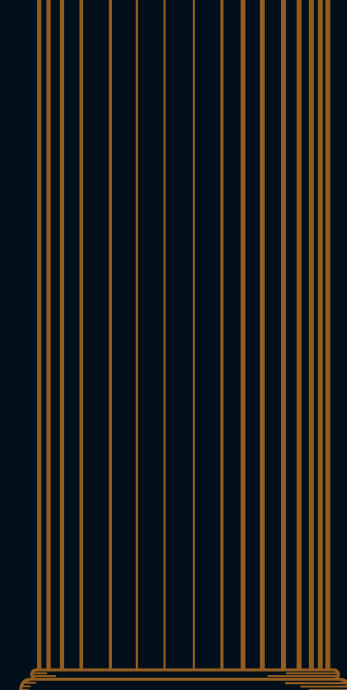




*The Blancpain
Villeret Grande
Décoration for
Only Watch 2011,
a unique piece with a
Monaco landscape
scene engraved on the
movement plate*

After years of pushing the boundaries of case size, cost and complications, watch brands have rediscovered the appeal of classically simple dials, modest dimensions and accessible price points.



CLASSICAL REVIVAL

BY MARK BERNARDO

Simplicity is the final achievement. After one has played a vast quantity of notes and more notes, it is simplicity that emerges as the crowning reward of art.

Frédéric Chopin

THE WATCH INDUSTRY reached something of a tipping point in 2008. Among the models that generated buzz at that year's Swiss watch fairs were DeWitt's WX-1, a hulking timepiece that looked like a futuristic battleship and measured more than 72 mm long and almost 50 mm wide; Greubel Forsey's Fundamental Invention No. 2, the first wristwatch with not one, not two, but four tourbillons; Romain Jerome's Day & Night Tourbillon, a watch with no hours or minutes indication, which defiantly scoffed at the quaint notion that a wristwatch should tell the time; deGrisogono's Meccanico dG, with its mechanically operated digi-

tal time display; Hysek's enormous, multi-complication Colosso; and Concord's high-tech monolith, the C1 Gravity Tourbillon. It seemed as if the new rules in the watch world had been set: that bigger is better, that complicated trumps simple, that price is no object, that the ability to read the time on a watch takes a back seat to mind-blowing design and technological savoir-faire.

Since then, however, in the wake of the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the subsequent worldwide economic crisis, the winds have begun to shift, and the seeds of a contrarian counter-revolution of sorts have taken root.



Clockwise from top: Vacheron Constantin Historiques Ultra-fine 1968 (right) and Historiques Ultra-fine 1955; Piaget Altiplano 43-mm Anniversary Edition; Zenith Elite Ultra Thin; Omega JFK Commemorative Timepiece

The seeds started sprouting in some unlikely places. Zenith, which had in recent years pushed the big, pricey, avant-garde Defy watch as its leader model, devoted 2009 to reviving its El Primero Chronograph, a model introduced in 1969. Then, in 2010, its standout was the Elite Ultra Thin, a slim-cased, two-handed watch with a subtle small-seconds subdial at 9 o'clock; its restrained elegance was a 180° turn from the Defy collection's in-your-face boldness, and its price (\$3,900 for the steel version) was very consumer-friendly for a watch with an in-house movement. Along with its usual slew of sporty Seamasters and Speedmasters, Omega released in 2009 a replica of

the thin, rectangular, manual-wind watch worn by President John F. Kennedy in 1961 (\$8,250), whose yellow-gold case measured only 25.39 x 31.5 mm. Girard-Perregaux, which in 2007 gave the world a \$625,000 tourbillon watch with a miniature slot machine in it, started shifting its focus in 2009 and 2010 to new models in its elegant, vintage-look 1966 and 1945 lines, inspired by designs from their namesake years.

Vacheron Constantin went vintage and thin in 2010, introducing the Historiques Ultra-fine 1955 and Ultra-fine 1968 (\$22,900 and \$28,200, respectively), two slender, slightly updated models from its past. That same year, Piaget, renowned for its wafer-thin movements, created a brand-new one, 2.35-mm-thick automatic Caliber 1200P, for its Altiplano 43-mm Anniversary Edition (\$22,000); Frédérique Constant opted to go without its trademark "Heart Beat" aperture in favor of a subtle "piano guilloché" pattern on the dial of its Limited Edition F. Chopin (\$1,445 steel, \$1,595 gold); and Germany's Glashütte Original added models to its vintage-look Senator Sixties line (one of which gets a *WatchTime* test elsewhere in this issue).



Return to Classicism

This year, the classical revival showed no signs of abating. The Baselworld and SIHH watch fairs saw a plethora of watch brands introduce simple, classically designed, uncomplicated models, many of them in extra-thin cases or inspired by historic designs (many are both). Moreover, after years of pushing the envelope to 50 mm and beyond, most of them also sport more modest case dimensions. These are watches suited to a more austere time, an era of discreet taste following one of ostentatious wealth. (Of course, the rise of China as a luxury market, and the Chinese preference for thin, small-diameter cases and clean, uncomplicated dials played a role as well.)

Germany's A. Lange & Söhne introduced the **Saxonia Thin** (\$19,700), a two-hand watch with a new in-house manual-wind movement, Caliber L093.1. With its 5.9-mm-thick, 40-mm rose-gold case, it is the thinnest watch Lange has ever produced, and the movement is only 2.9 mm thick. Audemars Piguet, while still rolling out big, masculine Royal Oak Offshores for their legions of fans, also released the **Jules Audemars Extra Thin** (reviewed in the following story alongside the Girard-Perregaux 1966 Small Seconds). Having launched its Master Grande Ultra Thin in 2008, Jaeger-LeCoultre followed it up this year with the **Grande Reverso Ultra Thin** (\$14,100 in rose gold, \$6,750 in steel), the thinnest Reverso ever made, at just 7.2 mm. It contains hand-wound Caliber 822 and comes in a 46 x 27.5 mm case. Unlike many Reversos of recent years that boast multiple complications, this one tells only the hours and minutes. The **Tonda 1950** from Parmigiani (\$16,900 in rose gold, \$18,900 in white gold) is almost as uncomplicated, adding only a seconds subdial to the two-hand time display. It is also only slightly thicker, at 7.8 mm, and is powered by the brand's new in-house movement, Caliber PF 701, only 2.6 mm thick.

Vacheron Constantin added another Historiques model, called the **Aronde 1954** (\$26,200). It has an Art Deco-inspired rectangular rose-gold case whose distinctive shape, in profile, looks like a bird in flight, hence its name, which is

Top to bottom: A. Lange & Söhne Saxonia Thin; Frédérique Constant Limited Edition F. Chopin; Jaeger-LeCoultre Grande Reverso Ultra Thin; Parmigiani Tonda 1950





Top to bottom:
Hamilton
Thin-O-Matic
with flex bracelet;
Baume & Mercier
Classima
Executives; IWC
Portofino
Automatic with
Milanese bracelet;
Ralph Lauren
Slim Classique
Square

French for “swallow.” IWC’s **Portofino Automatic** (\$4,200 in steel) not only evokes classical simplicity with its three-hand dial, simple indices and Roman numerals at 12 and 6; it’s also available, for \$1,000 more, on a steel-mesh “Milanese” bracelet, a style popular in the 1960s, when IWC’s first Portofino was released. Hamilton also pays tribute to ’60s style with its **Thin-O-Matic**, available in a 38-mm or 42-mm case with either a standard metal bracelet or a vintage-style flex bracelet or tapered leather strap. Prices range from \$845 to \$975. This year’s revamp of 180-year-old Baume & Mercier — with designs intended to evoke the easygoing luxury of seaside living — included an updated version of the **Classima Executives** (\$1,700 to \$4,700), its dressy businessmen’s watch. The dial has traditional Roman numerals, thin indices and a subtle date window, and the beachcomber theme is evident in the “sundeck” pattern in the dial’s center. Retro was the watchword this year for Ralph Lauren, which augmented its round Slim Classique line of thin dress watches with its

first square-cased model, the **Slim Classique Square**. It features the hand-wound RL430 movement made by (who else?) Piaget. The watch is not only slim; it is also very small for a modern men’s timepiece, at only 27.5 x 27.5 mm. It comes in a rose-gold (\$12,600) or white-gold case (\$13,800; \$15,200 with guilloché dial).

Even some brands better known for chronographs, complications and big, sporty cases got into the act. Breitling re-





leased its updated **Transocean** (\$5,010), a very traditional-looking piece that eschews the tachymeters, slide rules and multiple subdials of many other popular Breitlings in favor of a clean, no-frills three-hand dial. This watch is also available with the steel-mesh “Air-Racer” bracelet for \$5,495. Another aviation-themed brand, Bell & Ross, veered from the big, square-cased, instrument-panel style for which it is renowned to produce a simple round watch, the **Vintage BR WW1** (\$4,500). The dial design comes from cockpit dashboard clocks of vintage airplanes, the big fluted crown recalls those of pilots’ pocketwatches, and the thin lugs are of a style popular in the 1920s. (Bell & Ross also released a pocketwatch version for the same price.) Blancpain’s Fifty Fathoms divers’ watch has been its most talked-about model in

recent years, but its focus this year was the elegant **Villeret** collection, including the **Villeret Grande Décoration** (\$54,000), which sports a stark white, *grand feu* enamel dial; hand-painted enamel Roman numerals to mark the hours; and two gold hands that match the 45-mm gold case. This extremely limited model (only five will be produced this year, plus one unique piece for the Only Watch Auction in Monaco) saves its decorative flourishes for the movement plate, visible through a sapphire caseback, which boasts hand-engraved art depicting landmarks of various countries in which the watch is sold.

When watch aficionados think of Corum, they usually think of the nautical-themed Admiral’s Cup models. However, the brand opted for classical simplicity with this year’s **Grand Précis**, which is based on a model from 1957. A limited edition of 100 pieces in rose gold (\$14,500) and 50 in white gold (\$16,750), the watch has a champagne-colored dial with a “crosshairs” pattern, gold-coated applied indices and gold-coated dauphine hands. It is powered by the hand-wound Caliber CO162. The **Historiador Pequeños Segundos** from Cuervo y Sobrinos debuted in 2010. As



Clockwise from top left: Corum Grand Précis; Bell & Ross Vintage BR WW1; Girard-Perregaux Vintage 1945 XXL; Breitling Transocean; Cuervo y Sobrinos Historiador Pequeños Segundos



with most of that brand's models, its design is inspired by vintage timepieces from the early 20th century. This year's versions (\$3,200 in steel; \$10,950 in gold) add a modern touch of color, with an of-the-moment cobalt blue or anthracite dial. Ball Watch commemorates its 120th anniversary with the **Trainmaster One Hundred Twenty** (\$5,999), whose uncomplicated dial (available in silver or gray) is embellished with a sunburst pattern and the brand's trademark micro-gas tubes on the hands and indices for easy nighttime reading. Mühle Glashütte placed its first in-house manual-wind movement, Caliber MU 941, inside the new **Teutonia III Handaufzug** (German for "hand-wound"; \$2,599), a timepiece inspired by historic Glashütte pocketwatches. It sports Arabic numerals, Breguet hands, a small date window at 3 o'clock and a classical coin-edge bezel. Carl F. Bucherer recently launched the **Manero Autodate**, whose diameter is a relatively modest 38 mm and whose understated dial features dauphine hands, gold-colored wedge-shaped indices, and a date window at 3 o'clock. Prices are \$2,800, steel; \$9,000, rose gold on a strap; and \$22,700, rose gold on a bracelet. Finally, you know it's a trend when jewelry king Harry Winston, whose high-horology Opus models are always the talk of the Basel fair, chooses to also release an elegant, understated timepiece like this year's **Midnight Automatic** (\$21,300), with traditional beveled hands and delicate baton-shaped hour markers.

As this sampling shows, while there will always be room — and we daresay, a demand — for watch companies to push the envelope with high complications, big cases, and wildly experimental materials and technology, there's a reason why the classics are the classics. ○



Clockwise from top: Harry Winston Midnight Automatic; Ball Trainmaster One Hundred Twenty; Carl F. Bucherer Manero Autodate; Mühle Glashütte Teutonia III Handaufzug