

TRACED ELEMENTS

An immersion in watchmaking's past imbues Parmigiani's designs.

AS HE WALKED TO AND FROM school each day in the Swiss village of Couvet, near Fleurier, a young Michel Parmigiani passed a statue of Ferdinand Berthoud, a local 18th-century watchmaking hero. Berthoud, one of the fathers of the marine chronometer (along with John Harrison), left the region for Paris, where he established his business in 1745, to produce watches for the French navy and King Louis XVI. More than two centuries after Berthoud made his horological mark, Parmigiani grew up on the same streets, also destined to become a master watchmaker.

Parmigiani, who launched his own eponymous brand in 1996, is among a handful of contemporary masters—

François-Paul Journe, Philippe Dufour, and Peter Speake-Marin among them—whose intensive studies of historic watches enrich their modern-day craft. “Restoration belongs to our culture, our company soul,” explains Parmigiani, who resurrects antique treasures in his Fleurier *manufacture*, a practice made possible by his company’s independence and freedom from

quarterly shareholder demands. “It’s not a profit-making department, it’s more linked to the history of the profession of watchmaking, which is one of our values,” he says. “It brings out the cultural aspect of watchmaking, which can be forgotten because we are always talking about prices. Still, it is at the foundation of everything we do.”

For collectors such as Behrooz Sarafaz, an oilfield investor who owns more than 360 timepieces including about a dozen Parmigianis, this link to the past is evident in the attention to detail exhibited in Parmigiani’s watches. “I believe he is absolutely inspired by other geniuses and



visionaries who came before him,” says Sarafaz. “It would be impossible for a world-class artist of his level not to be inspired by that.”

Restoration can often be a serendipitous venture that yields unexpected discoveries. In 2002, for example, Parmigiani flew to Malta to evaluate a cache of old timepieces that were discovered in the Palazzo Falson, a villa that was being renovated to become a museum after being closed for 40 years. As he sifted through a cardboard box containing a number of watches, he came across an exceedingly rare decimal pocket watch. The piece was marked with the name Robin and the number 2. “At that moment, I was the only person in the world who knew there was a second Robin watch,” Parmigiani recalls. “It was like discovering a Van Gogh in your grandmother’s attic.” ➔



Parmigiani mixes restoration work (as in the Robin watch, above) with his contemporary designs, including the Pershing Tourbillon.

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—MICHEL PARMIGIANI



Fibonacci's Algorithm inspired the case design of Parmigiani's Kalpa.

Robert Robin (1742–1799), one of the first French clockmakers to use the anchor escapement, served Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Following the revolution, Robin participated in the government's short-lived experiment to reclassify time into units of 10. Parmigiani was impressed with the fine condition of the 1791 piece he had found, and assigned Roman Winiger, one of three watchmakers in Parmigiani's restoration workshop, to restore it to its original splendor over the course of a year.

“Restoring is like being an archaeologist of time,” explains Parmigiani. “But before you even touch a piece, you have to spend time observing and investigating it so you can understand it. When you meet an important piece, you must maintain great humility before your ancestor watchmaker's work.” Humble is one of the first words often used to describe the soft-spoken Parmigiani, who is the antithesis of the ego-driven rock star watchmaker.

But restoration provides no outlet for self-expression, which is why Parmigiani relishes crafting original watches that embody the spirit and refinement of the antiques that have passed through his hands. His timepieces reference history not in a literal sense, but with a reverence that is demonstrated through his commitment to uncompromising standards of quality and finishing. “My watches have a *fil rouge* [red thread], a common thread that represents all I have acquired through watchmaking history that carries through to my contemporary work,” he explains.

From his restoration workshop to his haute horlogerie atelier, where a team crafts custom timepieces for connoisseur collectors including Sarafaz, Parmigiani is able to devote resources to such less-commercial endeavors because he is not beholden to the short-term profit motives of investors. “Independence for us means flexibility and rapid reaction time,” he says, adding that his workshops can produce a custom piece in about a year, compared to three to five years at bigger brands. “All this brings us an intellectual independence as well, which is very important as we want to create unique and rare pieces.”

—LAURIE KAHLE ●

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