, Haldimann Horology is about 90 percent vertically integrated.

Haldimann is particularly proud of his watch movements, 100 percent of which are of his own design. Unlike some of his contemporaries, he has never bought movements from outside suppliers and simply added the finishing touches and final decorations. A telltale feature of Haldimann's movements is that you'll never find an index tail, which can cause errors. Eccentric screws are used to finely adjust the balance.

The cases of Haldimann's watches are made of platinum or gold. They have a concave curvature along their flanks that cannot be produced by automated machinery, so each one is manually lathe-turned and then soldered to its lugs.

HALDIMANN'S H1 Central Tourbillon, which he introduced in 2002, presented a very special challenge. The cage of this astonishingly large "flying" tourbillon is 16.8 mm in diameter and rises well above the plane of the dial. The tourbillon is positioned precisely in the center of the dial, so Haldimann obviously couldn't put the axis of one or more hands there. Others had found their own solutions to this conundrum. For example, in the pendules mystérieuses of the Art Deco era, as well as in Omega's contemporary Central Tourbillon, conventional hands were eliminated entirely, replaced by pointers painted onto thin sapphire disks bearing wreaths of teeth along their peripheries.

But simple imitation has never been Haldimann's cup of tea, so he came up with a system of his own. The tourbillon in the H1 rotates at the central point shared by annular gears that are borne along their peripheries. Beyond the tourbillon's cage, these wheels carry protruding Breguet-style hour and minute hands. The H1 is a functional timekeeper, though its owner is far more likely to pass the hours admiring the constant turning of its tourbillon cage, and the escapement that rotates with it, than checking the time.

In designing the H1, Haldimann even considered its audible characteristics: he wanted to create a wristwatch that would duplicate the sound of a Breguet pocketwatch. Some H1 owners place it on their nightstand so they can fall asleep to the lulling sound of its quiet ticking. Approximately every 30 seconds, they hear the delicate hum of the watch's balance spring, a melodic sound resulting from its resonance with the tourbillon's cage.

*HALDIMANN PRIMARILY
REGARDS HIS TIME-
PIECES AS DYNAMIC ART-
WORK. DISPLAYING THE
TIME IS OF SECONDARY
IMPORTANCE — OR NOT
IMPORTANT AT ALL.*

*A watch without
a time display:
the H8 Sculptura
Tourbillon*



Haldimann builds so few watches that he and his six colleagues maintain their sidelines as restorers of chronographs and complicated clocks. These historic mechanisms provided the inspiration for another of Haldimann's creations, the H2, which debuted in 2005.

The H2 translates the concept of a double-pendulum clock into the dimensions of a wristwatch. Instead of classic pendulums, he uses a pair of identical rotating ones — essentially two balances that oscillate at precisely the same frequency. The resulting resonance effect ensures that the twin balances reciprocally synchronize each other. The vibrations are conveyed via the watch's plate.

Perhaps the most bizarre of Haldimann's many creations is the H8 *Sculptura*, which is very likely one of the world's first watches from which the time cannot be read at all. It consists solely of a tourbillon and has no hands. Haldimann creates between 20 and 30 pieces of the H8 *Sculptura* every year. The concept behind the *Sculptura* is that it responds to time — with motion, rhythm and frequency — without displaying its passage, so its owner can enjoy the luxury of abstracting the present moment without entirely escaping from it. One customer wrote that he often glances at his watch, but fortunately never knows what time it is. Haldimann considers this the highest compliment he could be paid.

HALDIMANN IS NOT BIG on marketing. He hasn't exhibited at the AHCI's stand in Basel since 2004 and relies primarily on word-of-mouth to promote his work to collectors and watch aficionados. As an independent watchmaker, Haldimann has delivered somewhere between 70 and 80 watches to customers thus far, and it goes without saying that he knows each watch intimately. Those customers know not to send their watches anywhere but directly to him for repairs and servicing, though most have never needed to do so. Haldimann's fans take pleasure in travelling from the United States or Japan to Thun to discuss the idiosyncrasies of their present or future timepieces with the master. Almost every week, either Haldimann or his wife personally leads clubs, associations and classes of schoolchildren through the house to demonstrate how a luxury watch is created.

The extreme concentration and absolute perfection demanded by his profession has led Haldimann to the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, a discipline he studied under the tutelage of a Japanese master. One of the lessons it has taught Haldimann is that the human hand, guided by the subconscious mind, creates things that may not enter the consciousness until many years have passed.

In September 2009, the international timepiece museum in La Chaux-de-Fonds conferred upon Haldimann its highly regarded Gaïa Prize, the highest award a watchmaker can receive. Despite this and all his other success, however, Haldimann at first had a difficult time justifying to his father the prices he charges for his watches: the elder Haldimann was initially shocked to learn that the least expensive of his son's products sell for four times what he earned as a postmaster. Fortunately, that shock has since given way to paternal pride. ○



The headquarters of Haldimann Horology lies amidst Alpine scenery



Inside Haldimann's atelier in Thun