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Artists Create, but on a Palette for the Wrist

By KATHLEEN BECKETT MARCH 19, 2015

NEW YORK — Just as the fashion world has partnered with artists to get buzz for clothes or accessories (think of balloon dogs by Jeff Koons plastered on H&M handbags), so too do watchmakers look for the artiste touch.

These collaborations range from superficial to something a bit more elemental.

As Alex Newson, senior curator at the London Design Museum, put it: "Are the artists just choosing a color, or are they looking into how to go about communicating the time?"

Efforts from various watch companies fall somewhere in between, and the process is sometimes more complicated than it may seem by looking at the watch dial.

Chaumet, for instance, commissioned Loris Cecchini, an Italian artist based in Berlin, to design one of its Class One watches.

The look of the watch is "strictly related to my series of sculptural installations, Wallwave Vibrations," which evoke "the behavior of waves on the water's surface," he explained.

But Mr. Cecchini did more than just slap a wavy surface on a dial. "We spent almost one year of work and conversation with engineers and craftsmen to realize this product," he said.

“At the beginning I made several proposals and designs, and then with the team of Chaumet we evaluated the feasibility of the initial individual variations,” he added.



The Brainwash is an Hublot Big Bang Unico watch decorated by Mr. Brainwash (Thierry Guetta). “It’s unbelievably wild. It’s totally painted,” said Jean-Claude Biver, president of LVMH’s watch division.
Hublot

“This moment of the work is very important because it gives you the opportunity to get to know how to work in the technical implementation.”

Artists and designers “like to take an established product, like a chair, and give it their own interpretation,” Mr. Newson said. But, he added, working with a watch “is an unusual challenge.”

Not only is a knowledge of the technical demands often required, but sometimes the biggest problem is just the small space involved.

Occasionally the size is part of the game, for example with Art Piece 1, the watchmaker Greubel Forsey’s latest collaboration with an artist.

The firm commissioned Willard Wigan, an artist known for painting on the head of a pin, to collaborate on a watch design.

The result featured a three-masted sailing ship crafted from 22-karat gold and carbon fiber — and the size of a grain of sand.



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“It is practically invisible to the naked eye,” said Stephen Forsey, “so it was necessary to develop a special miniature optical system which took almost four years to design. Set into the side of the watch case, this revolutionary miniature microscope achieves 23-times magnification.”

If the wearer wants to know the time, it’s necessary to push a button to reveal it, because, Mr. Forsey said, “the time display purposely takes a back seat in order to focus on the artist’s work.”

No magnifying glass is needed to appreciate Hublot’s artist collaborations. In fact, a pair of shades might be more in order.

Hublot's first partnership with an artist launched last year. Jean-Claude Biver, president of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton's watch division, turned to the Brazilian artist Romero Britto to celebrate the World Cup.

Mr. Britto designed a special watch case, shaped like a football (soccer ball) and brightly painted it with a patchwork of colors and patterns, to house a limited edition Big Bang Unico FIFA watch.

In a more recent project, Mr. Britto painted the dial of a Classic Fusion watch.

The artist "did not really design a watch, but used the dial like a painting," Mr. Biver said. "The dial, after all, is 65 percent of what you see."



Art Piece 1, a joint creation by Greubel Forsey and the British artist Willard Wigan, houses a three-masted sailing ship crafted from 22-karat gold and carbon fiber — and the size of a grain of sand — which is visible through a microscope on the case band.

Greubel Forsey

Hublot also turned to Thierry Guetta, better known as the artist Mr. Brainwash.

He had his way with the whole watch. “It’s unbelievably wild,” Mr. Biver said. “It’s totally painted, the indices, the dial, the crown, the bracelet. It’s a work of art, and each one is different.”

So far Mr. Brainwash has produced five pieces, and negotiations are underway to form a partnership between artist and watchmaker.

Having artists collaborate on watches has a history.

“One of the earliest examples is Swatch,” the London Design Museum’s Mr. Newson said.

“They commissioned Kiki Picasso to create a limited edition Art Watch #1,” he added. “Then they worked with artists such as Keith Haring and Yoko Ono.

“They were one of the first to recognize the power of collaboration. It’s a powerful marketing tool. It opens up a different market from the classic watch market, a more fashion client, and those interested in the artist’s work.”

Jean-Claude Biver couldn’t agree more.

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“The artist is like an ambassador for us,” he added. “He transfers his art, and he gives us the credibility.” And for the consumer, “You have a piece of art to wear on your wrist instead of hanging it on a wall.”