

Classical watchmakers keep the forms of the past in step with today.

# PROGRESSIVE RETROSPECTIVE

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“When I see today’s designs,”

notes Osvaldo Patrizzi, “I say, ‘What is the news?’” Patrizzi, a watch expert and the CEO of Geneva-based Patrizzi & Co. Auctioneers, speaks for many of those who have observed the wave of neoclassical designs sweeping forth from Switzerland. A few years ago, watchmaking seemed to have entered an unprecedented era of creativity, flamboyance, and technical advancement, fueled by an insatiable market. Now the party is definitely over. The global financial crisis woke the watch world to a severe hangover, and for many watch designers, the likely remedy seemed to be the tried-and-true designs buried deep in company archives. But Patrizzi uses this analogy: “For me, there is something wrong with designing an old car using new technology.” ➤

IWC Portuguese Yacht Club Chronograph (opposite, \$23,600) and Parmigiani Fleurier Tonda 42mm (left, \$19,100).

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Brand representatives would argue that they are not merely remaking old watches, but making them relevant for the modern customer. A look inside their design departments reveals the substantial effort required to reinterpret vintage aesthetics for large-scale timepieces that outperform their delicate ancestors with resilient in-house movements, watertight cases, and more detailed finishing, particularly on these cases.

“In the 1990s, Vacheron was making exact copies of vintage watches for its Historiques

collection,” says William Lind, the Vacheron Constantin forum moderator for PuristSPro ([www.watchprosite.com](http://www.watchprosite.com)) and a vintage-watch specialist at Royal Jewelers in Andover, Mass. “I felt ill at ease with those watches. As a vintage collector, I would rather have the original than a copy; it just feels more honest. As they revised the Historiques line, starting with the Chronomètre Royale 1907, they started referencing past pieces more for inspiration rather than exact imitation. I prefer that approach, and it suits today’s tastes better.”

Vacheron’s product marketing director, Christian Selmoni, highlights 2004’s Patrimony Contemporaine as an early example of the new classicism. “We looked at watches from the 1950s and borrowed design elements, but we worked hard to add some contemporary elements so it did not look vintage. We went to a contemporary diameter of 40 millimeters, but that is not the only thing—we had to find the right balance and proportions. With classic watches, it looks easy to re-create, but it is not easy at all.”

This year, Vacheron introduced the Historiques Ultra-fine 1955, heralded as the thinnest hand-wound watch: It is a mere 4.10 mm thick. “The key discussions were about how to redesign a watch from 1955, which was very pure, and make the jump into the 21st century,” says Selmoni, who notes that the original measured a petite 31 mm across. “We made several mock-ups. At one point, we considered a 33-millimeter dedicated to collectors, but it looked like a ladies’ watch.” Ultimately, they settled on 36 mm, which is still modest by today’s standards. “Having ultrathin movements helps, because these watches from the ’50s and ’60s had a wonderful balance of diameter and thickness,” Selmoni adds. “You cannot copy a design from the past and do it at 42 millimeters with the same dial. We really have to think about what the watch from the ’50s tells us in terms of inspiration and emotion. It’s more about recapturing the spirit of the past.”

Girard-Perregaux is similarly refocusing on simplicity. Since its debut in 2006, the vintage-inspired 1966 collection has become the brand’s best seller. “My Italian interpretation of a globally classic design—whether in watches, architecture, or cars—is not overcharged,” says Stefano Macaluso, a ▶



Girard-Perregaux 1966 Chronograph in rose gold (opposite, \$24,000) and Blancpain Villeret Moon Phase (above, \$13,500).



H. Moser & Cie Perpetual Moon (above, \$25,800) and Vacheron Constantin Historique Ultra-fine 1955 (right, \$23,200).

senior vice president at Girard-Perregaux. “There is an aesthetic economy of the different components of the watch—it’s a less-is-more approach.” This year’s column-wheel Chronograph and last year’s Annual Calendar Equation of Time added more complications to the classic range, capitalizing on the brand’s technical prowess. “A brand like GP will never stop developing complications,” says Macaluso. “Watches are a bit like cars—there are cars that focus on performance and high speed and others for lower fuel consumption. If we produce watches that are not so complicated, we can work more on accuracy and have chronometer timekeepers.”

**C**omplicated and classic also harmoniously coexist at IWC, which this year expanded its flagship Portuguese range. The 1939 originals—commissioned by importers in Lisbon and Porto—housed pocket-watch movements, making IWC a pioneer of the oversize wristwatch. While the design has evolved over the decades with different movements and variations, it has always spoken the language of longevity. “If you touch such a product icon, it’s like redesigning a Porsche 911. How far can you go? How much of your own signature can you introduce without disturbing the icon?” asks creative director Christian Knoop, who zeroed in on the essential design elements of the Portuguese: the large size, round case, four lugs, shaped hands, railroad track-style chapter ring, and the look of the Arabic numerals. “All those things make a Portuguese a Portuguese, so we wanted to preserve them throughout the family.”

Outfitted with the brand’s thin, oversize manual movements (which evoke the

pocket-watch movements by IWC’s American founder, F.A. Jones), the sleek and minimalist watches like the Hand-Wound Tourbillon may be the purest expressions of the signature design. But the most dramatic design departure for the range is the sporty Yacht Club, a youthful fly-back chronograph. The piece is water-resistant to 6 bars, with a more robust case, crown protection, luminous indexes and hands, and a rubber strap. “We explored lots of design alternatives and prototypes to make it a true regatta watch,” says Knoop. “But in the process, we discussed what truly fits the family, and we went back to a very calm design. If we design a sport watch for a boat, it should still have the spirit of Portuguese, so it is less about the sport of regatta sailing and more about the spirit of navigation and navigational instruments.”

The established marques naturally have a vested interest in reinvigorating their iconic models. Many brands have also embraced a similar aesthetic as their own *raison d’être*. Parmigiani Fleurier has added its signature lugs to the classic, round Tonda model, while Blancpain continues to draw from its palette of traditional Swiss motifs for its elegant and slim designs. “I don’t think there is a classic revival,” says Daniel Zimmerman, director of sales at the newly reconstituted H. Moser & Cie, a 19th-century brand that was reborn in 2005 with designs firmly planted in the past endowed with original in-house movements, such as this year’s Perpetual Moon. “We just wanted to go back to basics and common sense with good-looking designs, easy-to-read dials, and sensible color combinations.”

Certainly, the big brands have taken up the challenge of injecting modernism and originality into reprised design concepts for a transformed marketplace. For all its fallout,

the economic crisis spurred a healthy culling of the watchmaking herd, which had become overrun with superfluity and ostentation. “The huge success of watches at the turn of the century created some very interesting designs—for example, Richard Mille, Max Büsser, and Felix Baumgartner of Urwerk created a new path for watchmaking that is contemporary and technical,” says Selmoni. “But it also gave birth to bling watches, of which we saw many. The crisis immediately killed the bling, but there is still a place for creative watchmaking.” ■

## RESOURCES

Page 120–121

**IWC**

800.432.9330

[www.iwc.com](http://www.iwc.com)

**Parmigiani Fleurier**

949.489.2885

[www.parmigiani.ch](http://www.parmigiani.ch)

Page 122–123

**Girard-Perregaux**

877.846.3447

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Page 124

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