

A Case Study in Tuscany

Florence-based Anonimo is a watch brand where the case is king.

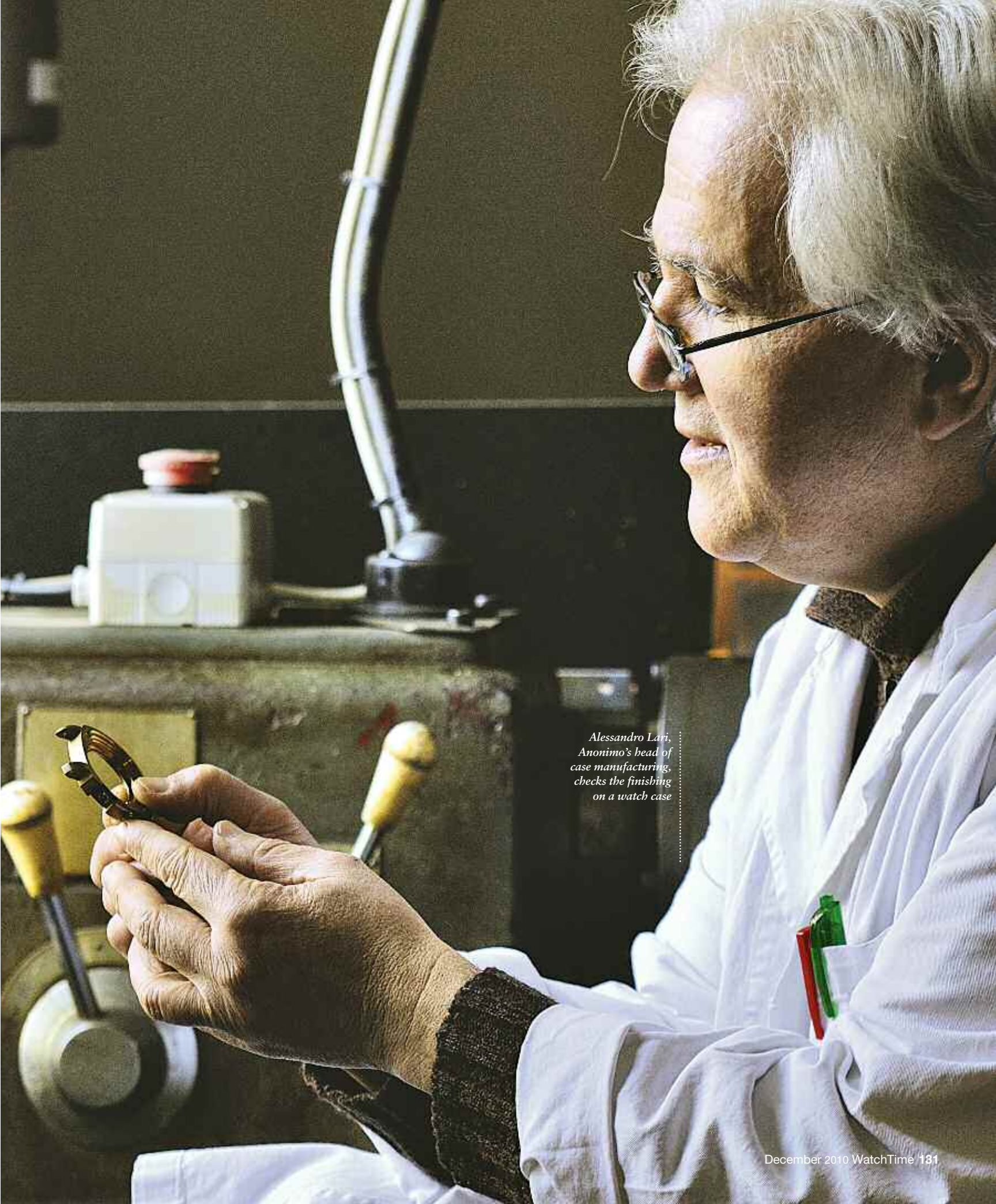
BY MARK BERNARDO

“E

very block of stone has a statue inside it,” said Michelangelo, the quintessential Florentine Renaissance man, “and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.”

While the man plying his trade in this crowded, clamorous, machine-filled workshop in a secluded Tuscan village would probably never compare himself to the sculptor of the statue of David, Florence’s most iconic piece of art, he has a similar, undeniably Florentine philosophy about his own chosen craft. In every

heavy bar of steel, titanium and bronze that comes into his hands, he sees an elegantly sculpted watch case waiting to be freed from its metal confines. Working amidst the dust, metal shavings and other detritus from the other projects on which he and his father, who founded the workshop, earn their living — mostly metal components and prototypes for military, aerospace, medical and industrial applications — he clearly cherishes his vital role at the beginning of this horological



*Alessandro Lari,
Anonimo's head of
case manufacturing,
checks the finishing
on a watch case*



Antonio Ambuchi, Anonimo's head of design, examines a case under a loupe at the workshop in Lastra a Signa

day before: "It is in the Italian DNA to make beautiful things."

Most watch cases, even those on many luxurious models, are made by "stamping," or forcing the metal through a die with thousands of pounds of pressure to make it conform to the case shape. Anonimo believes this results in the metal becoming unduly brittle. The company instead uses a reductive process that carves, drills and scoops out metal from a solid block that has been treated to maintain its molecular integrity. This is where the father-son team in the workshop comes in. They use a lathe to cut away the excess metal around the case and turn it from the inside, leaving a small, rough-edged piece, like a hockey puck with a donut hole. This piece is then fitted into a CNC machine, in which its shape begins to become defined, and its lugs formed, by a series of sensitive refining tools. Another CNC machine, guided by the craftsman's hand and eye and following a sophisticated CAD drawing, drills the precisely placed holes for the crowns and pushers. Once these operations have been carried out to the workshop's exacting standards — at the end of a good day, it completes maybe 20 pieces — the cases are shipped to Anonimo's finishing facility in Lastra a Signa, just outside the city of Florence, for further refinement. "We work in the opposite direction from the Swiss," Cypers says, explaining the company's philosophy. "They concentrate on building a beautiful, functioning movement and build a case around it. We start by building a beautiful, high-performance case and see which Swiss movement is best to adapt to it."

Although it has recently marked only its 12th year in business, Anonimo can boast of a history of casemaking craftsmanship that goes back to the 1930s. It is a history that began with — and is inextricably tied to — another, better-known Italian watch brand that once, but no longer, called Florence home: Officine Panerai, which made its name producing big, rugged divers' watches for Italian naval frogmen.



process. At its conclusion, it will render a finished Anonimo wristwatch, its dial proudly bearing the notation, "Hand-crafted in Firenze."

It is to watch this modern master at work (I have been asked to keep both his name and his location a secret by my hosts) that I have traveled from the city of Florence through the rolling Tuscan countryside — past acres of olive groves, vineyards and farming villages, accompanied by Anonimo's marketing director, David Cypers, and its head of operations, Dieter DeVrieze. Florence-based Anonimo takes great pride in its cases the way Switzerland's *haute horlogerie* houses take pride in their complicated movements, and this slow, labor-intensive, and expensive process that produces them is the reason. "In Florence, it's all about the unique piece, about craftsmanship, about working in an artisanal way," says Cypers. Federico Massacesi, Anonimo's founder, had put it more succinctly the

Fabiano Alessi's team oversees Anonimo's watch assembly and quality control

DEPENDING ON YOUR perspective, when Panerai left its traditional home in Florence to move its manufacturing to Switzerland, it meant good news, bad news, or opportunity. Good news for the Richemont Group, Panerai's buyer, which has since built it into an extremely profitable, powerhouse brand. Bad news for the Florentine craftsmen who made cases for Panerai watches, some of them carrying on family traditions that stretch back to the brand's beginnings in 1936. Opportunity for anyone determined to keep Florentine watchmaking alive and who had the means and resources to do so. The man who took advantage of that opportunity was Massacesi, a native of Florence and former executive at the Italian fashion house Salvatore Ferragamo.

Massacesi, who had no watchmaking experience but a keen eye for design and men's fashion trends, secured funding from local investors to start the company in 1997. He reached out to many of the casemakers who had worked regularly on Panerai watches, most importantly the members of the Ambucchi family, whose



The Firenze Dual Time Drass/Gold (\$9,500) has two automatic movements, one for each time zone.

atelier had been turning out cases for Panerai and other Italian watch brands since 1939. Antonio Ambucchi, son of the atelier's founder, Enrico Ambucchi, came on board as Anonimo's head of design, and he, more than anyone, is responsible for Anonimo's distinctive look.

The other important figure from the old Panerai with whom Massacesi became acquainted was Dino Zei, a colonel in the Italian navy who had risen to become the brand's CEO. The colonel and the company had a longstanding business relationship thanks to Panerai's work making watches for navy divers. Zei took over the management of Panerai (then called Guido Panerai e Figlio) in 1972, replacing Giuseppe Panerai, a descendant of the founding family who had recently died. Zei established Officine Panerai Srl, which took over the operations of the old Guido Panerai company, and became its chairman until 1997, when Officine Panerai became part of Richemont (then called the Vendôme Group). Zei did not actually join Anonimo in an official capacity until 2002 due to a five-year non-compete clause in his contract with Panerai. Today, he is the design consultant for the line of Anonimo watches that bears his name.

Massacesi called the company "Anonimo," (Italian for "anonymous") because, as he told *WatchTime* in a 2003 interview, "inner confidence is more important than ostentation." The Florentine tradition, he believes, is to "take away everything that is not essential." Hence, Anonimo watch dials, up until this year's redesign, did not bear the brand name.

In 2009, shortly after Anonimo's 10th anniversary, a new partnership was formed to create Firenze Orologi Srl, the company now responsible for Anonimo distribution worldwide. It is made up of three entities: the founding Massacesi family, represented by Federico Massacesi, who holds the title head of manufacturing; D.A.G., SA, a Belgian firm represented by new Anonimo CEO Dag van Elslande, as well as DeVrieze and Cypers;

Machines use precise refining tools to create the cases' distinctive shape.



and Fidi Toscana, a Tuscan consortium that supports local business. The new partnership put a marketing plan in place that emphasizes the brand's Italian pedigree. In addition to the Anonimo logo and "Handcrafted in Firenze" on the dials, Anonimo watches now bear the inscription "Casemakers in Firenze since 1939" on the casebacks.

MUCH LIKE THEIR predecessors at Panerai, Anonimo's designers focused on big, utilitarian divers' models, fashionable in the classic Italian sense but also suitable for underwater use. "The Florentine history of making watches for divers is important," says Cypers. "The watches have to be able to be used — in a sea environment, in a military environment, the wearer needs to trust that watch to be high-performance." Ambucchi and his team began developing technologies and inventions that would ensure easy operation under water, several of which would be exclusive to Anonimo. Among these are the so-called crown vanishing locking device, used on the Militare models, which uses a metal pin mounted on the inside end of the strap to push the crown, located at 6 o'clock, completely into the case; the "U-Lock system," used on Professionale models, which connects the bezel to a hinged caseback with external joints tightened by screws; and the quick-tightening "bayonet" crown used on some watches in the Dino Zei line. These are among the company's six patented innovations, along with its water-resistant "Kodiak" calfskin leather straps, which are treated with a secret vegetable-resin-mixture formula that enables water molecules to pass through the leather rather than get clogged up inside it.

Massacesi had the casemaking expertise lined up in 1997, but knew he needed Swiss movements to power the watches. Using his men's-fashion sensibilities, he created a catalog of watch designs and met with Swiss movement manufacturers, including the late Nicolas G. Hayek, chairman of the Swatch Group, which owns ETA. Hayek and these other suppliers were duly impressed by his proposed watch line and agreed to provide movements. Reminiscing about the meet-



The Dino Zei San Marco Drass (\$9,500) includes a military-inspired countdown function.

ings, Massacesi says, "I must have been the only watch company owner who makes a catalog in order to buy things rather than sell them!"

In 1998, the first models arrived, starting with the Millimetri (Italian for 1,000 meters), a three-handed model with central seconds and date window, and the 1,000-meter water resistance its name implies. The Millimetri included several aspects and functions found in Anonimo's collection today, including a manual helium-release valve; a thick, domed sapphire crystal; a screw-locked caseback; and the dial design with big Arabic numerals at the cardinal points and baton-style hour and minute hands coated with luminous material. It was a hit with watch consumers, and also led to Anonimo's continuing relationship with military clients and industrial diving companies.

Today, Anonimo's watches fall into one of four collections. The Basic line includes the Millimetri and other three-hand/date models like the entry-level Sailor Diver (water-resistant to 300 meters); the large-case Polluce Magnum (water-resistant to 1,200 meters); and a chronograph, the Cronoscopio Mark II (water-resistant to 120 meters). Watches

in the Militare line —three-hand automatics and chronographs — are distinguished by their locking crowns at 6 o'clock. They also include the Firenze Dual Time, a GMT watch with two separate automatic movements (one for each time zone) operated by separate crowns at 12 and 6 o'clock. The Professionale line has the hinged U-Lock cases and automatic helium expulsion valves, useful features for professional divers. This line includes the Marlin, with its 55-mm-diameter case, and the Professionale Crono and Professionale GMT, water-resistant to 1,200 and 2,000 meters, respectively. Finally, there is the Dino Zei line, with sporty-elegant models like the Nautilo, with a power reserve at 6 o'clock, and the San Marco, with a countdown function. All Anonimo watches are limited editions (the number of pieces made depends on the model), and the company makes only about 3,000 pieces per year.

AS ANONIMO'S watch line has expanded, Ambucchi and his team in Florence have continued to innovate in the area of casemaking. A recent development is the so-called drass finish, which Anonimo uses on some of its stainless steel cases rather than the more common PVD. "Drass" is an acronym meaning "Double Refinished Anonimo Steel Surface." It begins with the so-called Ox-Pro treatment, developed in cooperation with the Italian navy for weaponry, binoculars and other military applications in which metal items must be camouflaged. Ox-Pro is a 14-step oxidation process that uses selected acids to treat the surface layer of steel, rendering it more corrosion-resistant and nonreflective, as well as turning the steel a darker, gunmetal color. After this process, the treated steel case is then sandblasted to remove the least-resistant surface layer. The resulting drass case has both a distinctive, dark look and a higher scratch-resistance than typical stainless steel. Anonimo uses a drass case for the Dino Zei San Marco model. The watch has an automatic Soprod 9055 caliber on an ETA 2892-2 base

to power its multiple functions, including hours, minutes, and sweep seconds; 24-hour subdial between 10 and 12 o'clock with a GMT indicator hand; red power-reserve indicator hand at 5 o'clock; date display window at 2 o'clock; and the countdown function, controlled by a rotating external ring, which counts down to a pre-set time or event.

Other 2010 models combine drass with gold. The Cronoscopio Drass/Gold combines a drass case with gold screws to lock the bezel and a gold external ring around the dial. The watch contains the ETA 7750 automatic chronograph movement. The Notturnale Drass/Gold is a tribute to the Della Volpaia family, 16th-century pioneers of Florentine watchmaking who developed a mechanical timepiece that measured time by the daily movement of stars in the night sky. It is a Cronoscopio with five gold bezel screws, inscribed gold ring around the dial and gold trim around the date window. Only 200 pieces will be made.

Recently, Anonimo began using a material for cases that combined Tuscan sculptural tradition with nautical practicality: bronze. But not just any bronze: the alloy used in Anonimo watch cases is called marine bronze, a compound of copper, iron, and nickel. This highly corrosion- and oxidation-resistant alloy is commonly used in the petrochemical industry and in maritime applications such as ship's propellers. Watches with bronze cases, according to Anonimo, are not only suitable for deep sea diving; they are also ideal for collectors who want a truly personalized item: each watch case made with marine bronze will over time develop its own unique, warm patina activated by contact with skin, air and water. Several of Anonimo's models are available in bronze cases, including the Polluce Magnum, whose bronze version was released this year. It contains Anonimo caliber 01.0, based on an ETA 2824-2, with hours, minutes, central seconds and date indication, visible through a cutout in the partially skeletonized dial. The 43-mm-diameter case has a domed sapphire crystal and is water-resistant to 1,200 meters. The Marlin Bronze, at a massive 55-mm diameter, has a Sellita SW200 base move-



The Marlin Bronze (\$6,950) has a big, 55-mm-diameter case in corrosion-resistant marine bronze.

ment, an extra-thick dial and crystal, and a 1,500 meter water-resistance.

THE WORKSHOP IN Lastra a Signa where case finishing takes place is the same building in which Enrico Ambucchi started working on watch cases in 1958. When the cases arrive there, they are delivered into the capable hands of veteran case craftsman Alessandro Lari, Anonimo's head of case manufacturing, and his small staff. Their first step is smoothing out the rough edges, using four machines with sandpaper belts — the first one for the roughest surfaces, the final one for the finest. Afterward, the smoothed-out cases are immersed in a chemical bath for cleaning, then sandblasted — with real sand — to remove any remaining surface roughness. The pressure of the sandblasting varies based on the case material: bronze cases, for example, receive lower pressure than steel ones. Finally, one more bath in the chemicals follows for another cleansing. At this stage, bronze cases also undergo a chemical treatment to start the aging process that will give

each one its unique hue. This labor-intensive process is how Anonimo cases achieve their distinctive, matte appearance. Upstairs from these machines is another workspace where pre-assembly and some prototype construction takes place. Manually operated Swiss machines, some dating back to 1939, are in use here for various pre-assembly tasks. Steel bracelets, ordered from outside suppliers, are also finished here to make them suitable to match up with Anonimo's cases.

Finished cases are sent to Anonimo's nearby headquarters, which is also where Anonimo's head of assembly and after-sales service, Fabiano Alessi, and his staff assemble the watches and quality-test them for the market. The cases are fitted with mechanical movements from Switzerland, primarily ETA, Sellita and Soprod, as well as modules from Dubois-Dépraz made especially for Anonimo, and dials and other parts from other suppliers. Movements are attached to hands, dials, and crowns, and crystals are added to the cases and bezels. Alessi and his team then subject every timepiece to a motion test and water-pressure test using machines; Anonimo developed its own machine to test high-water-resistance models, as in the Professionale line, using 2,000 meters of pressure. Finally, each watch's serial number is logged into a computerized database for easy reference.

Because the cases are Italian-made, and the assembly takes place in Italy, Anonimo watches attain the 50-percent production percentage that enables them to legally tout that they are made in Florence. Many at Anonimo, including Ambucchi, would be happy to see that percentage of Italian parts and labor higher. For now, however, most are happy simply to be a part of keeping Florentine watchmaking alive and well.

"We recognize that the Swiss are the best at making movements," Cyper says, "while case manufacturing is typically a tradition of northern Italy. Our watches have an Italian case and a Swiss movement — to us, that is the best of both worlds." ○