

SCHOLARS :

FELIX BAUGARTNER, MARTIN FREI, AND URWERK

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PHOTOS NICHOLAS BIEBUYCK & URWERK

When we look at the great manufacturers of the past and the names they chose to use closer to their origins today, we see a prevalence of commas, ampersands, cics and fils. The realisation that some of the most storied brands of today were established as partnerships, consortiums, or drafted for the founders' children to keep pace, is obvious when we look through their history pages. The next realisation is that the relationships didn't always last, founders went their separate ways, got bought out in times of distress or blew up through strong disagreement.

So to find relationships in the watch world that have endured deserves close examination, particularly in the modern era when so many brands launch and fade away with such regularity. Felix Baumgartner, Martin Frei and their wonderful enfant terrible of the contemporary watch industry are a shining example of this, having lasted more than 20 years already and continue to go from strength to strength. Spending time around the two of them and the watches they have introduced over the years makes it clear that they have taken an unconventional approach to the rather reserved watch industry, and with a closer look, some clear guiding principles emerge.



FOUNDATION IN TRADITION

For a company producing marvels that feel so futuristic that they are appropriate wrist wear for technologically savvy big screen superheroes, it is useful to take a step back and recognise that these watches are born out of a respect for tradition and the classical ideals in both horology and art. For the former, the origin of Felix Baumgartner's passion for timekeeping is clear: a third generation watchmaker who studied at the highly regarded Solothurn school, it was the interactions with his grandfather, who worked for IWC, and his father, a highly regarded clock restorer, that gave him a deep reverence for the past masters.

For the artistic elements, we turn to Martin Frei and his multimedia curriculum covering graphics design, film, sculptures, but all with an interest in the fundamentals of time. Studying first at the School of Visual Art in Zurich, then at the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst in Lucerne under the famed Swiss artist Roman Signer, Martin acquired a firm grasp of the core ideals of aesthetics, intertwined with the passage of time, and came to realise that the philosophies of design could have great merit in the world of watches.

It is in Lucerne where a chance meeting at a party between Felix and Martin would give birth to the nucleus of what would become Urwerk. Felix was visiting his cousin who was also studying at the school, and a deep conversation around art and watches would evolve into the idea to create their own watches embracing these ideals in a more overt form than any other that existed in the market.

In 1997, the first reference, UR-101 and UR-102 would be presented at Baselworld, where they were met with polarising views as to what it meant for the staid watch industry of the time but to true historians it was clear there were many respectful nods to the past. Through his time in his father's workshop, Felix was familiar with a clock designed by the Campani brothers for Pope Alexandre VIII in 1652, which would allow the time to be read at night due to the passing hour indicator being illuminated from behind by oil lamp. This display would provide the inspiration for many of the watches in Urwerk's future, but the UR-101 and UR-102 were the purest executions of it.

Less well-known is the fact that all of these watches were entirely made by hand operated machines, not out of any artisanal ideal, but simply because that is what the Urwerk team had access to and could afford, although CNC machines are now more frequently utilised. The beautiful point is that these computer-controlled devices are complements to the savoir faire that exists in the movement finishing, with fine perlage and circumferential brushing visible on the calibres. More recent homages to the historic masters have included the AMC, which utilises all of the features of Abraham-Louis Breguet's most advanced Sympathique, allowing the atomic clock-powered master to wind, set and regulate it's related wristwatch. More subtle hark backs include the cylindrical spring used in the retrograde mechanism on models such as the UR-220 which is based on those used in high-end marine chronometers, and the hunter style cases on references including the UR-105 CT that show the abundance of knowledge and respect that Felix and Martin have for watchmaking and design history.



A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

This balance of future with avant garde aesthetics produced by techniques that have existed for hundreds of years shows a deeper meaning in the work of Urwerk. It is not simply a case of hitting a key performance metric, or seeing annualised profit growth, there is an intrinsic philosophical ideal that drives the company. One avenue that is worth exploring is the concept of perspective, that often, when we are caught up in the moment, running from one engagement to another and staring down at our watch to see how late we are running, it is easy to forget that we are mere mortals standing on a piece of rock flying through space. Indicators like those on the UR-100 to show the rotation of the Earth and its distance travelled around the sun in 20 minutes can go some way to give a moment of calm.

Perhaps Urwerk's best play on the perspective of time is the 90 degree arc in which the majority of their watches tell the time. When most analogue time telling devices show 60 minutes over 360 degrees, the process of cutting this in four gives the impression that time has in fact slowed down, the indicator moving at a more sedate pace. Add to that the additional layer of the brain having to genuinely assess and read the time in a format that has not been drilled into familiarity from a young age, as is the case with the two-hand hour and minute clocks, it provides an almost meditative experience.

Control over time is something that many of us wish we had, a scarce resource that seems to slip through fingers without us realising. While it might be impossible to have a hold over it in the literal sense, through the control panel to the reverse of many Urwerk models, and the chance to regulate from outside of the case similar to the pocket watches of the past by the likes of Breguet, there is at least a small feeling that we can do something about the passing hours, minutes and seconds, even if it might just be for the watch on our wrist. This feeling of a somewhat irrational close personal relationship with a metal enclosure containing gears and screws is something close to the heart of Urwerk, that while it might be a robotic time-telling machine which we as humans can form a bond with, it feels a lot less scary than the artificial intelligence and algorithms that many associate with technology today. The UR-220 offers perhaps the most distilled execution of this relationship between man and machine, offering the control to activate the oil change indicator showing how much time the watch has spent attached to the owner's wrist in the shared adventure of life.

It is this depth of consideration in all aspects of the watches created by Felix and Martin, from the design and engineering through to the grand ideals that underpin the work of the company, that have made Urwerk watches rather coveted and their collectors so dedicated. Freed of the ambition to build a vast multinational corporation with unending ranks of employees, Urwerk has found perpetual strength, releasing products that they love when they want to and they feel are ready for admiring fans, sometimes being the ones to deliver the watches personally, further strengthening the relationship.

When something is created in the moment, in the ideal place, with the right beliefs behind it, and friends working together to build for the better, it inevitably shows through, becoming timeless and beautiful. Be it art, architecture, engineering or any other discipline, including watchmaking, it always shines through, and Urwerk is an elegantly succinct summary to this, with ideals that we should all be supporting.





TIMELINE

- 1995 Felix and Martin meet
- 1997 Urwerk presents first watches at Basel, UR-101 and UR-102 on the AHCI booth
- 2003 UR-103.01 arrives with satellite time presentation and world first control board
- 2005 Collaboration with Max Büsser at Harry Winston on the Opus 5
- 2008 The arrival of the UR-202 with automatic air-regulated winding and patented rotating satellites
- 2009 UR-CC1 debuts inspired by a Patek Philippe concept from Gilbert Albert
- 2010 The UR-103 ends production after seven years with a final edition
- 2011 In January the UR-110 arrives with radical orbiting satellites
- 2011 August sees the unveiling of the UR-1001 high complication Zeit Device
- 2012 UR-210 arrives with retrograde minutes to compliment the satellite hours
- 2013 The first foray into electronics with the EMC
- 2014 UR-105 is presented featuring a revised case design language
- 2015 An introduction to women's watches with the UR-106
- 2017 AMC is presented, a modern Sympathique with atomic timekeeping
- 2017 For the 20th anniversary of Urwerk, UR-T8 arrives as the first reversible watch from the company
- 2018 Fibre optics project the time in a new format for the UR-111C
- 2019 A return to basics with a twist in the form of the UR-100
- 2020 UR-220 introduced a carbon case and a revised oil change indicator