

The Masters Of Time

Earlier this year we interviewed a group of people whose collective experience in their field was not only vast but well-known and well-respected. Daniel Roth, Roger Dubuis and Peter Speake-Marin have been making watches for most of their lives, which means they have been making them for most of yours, too. But for all that wealth of experience, when we crossed paths with two of the three of them in Switzerland (Daniel Roth and Roger Dubuis), we were catching them on the heels of doing something new. It is that new experience, and the impact that it had on them, that most stuck with me, and I'd now like to share that with you.

Along the way, you'll meet a man who isn't the face of the project, or even the hand that shaped the watches, but without whom there would never have been such a gathering of wisdom.

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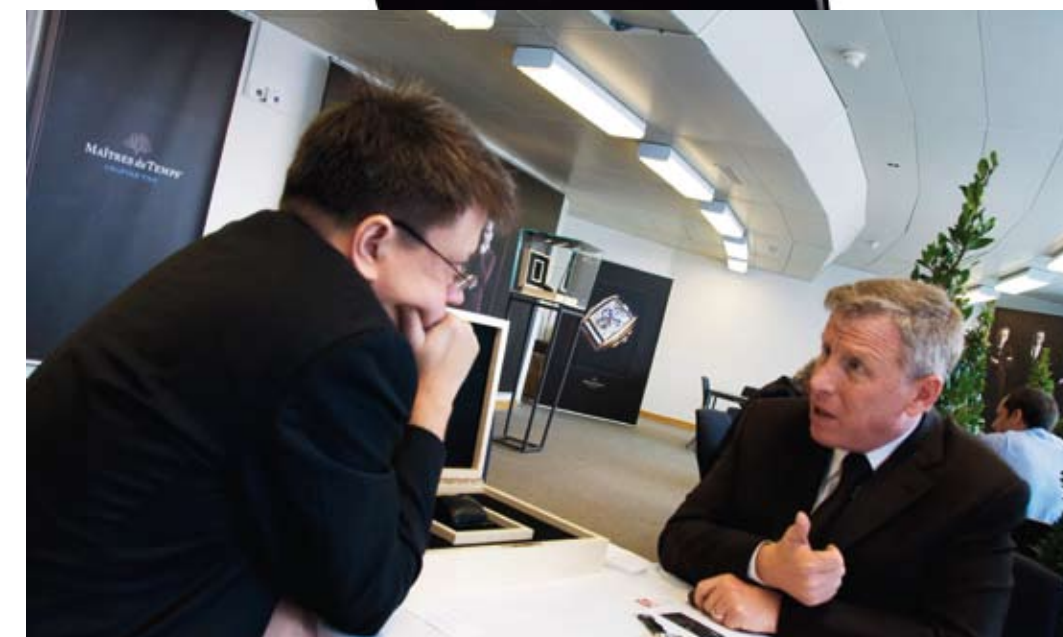
At the recent Baselworld we attended a meeting with a group called Maitres du Temps,

which literally translates as the Masters Of Time. This name, as you can imagine, is pretty darn impressive, even during a week-long exposition devoted to timekeeping and pretty jewelry. Now, we met a lot of people in Switzerland, and I'm not going to lie to you: I was star-struck a good deal of the time. It's strange, sometimes, taking meetings with brand names that you have heard your whole life. Rolex. TAG Heuer. Hermes. Which is not to say that it was only the old names that struck me into giddiness. I was tickled pink to meet Romain Jerome, the man who brought forth the Titanic watch, and I was downright thrilled when I realized that I was looking at the MB of MB & F. It's a great charge for me to meet the designers that I've only read about; it's also a charge to meet the people who've made the watches that I write about. At Basel this year I met both. But when we came away from the interview with the Masters of Time, I was convinced that they certainly deserved the title.

Now, in that enriched environment, when I say that we took a meeting that had me even more excited than usual, it's no small thing. In fact, my own interest was being fed by the obvious growing enthusiasm of my fellow journalists. They were clearly very happy about getting this interview arranged, and the fact that it was happening in three stages only served to pique my curiosity more. When we first got there, we were shown the excellent Maitres du Temps promotional video. It's a quite lovely piece of work, and we were sad that we couldn't obtain a copy for ourselves. But then we moved on to a brief meeting with Steven Holtzman, the Chief Executive Officer of Maitres du Temps, and all my thoughts of the video flew from my head. Steven Holtzman is a very forthright guy, easy to listen to, and what he had to say that afternoon was particularly informative, both for what it said about his brand and what it said about the entire industry.

I say "his brand", and that's not really far off track, because it was Steve Holtzman's idea to bring the brand together in the first place. To create a brand, as it were. It was his leadership that is responsible for the brand existing at all, and yet, he's one of those people who might stay simultaneously at the top of the pyramid and yet behind the curtain. Steven isn't a watch designer himself, and were it not for this meeting, I, and thus you, might never have known his name. I'm glad I do, because like I said, he's an interesting man. He wasn't ▶

OPPOSITE: The creative team of the Master of Time. Above, their creation. Below, our editor-in-chief with Steven Holtzman, at right, the man who brought them all together



a designer before this, either: he was a watch distributor, one of those people responsible for getting the timepieces to the places where you can avail of them. His take on his previous job was interesting, too. There seems to be a certain amount of necessary acceptance that went with the territory. The thing about being a distributor, he said, is that if you're good, you get replaced.

I guess that makes sense, although, it's a cold world we live in. I mean, I don't know any more about watch distributorship than you do. But it stands to reason. You start off, say, going around the area, working with a brand that you believe in and that you think, if given a chance, would really do well. You pour your heart into promoting it, and if you're doing your job well, people sit up and take notice. The watch starts to move more quickly than before. Pretty soon, it's moving even more quickly.

So quickly, perhaps, that the company decides that, wow, we're doing so well, we really need to think about getting a bigger distributor, someone with more manpower, someone with the resources to devote to the new and larger market. Unfortunately, someone not you.

I think that sort of self-inflicted planned obsolescence would get to anyone after a while, and you'd need to find some way to reconcile that. In Steven Holtzman's case, he decided to create a watch brand. Like I said, as far as I know he's no watchmaker himself, but as a distributor, he would know more about the watch industry and who was in it than the average guy. He may not know how to build watches, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have skill sets. The saying goes, those who can do, do. Those who can't do, teach. But that's not always the only option. Sometimes they direct.

And here is where we see Steve

Holtzman's abilities come into play. He wanted to create a group that pulled together watchmakers with similar philosophies, and similar languages. He wanted a brand that would combine two points of view: British directness, and Swiss old-school workmanship. And when the Swiss talk about old-school, they're not kidding: Geneva is of course famous for its craftsmanship in the horology field, and it's been evolving for a really long time. The commitment of Swiss watchmakers to the pursuit of detailed, minute, precision handiwork has made it practically a synonym for high standards. "Runs like a Swiss clock", as they say. And Holtzman wanted to fuse these British and Swiss ideologies and aim them towards creating something distinctive, something enduring. He's neither Swiss nor British himself—he's American, unless I'm very much mistaken—but like I said: the man knows people.

When he envisioned the Masters of Time, there were certain things that he wanted for it. First and foremost was the idea of pulling together accomplished and experienced people from the field, and getting them to collaborate. (Collaborating on such a project isn't always the easiest thing in the world, as will be seen.) The watches would also have harmony across the board with each other: there would be a unifying theme, and a unifying look. The particular hook that they hang their hat on is the rollers on the top and bottom of the watch. These rollers were to be a consistent presence in the line, even when – and this is one of the most interesting factors – the design teams for each release changed. Because this was another part of the plan: the brand would assemble these teams to work on each chapter of the brand releases, but the Masters would change from one phase to the next.

In a way, for me this is the hardest part of the whole plan to grasp: that every chapter, the design team would be assembled anew. The team is not a

fixed list. Granted, from Chapter One to Chapter Two there was only one team member changed, but the precedent seems to be that the roster is fluid. One incredible collection of minds comes in for each chapter; at that chapter's end, the team is disbanded and another fine assortment of experienced and talented watchmakers comes together. It seems that it would be very difficult to let go of such a group, once you had brought them together. But maybe that's part of the concept as well. The watches are deliberately distinct: they are known as MdT Chapter One, and this year's offering, MdT Chapter Two. Perhaps the whole idea was to really work within parameters, and accept that the Chapters would all have an end. A single, goal, and when that goal is achieved, the team would release their hold, and make way for the input of the next selection of Masters of Time.

Oh, but what a team they had for Chapter Two! There's a very real danger of me going on and on, but this group of men was something to see. First of all, they've been pillars in the field for years. So much so, that each of them is, actually, a brand name. Which is a little weird, and maybe weird for them too. When we began the third portion of the

interview and met with the members of the team (alas, not Mr. Speake-Marin) the impression was reinforced that these men have been doing their work for a long time. Each of them has their name associated with a watchmaking brand, which means that in the field of Horology, the name was well known enough to trade on. When you say you're working with Roth, Dubuis and Speake-Marin, these are names of note.

A little history is not out of line here. I can't pretend to give a comprehensive resume for these three men, but at least I should touch on the highlights. It's particularly interesting, for me at least, to note how many similarities there are among them, even though this project was their first time to work together. It gives you a sort of window into the profession.

Roger Dubuis had an early introduction to the world of timekeeping: when he was a schoolboy, he had the task of winding the weights of the clock tower in his church. He also got to ring the noon bells, which had to have been a pretty great job for a kid to do. Clearly Mr. Dubuis felt the attraction as well, because it's not as if he left the field or anything once he grew up. He studied at the Geneva School of Watchmaking,

and if you accept (as well you might) that Geneva is the center of the world when it comes to watchmaking, you can imagine how much clout the Geneva School commands. Mr. Dubuis later went to work for Patek Philippe, one of the oldest and most respected companies in the watchmaking world. He was with Patek Philippe for a long time, including fourteen years spent in the department of high complications. His personal achievements span decades. If you want to pick one to focus on, apart from the very impressive fact that he got himself hired by Patek Philippe at all, then consider this: he was on the team ▶

The MdT Chapter Two stresses readability and ease of setting; the rollers move simultaneously with adjustment. The creative team, above, stressed that the older you get, the more you appreciate clarity and simplicity.



The exploded view of the Chapter Two details the size of the signature rollers. Right, our editor-in-chief with Daniel Roth.



that created the world's first perpetual calendar bi-retrograde movement. He went on to have his own atelier, and eventually to found the company that bears his name.

Peter Speake-Marin is English, and he trained at Hackney Technical College. His interests led him to a job with a London dealer of antique watches. There he came into regular contact with the past and its methods, as he was working on the vintage complication watches of several different brands. He has said that it was there that he fell in love with watchmaking. After this, he moved on to Switzerland to further continue his studies in the field; reportedly his first stop was at the workshop of Renaud & Papi, the complications specialists of Audemars Piguet. Carving his own distinctive path into the watchmaking industry, Mr. Speake-Marin went on to build a tourbillon pocket watch, apparently creating one with not one but two power trains. This perhaps served as a road marker for a man whose path has led him inexorably to the deeper recesses and intricacies of the mechanical complication watch. The tourbillon pocket watch was constructed and assembled entirely by hand. His work continued to grow and garner praise. He, too, went on to found his own watchmaking company, The Watch Workshop. This seems like a natural evolution for someone so dedicated to following his own instincts. Ever the innovator, Peter Speake-Marin has said that if horological artistry is going to flourish, there must be both awareness of the past and a sense of the new possibilities that the future will bring to us.

Daniel Roth initially studied watchmaking craft in Nice. Now, there are a lot of very fine things you can say about Nice, and far be it from me



to disparage it or them. But Mr. Roth wanted to be a watchmaker, and if you're going to get in deep into that field, the warmth of Nice isn't going to be your climate. Switzerland was calling, with its extreme temperatures and storied history. So it was that Daniel Roth, who seems to be a very warm person himself, traded the balmy coastal beaches for the freezing mountain valleys. He trained in traditional watchmaking methods at Audemars Piguet. In 1970, when Mr. Roth wasn't yet thirty years old, the Chaumet brothers acquired a mostly dormant watch company called Breguet. Their plan was to revive the historical brand and restore it to prominence. Daniel Roth came over and applied for the position of master watchmaker. Now, Daniel Roth came across like a very sweet and kindly man with white hair when we met him in Basel. Kind of like a Swiss Santa Claus, only thinner. But to walk up to the Chaumet brothers at the age of twenty-something and put yourself forward as master watchmaker – he must've had some kind of steel in his backbone. Maybe the move to the Swiss valley wasn't so bad an idea after all. The brothers decided he was just what they'd been looking for, and put him in charge. He was at Breguet for 14 years, and if you're wondering how he did, well, back then they were an almost quiescent property, and now they're freaking Breguet, so he apparently knew what he was doing. In 1989, when the brand was sold, he formed his own brand under his own name.

The respective brands have since become institutions in their own right, and the men have thus become free to return to their own original place at the workbench doing what they love to do. And to say that they love making watches is probably, well, inadequate. All of them could have retired by now,

including Peter Speake-Marin, who is relatively younger. But they haven't stopped working in the field that they love. In fact, when we started our interview, Daniel Roth took a square of cloth out of his pocket. It looked like chamois or a polishing blanket. We weren't sure what he had to show us, until he unfolded the cloth to reveal a wristwatch, which he then strapped on. What is that, we asked. It turns out that he had made it himself, by hand. A real handmade Daniel Roth, in an extremely limited edition of one, with a special carrying case that is, essentially, Daniel Roth's jacket pocket. This, please note, is something completely separate from the MdT Chapter Two watch. This was something he just did on his own, apparently for the sheer fun of it. So yeah, they're keeping busy.

And the current fruit of their labors is the Maitres du Temp Chapter Two. The Chapter Two is a large watch, and it carries a lot to justify that size. It's called the Big Date Triple Calendar, and it is an instantaneous triple calendar, big date timepiece. It has the rollers that characterize the MdT signature look, with day indication and month indication each having a roller. The case is in red gold, and like we said, it's a big one. 58 mm by 42mm, and 18mm thick. The size grants you an unprecedented readability. The large top-and-bottom rollers are easy to view, and their text is unabbreviated, so you really can't ask for more in terms of simple ease of glance. The big date and the rollers also change instantaneously, which is good, cause, well, it's never half October half November. Roger Dubuis is particularly happy about that. The legibility is another happy point for Mr. Dubuis: during the interview he said the older he gets, the more he appreciates it, which got a laugh out of everyone. Of course,

The Chapter Two model in its display case. It's a commanding presence, even more so when seen on the wrist, at right.

The Chapter Two is an impressively sized watch, and it does tend to grab attention. Of course, with such a team behind it, who wouldn't want that?



they're all watchmakers, so there are things about the watch that all three appreciate that would never be apparent to the naked eye.

Only the three men know the work that went into making the watch into the final product. Putting the correctors in easily accessible locations is another tiny detail that meant a lot to the makers: you don't have to turn the watch over to correct it. There was a fair amount of difficulty getting the self-winding movement to power not just the usual watch hands, but two sizable rollers as well, and those in opposing locations. The same power has to drive all three parts, and not lose accuracy, and do it so that the change for the rollers and date happens in an instant. Peter Speake-Marin said in the press kit, "To ensure sufficient force in the construction of the calendar, the transmission of power through the movement had to be very efficient, consuming minimum power turning the large rollers, so we had to master the horological challenge and use the latest technology. One aspect which was crucial in the design was the fabrication of the rollers in ultra-light material." During the interview, Mr. Dubuis said that there are things that look easy once they're done, but are actually very difficult to do. But then for a watchmaker that's part of the joy. Daniel Roth loves watches "that have an original design, that you don't see on every street corner". This watch certainly fits that description. It's an unusual looking watch, where even the case is hard to describe: it's sort of a tonneau

casing, but not exactly, and seen from the side it almost seems oblong. It is, Mr. Roth says, a little more modern than his own work: he's more the Louis XVI type.

Which, of course, is one of the great things about collaborating with other watchmakers. When you've been a solo worker (and, you know, a brand name) for so long, you develop a certain way of doing things, and those conceptions get challenged when you're in a team with others of equal standing. The product of such a collaboration is going to be unlike anything that any one of them would have come up with alone, says Daniel Roth, but it will be the product of them working together. And as we on the outside can see, it will be remarkable nonetheless. Certainly the Chapter Two is. But as proud of these men are of the product, it is their thoughts on the process that stayed with me. When the interview was almost over, I asked them what they had learned from the project that will help them in the future as watchmakers. They laughed. Roger Dubuis said that he'd learned nothing new about horology, but he had learned a lot of positive things from the act of cooperative creation. He learned how to form a consensus, and also, he said, a certain type of humility. Daniel Roth echoed that: he said, in effect, "I spent my whole life in my shop. I've worked hard! I feel like I'm working hard, working hard. But now I get to meet other watchmakers and see their extraordinary work, and I see, huh. They've been working hard too."

That's not a bad lesson to take away from a job. Even for the Masters Of Time. ■



Roger Dubuis, seen here in double, is a name unto himself. It's no small thing that Holtzmann, below, was able to pull three such powerhouses onto the same project.

