

# Protecting Watchmaking's Past

Some of the industry's most celebrated names have been developing a foundation to preserve traditional skills.

**By Kathleen Beckett**

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One winter's day a few years ago, while driving with a reporter around the snow-blanketed villages of Switzerland's Vallée du Joux where the world's finest watches are produced, Philippe Dufour became nostalgic.

He drove past the technical school where he had learned as a boy how to make a watch by hand, from start to finish. But now, the man widely regarded as the greatest living watchmaker lamented during the drive, “young people know how to make this part or that, but very few know how to make everything. At factories, they need more machine operators than they need watchmakers. So the schools don't teach it.”

In the watchmaking center in and around Neuchâtel, about 50 miles away, other independent makers were bemoaning the same situation. In 2005 Stephen Forsey and Robert Greubel had formed the watch company Greubel Forsey and “we found it difficult to find skilled people,” Mr. Forsey said. The independent watchmaker Vianney Halter was having the same problem.

“We all,” Mr. Forsey said, “found it difficult to find young watchmakers with the needed skills in watchmaking.”

The reason was clear, he said: “Switzerland had gone through the crisis in the '70s and '80s” — the rise of quartz-powered watches, which the mechanical watch industry still refers to as the Quartz Crisis — “so there was pressure on schools to reorient their training. They needed technicians, not watchmakers who could make a part in the ancestral method.”

More discussions revealed it was not just watchmakers who were concerned. Retailers and collectors were as well — because trained workers are needed to service watches, and those skills were in danger of disappearing.

The men thought the remedy was obvious: For the watch industry to have a future, it needed to respect and to preserve the past. “We thought perhaps if we grouped together we could get some support,” Mr. Forsey said.

And that is how, in 2008, the Time Aeon Foundation was formed.

Its objective: to safeguard endangered skills and techniques, whether, Mr. Forsey said, “it be through workshops, events, communication, or supporting new collaborative projects.” The men initially wanted to create a school but, as that idea now seems untenable, the current goal is to introduce a postgraduate program to train students from watchmaking schools in traditional skills.

“The watch industry has survived 500 years despite many challenges,” Mr. Forsey said. The foundation now wants to guarantee that it survives another 500.



From left to right, the founders of the Time Aeon Foundation in 2006: Stephen Forsey, Philippe Dufour, Vianney Halter, Kari Voutilainen and Robert Greubel. Greubel Forsey

While the foundation's founding members — Mr. Greubel, Mr. Forsey, Mr. Dufour, Mr. Halter and the watchmaker Kari Voutilainen — are celebrated experts in their field, they had terrible timing.

For initial financial help in 2008, “we turned to the bigger companies but the financial crisis hit and budgets were trimmed,” Mr. Forsey said. Yet the skeletal team soldiered on.

In 2012 Greubel Forsey began to showcase the foundation and, Mr. Forsey said, “demonstrate some ancestral skills,” in its booth at the annual Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie, best known as S.I.H.H. By 2016, the fair's organizer, the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie, had dedicated a show space to the foundation.

But the foundation will not participate in Watches and Wonders, the renamed

and reorganized S.I.H.H. scheduled to open April 25 in Geneva, because, Mr. Forsey said, he and Mr. Greubel feel “the format of a big event” will not be compatible.

Over the years, the foundation has developed various programs, including workshops and master classes for students and collectors, held in Mexico City, New York, Toyko and Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and one is now being planned for Paris sometime this year. It also has been making videos of various skills, and is working on how to make them available to watchmakers.

The point, Mr. Forsey said, is not just to pass on the techniques in danger of dying out, but “to raise awareness of watchmaking as a valuable profession culturally. We try to infect them with the virus.”

Although the goal is for the foundation to stand alone, it has no headquarters or staff of its own — to keep costs low, Mr. Forsey said — but all its projects still take time and money.

So Mr. Forsey and Mr. Greubel came up with an idea: making one-off watches to be sold at auction. The program is called Naissance d'une Montre, or Birth of a Watch, and has independent watchmakers form a team to create a timepiece using the skills the foundation is devoted to preserving.

In 2009, “we knew we had hit a home run when Philippe Dufour agreed to participate and share his knowledge and immense set of skills,” Mr. Forsey said. The organization needed someone to learn from Mr. Dufour, and that’s where Michel Boulanger came in. “We wanted to find the right person to spread the knowledge they would gain in the process of studying these skills,” Mr. Forsey said, and “Michel Boulanger won because he’s a dedicated teacher” at the Lycée Diderot, a polytechnic in Paris that teaches watchmaking.



Michel Boulanger, center, teaches one of the foundation's workshops to watchmakers and students of watchmaking. Greubel Forsey

Mr. Boulanger had to take a leave of absence from teaching, subsidized by the foundation, to work with Mr. Dufour and the team at Greubel Forsey for the first *Naissance d'une Montre*, which took years to make and finally was completed in 2015. "That was a eureka moment," Mr. Forsey said, "when the first prototype was ticking."

Christie's agreed to auction the watch without taking a commission. "Charity is in Christie's blood," said Stéphane von Bueren, the house's international business director (his father was a watchmaker.) "We had the privilege to sell the prototype."

The watch was sent on tour before being sold in 2016 in Hong Kong for \$1.46 million. Over the next three years, 11 copies were made, all by hand, each one presold to collectors for 450,000 Swiss francs (\$463,705).

Christie's also arranged for Mr. Greubel and Mr. Forsey to meet with collectors and retailers in places like Hong Kong, Dubai and Geneva, to talk

about the watch and the foundation's mission. "We have the same values," Mr. von Bueren said, "for the young generation to meet the old and learn, to know about the whole watchmaking industry."

The second Naissance d'une Montre, a collaboration between Greubel Forsey and the Swiss brand Urwerk, will be displayed at Baselworld in the spring.

Urwerk's involvement in the project highlights the fact that, if there is a thread that runs through the passion to keep watchmaking alive, it is family. "I'm the son of a third generation clockmaking family," said Felix Baumgartner, Urwerk's co-founder. "This is my heritage."

His parents inspired much of his work. "My father restored old French and English clocks," Mr. Baumgartner said. "He worked on 30 to 50 at a time. At midnight they would all chime, it sounded like a disco." And his mother, he recalled, "loved the Rolling Stones and modern art." So when he and the artist and architect Martin Frei collaborated to begin Urwerk, they agreed it would be a blend of traditional watchmaking and contemporary style.





The second Naissance d'une Montre. Greubel Forsey

Two of Urwerk's engineers, Dominique Buser and Cyrano Devanthey, who share that passion of collecting, restoring and operating traditional watchmaking machines, also worked with the Greubel Forsey team and Mr. Baumgartner on this second timepiece. After Baselworld, Christie's is to send the watch on tour and auction it at the end of the year in Hong Kong.

More Naissance d'une Montre watches are in the discussion and planning stages. The third is expected to involve Ferdinand Berthoud, the house named after the 18th century French watchmaker and now led by Karl-Friedrich Scheufele, co-president of Chopard.

As planned, Naissance d'une Montre No. 4 would be something of a homecoming: Greubel Forsey teaming up with the watchmaker Dominique

Renaud.

Mr. Greubel and Mr. Forsey once worked at Renaud et Papi, the celebrated complications company co-founded by Mr. Renaud, who said he was delighted to become part of the foundation “family” (And like almost everyone in Swiss watchmaking, he comes from a watch family, with Meylans and LeCoultres in his family tree.) “It was first of all the spirit of sharing with the new generations that won me over,” Mr. Renaud said.

His collaboration, he said, would be based on one of his inventions, incorporating the best of old and the new to form what he called “the ideal escapement.”

The foundation appears to be gaining momentum, Mr. Forsey said, but “we’ve only just scratched the surface. We’ve planted a few seeds, but they need a lot more light and water.”

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