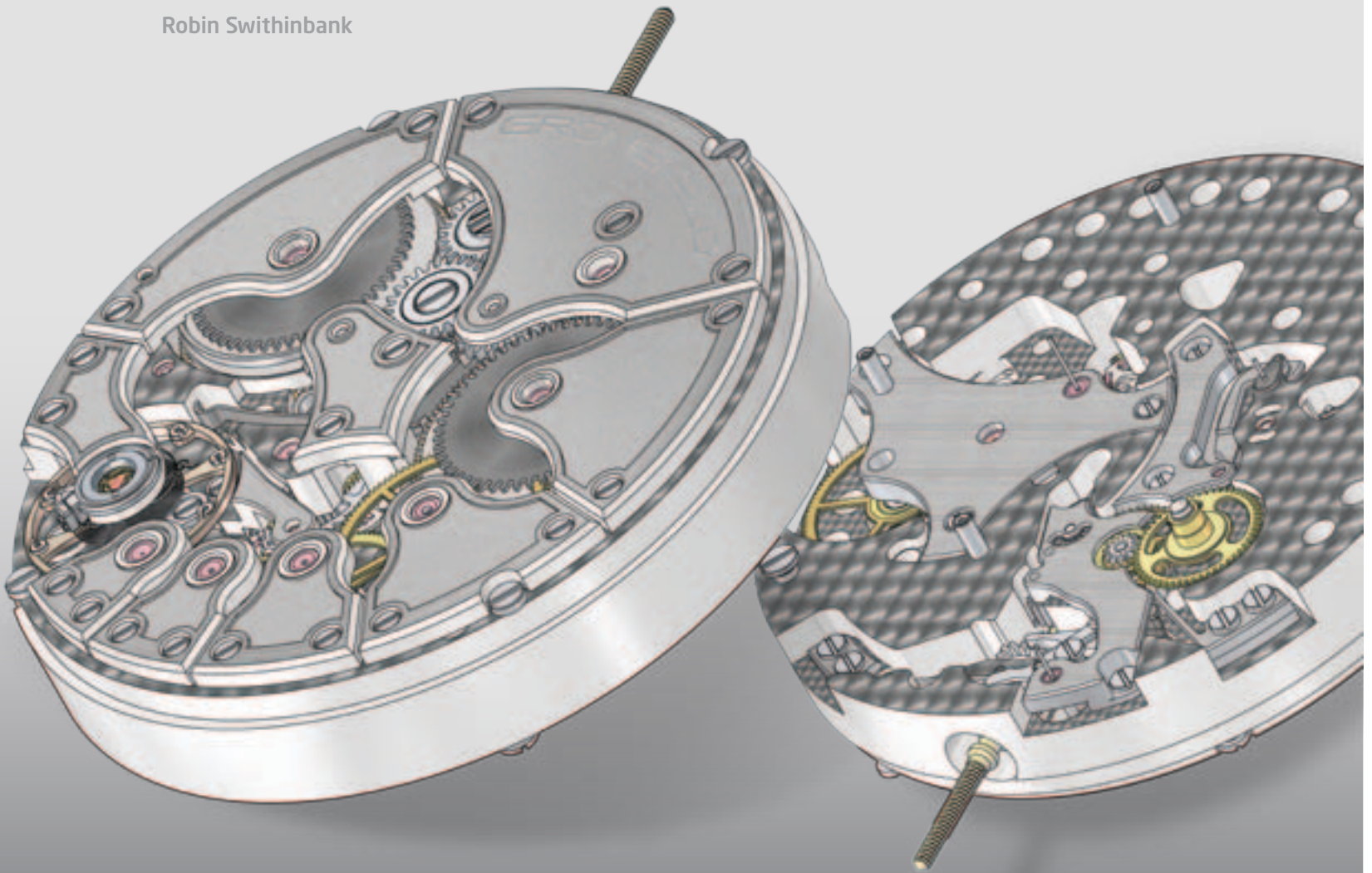


Their Time Has Come



You may not have come across Bart and Tim Grönefeld. It's even more unlikely you will have seen anyone wearing one of their watches - they've only delivered one. So *QP* decided to find out why there is such a buzz surrounding the two brothers and their young Dutch watch house?

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A man's life is punctuated by little moments of realisation. Like the moment he realises the chances of attracting the opposite sex while on the dance floor are negligible. Or a little later, that riding a bicycle used to be fun, now it's undignified. That sort of thing. Mercifully, not all of these moments are so reductive. The moment he realises there are only so many watches he can own from mainstream brands, for example, is much more engaging.

Casting aside the usual suspects, he creates a brief for the perfect watch: it must be horologically interesting, exquisitely made and as rare as unicorn tears. In keeping with this, the brand name will be unfamiliar, the volumes reassuringly low and the movements a sight so wonderful, they induce watchmaking nirvana.

The now halcyon watchmaking boom was kind to all with such a brief. Richard Mille, Roger Dubuis, Antoine Preziuso, Urwerk, Harry Winston, Speake Marin, MB&F, Greubel-Forsey - the list of top-end watch houses producing low-volume, complicated timepieces and launched in the past 15 years is longer than the odds on Ed Milliband becoming the UK's next Prime Minister. But success comes at the cost of novelty, so where now for the watch collector looking for something different? The answer dear reader is Holland.

Yes, Holland. The land of clogs, cheese, liberalism and a host of other facile stereotypes may not seem the most likely destination for the next big thing in niche watchmaking, but to say that is assuming you've not heard of Grönefeld.

Brothers in arms

Based in the unremarkable town of Oldenzaal in The Netherlands, Grönefeld is the creation of two brothers, Bart and Tim, who have taken their family's watchmaking tradition and surname and turned them into a luxury watch concern. Both have backgrounds as watchmakers, having qualified in Rotterdam and Schoonhoven respectively and then gone on to WOSTEP, where Bart became the first-ever Dutch student in 1990. After a year there he got a job with Asprey in London (working under Stephen Forsey - they remain firm friends), before returning to do a course on complicated watches.

Launched in June 2010, the Grönefeld One Hertz is the world's first and only production wristwatch with independent deadbeat seconds. To date the complication has only been derived from other mechanisms, usually a constant force device or remontoir d'égalité.



On 15 November 2008 Bart and Tim Grönefeld presented their first piece, the gold version of the GMT-06 wristwatch to a few selected Dutch and German press representatives. At BaselWorld 2009 it was joined by the platinum version. Both are available in an edition of 10.

The GMT-06 is a tourbillon with a minute repeater mechanism, able to sound the exact time on tiny gongs held within its case. Each piece requires more than six months of construction, assembly and regulation before completion.

It was here that he was mentored by the venerable Antoine Simonin, and here that he discovered a love of complications.

"Before that, I'd never heard of Patek Philippe, or anything like it," he admits, casting a few aspersions on his native watchmaking schools. "At WOSTEP, I was like, woah, watchmaking is really nice." Bart laughs self-deprecatingly, first proof of a light-hearted sense of humour not always found in the high-risk business of high-end watchmaking.

"If I hadn't come into contact with those high-quality watches," he says wryly, "I would have become a jeweller, changing batteries and selling things." In late 1991, he moved to Renaud & Papi in Le Locle, setting up a workshop assembling watches for brands like AP, Franck Muller and Parmigiani. After eight years, he had grown the set-up from five to 35 watchmakers.

Tim, who at 38 is three years his brother's junior, also went to WOSTEP and followed Bart to Renaud & Papi in 1995. He too rose through the ranks quickly. "After three months, I was made responsible for teaching people, checking their tourbillons, escapements and watches. I was young and working with people who had a lot more experience than me."

Going Dutch

Then, in late 1998, they returned to Oldenzaal and started Quality Watch Service (QWS), becoming an official agent for Breitling servicing. But the dream was never just to service other people's watches. They wanted their own watch brand. In 2005, with the watch industry booming, they took the plunge and founded Grönefeld. Three years later, on the brink of the global economic crisis, they launched their first watch, a tourbillon minute repeater called the GMT-06. Parts

were sourced from Switzerland and then finished and assembled in-house, and a limited run of 20 pieces was announced. In platinum, it retailed at €275,000.

"We were invited to go on a popular television show in Holland," says Bart. "They wanted to know, 'why did you launch such a stupid-priced watch at this time?' But we started three years before that. We didn't know the crisis was coming - it was really bad luck."

Bad luck yes, but not a bad watch. The concept was born of the brothers' experience, working with tourbillons and minute repeaters. "We wanted to make a tourbillon minute repeater that wasn't too classic, but more sporty and masculine," explains Tim. They gave the watch a 44mm case and came up with a unique lug design, but quickly discovered the combination gave them a problem.

Both Tim and Bart Grönefeld underwent extensive training in Switzerland, and within a relatively short span of time proved themselves adept world specialists in the production of the tourbillon minute repeater wristwatch, working anonymously behind the scenes, for many of Switzerland's most highly acclaimed watchmaking houses.



"To activate the repeater the slide has to move a certain distance," explains Bart. "This could not be done if our lugs were solid. Having thought about this for a few days, we thought it would be a great idea to channel out all the lugs and to make the case thinner at the lugs. We found these channels have two advantages. First, the slide can go underneath, and second it improves the sound."

The watch houses cathedral gongs that wind twice (instead of once) around the movement. A dial that's part open and part black onyx gives the watch a resonance that, the brothers claim, is louder than most minute repeaters.

The lugs became just one of a number of the GTM-06's aesthetic touches. High, heavily sloped indexes reflect light and give the dial a three-dimensional quality; the hands are the brothers' own design (and polemic, they've since found); while the classical feel of the movement emerging from below is offset against the company's avant-garde logo, intended to signal the brand's contemporary aspirations (and designed by Bart's graphic artist wife). "It turned out like a really luxury watch," he says, adding with that same laugh, "you can see the bling from a mile away."

The forgotten complication

It's not escaped their attention that the watch-buying public's appetite for bling and watches that cost more than the average house has gone south since 2005 and, with that in mind, they are on the verge of bringing to market their second watch, the One Hertz 1912. Initially planned for a run of just 12 pieces, it has a simpler aesthetic, but a movement aimed squarely at watch aficionados. It will feature what Bart describes as a "forgotten complication" - a deadbeat seconds.

"It's much more our own thing," he says, comparing the novelty to the GTM-06, which is by and large a borrowed movement (Christophe Claret supplies the unfinished minute repeater calibres). "Deadbeat seconds exists - FP Journe has it - but nobody else has this movement, or this complication. The system we're using was used in pocket watches until the late 1800s. Normally, in wristwatches, the deadbeat seconds hand is charged by the main barrel. But we have a secondary gear train, just to power the seconds hand. As far as we know, this is the first deadbeat seconds wristwatch of its kind."

Not surprisingly, they decided to make a virtue of this on the dial, which is



The current Grönefeld workshop is located in the same building as that used by founder Johan Grönefeld (pictured below) and frequented by Tim and Bart as children.



The name Grönefeld and the art of watchmaking have a history spanning nearly 100 years.



The One Hertz features a completely original in-house movement - the caliber G-02 - indicating hours and minutes on a sub-dial at 2 o'clock, a large sub-dial for the deadbeat seconds filling the majority of the dial with a power reserve indicator at 12 o'clock, and a setting-winding indicator at 3 o'clock. Setting-winding is ergonomically selected by pushing the crown instead of pulling it out.

dominated by a large seconds hand. This jumps in neat, singular steps and, as a result, the watch appears to tick at one beat per second. Just like quartz, ironically. One Hertz therefore refers to the motion of the seconds hand; 1912 to the year their grandfather qualified as a watchmaker.

Given this is a watch designed to appeal to a more subdued audience, the One Hertz announces its *haute horlogerie* credentials with almost no fanfare. The case will be stainless steel and the dial a slate grey, while the hour, minute and power reserve indicators are all muted. The trademark Grönefeld lugs remain (slightly pared back), and there's just space for a nod to one final watchmaking flourish - an indicator at 3 o'clock that signals a setting-winding device that's activated by pushing the crown in.

And the price? Somehow, despite the subscription only run, the brothers are letting the One Hertz go for just €29,500. "After the GTM-06, we wanted to make something with our own movement, not used in other watches," says Tim. "We wanted it to be unique, but not too expensive. The One Hertz is really cheap

for what it is. We're getting a lot of respect from people for making a watch like this for this price."

Upping the pace

So, are these Dutch watches? "No," says Bart assertively. "We were trained in Switzerland and we do everything like the Swiss. Although our watches don't have 'Swiss Made' on them, neither do they have 'Dutch Made'. Typical Dutch watchmaking doesn't exist and I don't think there's anything Dutch in the design of our watches. We have our own style, but there's no windmill on the dial."

Of more concern to the Grönefelds than the ethnicity of their watches is how they grow their business. Although they've invested their retirement fund into the project, there's no sense they're in this for big bucks. They are a collectors' brand, focusing on high-end complications, but having made only a handful of watches to date (the first One Hertz is due in the run up to Christmas and at the time of writing, only three of the planned run of GTM-06s have been finished), they're eager to up the pace of production.

"At the moment we're trying to look at least five years into the future," says Tim. "We want to reach 100 pieces. Even more important is that we want people to be wearing our watches, talking about the brand. But also we want to have a small dealer network around the world."

If you want to add a Grönefeld to your collection, you call Bart and Tim. One of the joys of a small brand, is that there are no layers of customer service to wade through. Call the number on the Grönefeld website and Bart answers the phone. Email the main address and they reply in person. In a world of automated responses and tight-lipped receptionists, this feels a bit like going to Buckingham Palace and being shown around by the Queen.

Will the business work? Bart and Tim are in confident mood. The first client to take delivery of a GTM-06 was so enamoured with it, that when the One Hertz was launched he got straight on the phone and placed an order. Read into that what you will, but in putting on a Grönefeld watch, it seems that collector experienced a rather wonderful moment of realisation. ☺

Thank you very much QP Magazine team!

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Bart and Tim Grönefeld.