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THE EXPERT'S VIEW Monday, October 19th 2009

An artist recompensed: Beat Haldimann wins the Prix Gaïa

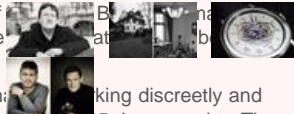


H8 Flying Sculptura © Haldimann Horology

This year's Prix Gaïa in the "Craftsmanship-Creation" category has gone to an uncommon watchmaker. From his workshop in Thun, Beat Haldimann makes timepieces that have no equivalent anywhere in the world. Portrait of a man versed in the art and science of watchmaking.

Fabrice Eschmann/BIPH

Who has heard of Beat Haldimann? Few, if truth be told, outside a small circle of aficionados and collectors of outstanding timepieces. And yet he has just been awarded the Prix Gaïa, a sort of horological Nobel Prize, by the Musée International d'Horlogerie in La Chaux-de-Fonds. This distinction, given to him in the "Craftsmanship-Creation" category, rewards a creative genius who cares as much about the art as the science of watchmaking. It doesn't just make



name. He gives them a soul: his soul.

Beat Haldimann is one of a dying breed; one of the lone knights of watchmaking, working discreetly and silently. Born in Emmenthal in 1964 and certified as a clock and watch repairer in 1985, he moved to Thun in 1991. Having passing the federal diploma that granted him the title master horologist, he embarked on his very first creation: his workshop.

"Concentrate on the essential"

Beat Haldimann set up his manufacture in a mansion, built in 1907, that stands a stone's throw from where the Aar flows into Lake Thun, although "manufacture" is a euphemism for what lies behind these doors. There is not a single CNC machine, no CAD software, no blinking electronics. Beat Haldimann takes his science to its furthest expression and uses only vintage machines which he unearths on his travels around Switzerland and Europe. An old 1940s Schaüblin lathe, discovered in a hospital in the Netherlands, found its way back to Thun. His most modern piece of equipment is a 1960s optical microscope.

Surrounded by these objects, Beat Haldimann could begin his work. A life's work: first a restorer of antique watches, he then began to make clocks. From 1992 to 2001, he developed prototypes for a prestigious Swiss brand. But an idea was slowly taking shape.

After three years' research, Beat Haldimann caused a sensation at Baselworld 2002 with his first wristwatch, the H1 Flying Lyra. Hovering above the dial, the central tourbillon carriage takes the form of a lyra. "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 centre'," he remarked in a 2003 interview for timezone.com. The result is hypnotic.

Leading light

Beat Haldimann, 38 at the time, was now considered a luminary. The German magazine Chronos and the American review Watch Time ranked him among the 20 most significant watchmakers in the world. A title which the young watchmaker confirmed in 2005 when he unveiled his H2 Flying Resonance: a central double tourbillon floating above the dial is synchronised according to the principle of resonance in physics. A world-first that not only uses mechanical principles but also draws on a natural phenomenon.

His latest creation makes a chronological leap. Returning to the H1, the H8 Flying Sculptura, completed in 2008, returns to the central flying tourbillon but banishes all indications from the dial. All that remains is the perfectly regulated and captivating sight of passing time. Thus the watch moves from being an instrument of measurement to an art object, and the watchmaker from the rank of craftsman to that of artist.

Who has heard of Beat Haldimann? You have, of course. He is the kind of man to call each of his customers by their first name. The kind to pay the utmost attention to the sound of the tick-tock inside their watches. The kind who is too humble, too modest to ever rank among watchmaking's stars. And the kind who has no need to. ■

GREUBEL FORSEY WINS IN THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP CATEGORY

Winners of the Prix Gaïa in the Entrepreneurship category, Robert Greubel and Stephen Forsey are,

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During the Renaissance, the French would dismiss Italy as trop de têtes, trop de fêtes, trop de tempêtes (too many heads, too many festivities, too many storms), insinuating that the Peninsula had too many princes, each with his own small state and rivalries; too many festivities resulting in disorder and a certain laxity; and too much political and institutional chaos, fuelled by scheming, short-lived alliances and duplicity. Five centuries on and I must admit, not without regret, that the situation has changed little...

Franco Cologni

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without doubt, leaving their mark on the art of watchmaking. Co-founders of the Greubel Forsey brand, the former French and the latter English, they can take credit for creations that have made a deep impression on the branch. These include the Quadruple Tourbillon à Différentiel Sphérique, which recently carried off the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie Asia in the category for "Best Complicated Watch."

Most of all, the Prix Gaïa comes in recognition of their faculty and determination to innovate and invent. Robert Greubel and Stephen Forsey met in 1992 at Renaud & Papi (now Audemars Piguet Renaud & Papi). They left the company in 1999 and two years later set up their own business, CompliTime. Both specialists in grandes complications, the two men worked for the most prestigious names in watchmaking.

New headquarters

But they had other ambitions. In 2004, after a long gestation, Greubel Forsey presented its first timepiece at Baselworld: the Double Tourbillon 30°. This was the beginning of a meteoric rise. A new company, GFPI, was set up in 2005 to acquire and manage intellectual property rights. In 2006, convinced of the exceptional pertinence and solidity of the brand, the Richemont group took a 20% stake in its capital. That same year, these entrepreneur-watchmakers set up CT Design in partnership with Antoine Tschumi, head of Neo Desis design studios in Le Locle. This was followed in 2007 by CT Time, tasked with the development and production of more industrial movements for a selected clientele. The group now employs some one hundred people and Greubel Forsey makes and sells around a hundred watches a year, at prices ranging from CHF 300,000 to 670,000 at some thirty points of sale around the world.

The cherry on the cake, staff from these four companies now work together under one roof at the group's new headquarters, recently opened in Les Eplatures, between La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle. Reflecting the Greubel Forsey brand itself, the new building spans tradition and modernity, with a farmhouse and listed building adjoining a glass and steel structure. The official opening will take place in October 2009. *F.E.*

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