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I write about luxury timepieces.
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How To Make Luxury Watches Cool

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HYT H1 Watch

The high-end luxury watch is an evolving concept that has experienced a golden age over the last decade or so. New technology has allowed wonderful mechanical creations to be brought to life, but they still need to exist as members of an elite traditional watch making family. Traditional high-end timepieces seen at auction or produced by many “classic” brands currently are beautiful but less than modern or innovative in their approach. Modern high-end watches must not only be innovative and attractive, but also present themselves as legitimate luxury items. It isn’t an easy task. The bottom line is that for modern luxury watches to sell they need to be cool. To understand how what goes into producing a “cool” luxury watch I spoke with watch industry veteran and creative mind Vincent Perriard. He has an admirable track record of combining the traditional watch industry with the modern world, and most recently is the CEO behind the innovative and very successful new high-end watch brand **HYT**.

Ariel Adams (AA): *Historically, most really high-end watches were all classical looking and meant for very conservative tastes, how and when did that change?*

Vincent Perriard (VP): My perception is that it started to change in the late 1990’s. Brands such as Audemars Piguet had tremendous success with the Royal Oak Offshore (born in 1995) and this gave inspiration to more sporty, bigger, and stronger looking watches. It is also due to the fact that a lot of managers who worked for large brands, started to imagine their own brands. Combined with an irresistible increase of demand for watches (worldwide), what we call “the new horlogerie” was born at the beginning of this century. I would mention Richard Mille as a leading brand in this new segment of the industry. He pushed watchmaking know-how to a new limit with new ways to display time, and how treat and use the materials. He almost “gave birth” to many other projects/brands in the watch industry such as Haultence, MCT, MB&F, Urwerk, and today’s new innovative watch brand HYT. All these companies are niche in the market but bring high creativity and innovation to life. They are today “necessary” for the entire watch industry because they are really the major pipeline of R&D for more traditional and/or conservative watch makers.



Vincent Perriard

AA: *A lot of people, even in the watch industry, claim that wrist watches are no longer necessary because technology has given us better and more accurate ways to tell the time. How does one design an unnecessary item to feel necessary?*

VP: The entire Swiss watch industry (as an entity) succeeded after about 20 years to become “fashionable.” Shifting the idea of a watch from a necessary item to a status symbol item. Wearing a watch today shows your status, your spirit, and character. It is no longer connected to accuracy. This is the result of combined efforts of low-end brands such as Swatch (which became the icon of coolness in the watch industry in the late 80s) or Hublot today (on the higher-end) which have become a symbol of success for the hip and wealthy crowd. The key element of this perception shift is marketing. Brilliant marketing campaigns have changed the perception of the watch to become an emotional and aspirational product rather than just a tool.

AA: *Do you agree with the statement that “cool watches take risks?” If so, what types of risks need to be taken and how do you make sure that in the end those risks are successful?*

VP: Small brands *need* to take “risks” in their design and/or innovation approach. It is the only way to create visibility in a market of 7 billion people. You have over 250 Swiss watch brands exhibiting at the famous BaselWorld watch fair every year in Switzerland. If you want to be seen and desired by clients (retailers and consumers), you need to “speak” differently. You need to “act” differently, and you need to bring a high dose of innovation in order to be different. The segment of new horlogerie needs to create desire and difference otherwise it won’t be seen. That’s quite a simple equation. Those who proved not different or creative enough (mainstream) have just disappeared, especially during the economic down-turn around 2008. So for me, I read “cool” as different, innovative, and strong.

AA: *How important is it in today’s high-end watch market to create something new and fresh? Can a reinterpretation of existing designs and concepts also be cool?*

VP: Being fresh is vital. Creating something new however is more challenging. Why? There are more and more watch brands out there all the time, which are each trying to do the same thing. Lots of brains are designing and trying to innovate and bring great marketing concepts to market. So year after year, you need to raise the bar to a new level. In certain categories of watches and for certain types of product lines, I would say that reinterpretation of design is a necessity. You always need to evolve and follow the trends and therefore re-designing a design that became too classic is sometime very important.



AA: *What should a good watch designer do to keep in touch with current tastes, technological developments, and trends in order to ensure their products are relevant to consumers?*

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VP: Very difficult answer. Some good designers can actually “smell” the market and follow consumer behaviors by compiling what they see at the present moment in time and culture. You also have designers who are in advance of the times, with a vision of the future. These special designers can anticipate the direction of demand or even create the trends. These two types of designers are completely different. And both types are necessary, in any business. It really depends on what the brand is looking for; what type of risks the brand is ready to take. Because “showing the path” or creating a trend is obviously a great challenge. As a watch brand CEO evolving in the new “horlogerie”, I am obviously more keen to break the rules and create innovative designs, as well as to take the lead instead of following the trends. Creating trends and two skills: understanding your market really well, and consumer behaviors and demands. You also must have GREAT instincts. You can learn the first skills. The second, you either have or don’t have.

AA: *When a design is clearly controversial or polarizing, how do you make sure that it makes sense for final production and eventual sale to the public?*

VP: You can never make sure. It’s a feeling, an instinct. But there are some rules. For example at HYT watches, we acknowledged 2 things before designing and creating the H1 watch :

1. The market is highly crowded with a lots of brands = you need to surprise the market and bring high added value.
2. The market of new horlogerie is in the \$60K – \$100K price range, and a lot of brands offer square or rectangular shaped watch cases = we “simply” design a round watch case and market it at \$45K.

In addition the two above ideas, we brought a highly innovative and experienced team to the project. With a strong network (both up and downstream) in the industry, we have one of the strongest knowledge and network databases to create and manufacture a watch as well as distribute it while creating worldwide buzz. So while risk is part of the equation, you always need to be prepared and work with the best people possible.

AA: *In the end, what should wearing a cool luxury watch make someone feel that a classic or traditional watch cannot?*

VP: It really depends on the person’s personality. It really depends what “message” you want to convey and the image you want to project. It’s like any other consumer good. You find people with no interest to communicate a personal image and you find people willing to be part of an elite “club.” Wearing a cool/innovative/recognizable design watch fits a specific category of people with a particular mindset. The watch they wear is a talking-piece, and they are proud to have it on their wrist. These people want to be part of a story and are not too shy to speak about it.

Ariel Adams publishes the [watch review site aBlogtoWatch.com](#).

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