



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

LOOKING FORWARD

Girard Perregaux has replaced its classic-looking timepieces with more updated and contemporary watches, cut down its model references and introduced two new lines **BY CHUANG PECK MING**

GOING by the high number of re-issues at this year's Basel watch fair in Switzerland, it would not be wrong to conclude that many luxury watch brands have turned to their past for inspiration in coming up with new timepieces for 2014. But there is at least one brand that went against the trend and did the opposite: Girard Perregaux. The Swiss watch manufacturer, renowned for its Tourbillon with Three Bridges, would have plenty of history to milk. It has been around for 223 years, longer than many better-known brands. And Girard Perregaux has been looking back to its early years for new ideas – but it has been doing too much of that, according to Michele Sofisti, chief executive of the Sowind Group which owns the brand.

While other brands went to the extreme and abandoned their heritage in the heady days not too long ago, when an economic boom was fanning a wild demand for luxury timepieces – and excess was the watchword in watch-making – Girard



“GIRARD PERREGAUX NEEDS TO BALANCE BY LOOKING FORWARD NOW. OTHERWISE, PEOPLE THINK WE’RE A MUSEUM.”

– Michele Sofisti (left), chief executive of the Sowind Group which owns the Girard Perregaux brand

Perregaux was at the other end of the continuum, buried in its past.

It's no wonder that many of its models have ended up looking like museum pieces. Even after being given several face-lifts, the iconic Three Bridges timepiece still, until in recent years, looked not much different from the original one that was unveiled over 150 years ago. Some believe that it has been produced to the point of saturation.

The bigger danger is that Girard Perregaux may lose sight of the future. It will not only drive away existing customers, but also fail to draw new ones if it stays the course. Things just have to change.

“Girard Perregaux needs to balance by looking forward now,” says Mr Sofisti, a 20-year veteran in the watch business. “Otherwise, people think we’re a museum.”

Since he became Sowind's CEO in August 2011, he has done just that. Under his watch in the past two-and-a-half years, 60 per cent of Girard Perregaux's collection was changed. Classic-looking timepieces have been replaced with more updated and “contemporary” watches. Where there were over 700 model references, there are now only 120. Two new lines were introduced: the Hawk sporty models; and the Travel lifestyle pieces.

Mr Sofisti overhauled Girard Perregaux's global distribution system, changing 60 per cent of its distributors to align it with the brand's new forward-looking move. New distributors have been appointed in the United Kingdom, Germany, Mexico, the Ukraine, China and South-east Asia.

In Singapore, Girard Perregaux parted ways – amicably, according to Mr Sofisti – with its long-time distributor (15 years) FJ Benjamin and appointed The Hour Glass as its new distributor. “The Hour Glass is one of the best (watch retailing) companies in the world,” Mr Sofisti says.

Competitors and industry watchers are paying more attention to the new timepieces launched by Girard Perregaux. And so far, they are impressed.

The Constant Escapement, introduced last year, was a technological breakthrough in watch-making and has raised the bar in time-keeping performance. Featuring an entirely new constant force escapement, it was the natural winner in the innovation category of the 2013 Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Geneve, the watch industry's equivalent of the Oscars.

The Constant Escapement made its debut in a 48 mm white gold case, and has been reissued in a 48 mm pink gold case this year.

The Tourbillon with Three Bridges got a radical makeover this year, and the re-designed Neo-Tourbillon with Three Bridges is more modern looking. Its bridges have been skeletonised. They are now also made of titanium – which is lighter but stronger than steel – and given a black PVD treatment.

The Neo-Tourbillon, which comes with a 45 mm pink gold case, is also equipped with a new automatic movement that beats to a high frequency of 3 hertz. Apart from the changes, the new tourbillon is also 45,000 Swiss francs (\$61,902) cheaper than the brand's other tourbillons, says Mr Sofisti.

The star of Girard Perregaux's latest collection is the Tri-Axial Tourbillon which, because it is designed on three planes rather than the traditional one, cuts out more disturbances caused by gravitational pull and makes the watch more accurate. Like the Constant Force, but contrary to current fashion, the Tri-Axial also has a large 48 mm pink gold case. It is powered by a manual winding movement.

The new Sea Hawk has been given a new coat of paint – striking cobalt blue and coral orange. The sporty-looking timepiece meets all the standard requirements of a diving watch, including water-resistance to 1,000 metres deep and is equipped with a helium valve which ensures that the air pressure between the watch's interior and external surrounding is rebalanced after a deep dive. The Sea Hawk has a 44 mm steel case that houses an automatic movement with a frequency of up to 4 hertz. Price: S\$16,000 (rubber strap) or S\$17,600 (steel bracelet). ■

WHAT'S NEW

1) Chanel J12 Flying Tourbillon Joaillerie: At S\$1.61 million, Chanel's most expensive timepiece, the J12 Flying Tourbillon Joaillerie, must be paved with diamonds. A flying tourbillon is complicated and pricey. Yet the price would not come near to this. You are paying for the diamonds – which cover the entire white-gold timepiece, including the crown. But even if you have the money, you may not get to buy this stunning automatic timepiece in a 38 mm case. It is limited to only five pieces worldwide.

2) Grieb & Benzinger Green Inspiration: Green is the traditional colour representing Islam – and this specially commissioned timepiece, defined by a mostly green dial and an alligator leather strap with green stitching, is intended to be a gift for the holy month of Ramadan. The eye-catching two-part dial is very deep: Arabic numerals on the upper hour scale with green dots marking the hours are combined with a handcrafted, guilloché, green-coloured base. Called the Green Inspiration, the watch, created by German watchmakers Grieb & Benzinger, has a 43 mm platinum case with the typical Grieb & Benzinger hand-guilloché bezel. It is powered by a hand-wound movement. Price: About 65,000 euros (S\$108,724).

3) Ulysse Nardin Skeleton Tourbillon Manufacture: Ulysse Nardin has been a pioneer in the use of the magnetic-resistant silicon in watch-making, having first introduced the material into a timepiece in 2001. The Skeleton Tourbillon Manufacture is not just a showcase of the brand's expertise in the art of creating skeletonised pieces, it is also an example of its know-how in silicon, which makes a watch more accurate. Nestled within the hand-wound movement of this complication is a flying tourbillon that features a balance spring, anchor and escapement wheel made of silicon. The Skeleton Tourbillon Manufacture comes in a 44 mm rose (S\$116,400) or white gold case (S\$123,200). It has power reserve of seven days.

4) Jaeger-LeCoultre Geophysic 1958: Jaeger-LeCoultre's Geophysic chronometer, created in 1958 for the International Geophysical Year, is a symbol of precision and reliability and pure design. The brand has now created the Geophysic 1958 to pay respect to the legendary timepiece. An improved version of the earlier watch, it has a slightly bigger 38.5 mm case and is equipped with Jaeger's Calibre 898/I, deemed one of the most accurate and reliable in-house automatic movements on the market today. The movement features a stop second for accurate time-setting and a high frequency of 28,800 vibrations per hour for high precision. It is also highly resistant to shocks and has an automatic winding with ceramic ball bearings that require no lubrication, which means that the watch does not require servicing as often as a regular timepiece. What's more, a soft iron inner case protects the movement from the effects of magnetism. The Geophysic 1958 is available in steel (limited 800 pieces), pink gold (limited 300) and platinum (limited 58) models.

5) Christopher Claret Margot: A paramount question that has kept romantic young women awake since, perhaps, the beginning of time is this: Does he loves me? So they go about picking the petals off a daisy while reciting "He loves me, he loves me not." The English version of this is all or nothing – he loves me, he loves me not. The French have a wider range of possibilities – he loves me a little, loves me lots, loves me passionately, loves me madly, or doesn't love me at all. Christopher Claret's latest complication, Margot, the first that he has created for ladies, has an ingenious mechanism that helps to – or at least tries to – answer the paramount question. The watch is powered by an automatic movement and features a mother of pearl dial with three pear-shaped diamonds. Margot will be available in four limited editions of 20 pieces each, with white or red gold cases wrapped in diamonds. Prices: 198,000 Swiss francs (S\$272,288) or 278,000 Swiss francs (excluding VAT).

6) Tissot T-Race Nicky Hayden: This limited edition watch marks motorcycle racer Nicky Hayden's new start in 2014 with a new team. The Tissot T-Race Nicky Hayden, which has a break disc bezel and tyre tracks on the back of its bracelet, has the racer's signature logo on its case-back. It comes in a special helmet box. Costing S\$1,250, the watch is limited to 4,999 pieces.

7) Sinn EZM13: A hallmark of Sinn's EZM13 is its readability – a key requirement for a professional diving watch. It has an integrated SINN SZ02 automatic chronograph that boasts a 60-minute – instead of the standard 30-minute – counter at 6 o'clock. This provides direct and easy reading of the minutes right through from 0 to 60. Another special feature of this diving timepiece, which is pressure resistant to a depth of 500 metres, is the positioning of the crown and push-pieces on its left-hand side that ensure unlimited freedom of movement for the hand. The 41.5 mm steel watch is also highly resistant to magnetic influence and temperature. Prices: S\$6,200 (with leather strap) and S\$6,600 (with steel bracelet).

