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WHAT MAKES US TICK —*Basel*

Preface

Showing the world the true face of today's watch industry, Baselworld's annual fair remains as relevant as ever. Here are our highlights from this year's edition.

WRITER

Tom Morris

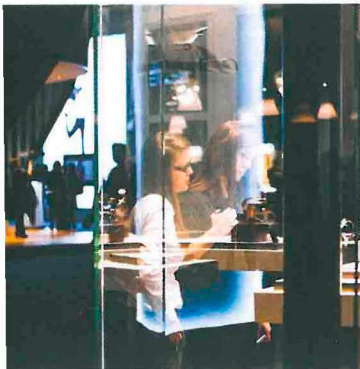
PHOTOGRAPHER

Aurélien Bergot

The writing was, quite literally, on the wall. Just past the security gates of the main hall at this year's edition of Baselworld, next to Tag Heuer's stand, it was visible in bright lights: Google. The tip-tap of Silicon Valley fully implanted in the middle of the tick-tock world of the Swiss watch industry.

On the eve of this year's Baselworld, the horological trade fair that takes place each March, LVMH brand Tag Heuer announced that it would be the first Swiss manufacturer to enter the world of "wearable tech", in reaction to the launch of the Apple Watch. Tag Heuer CEO Jean-Claude Biver kept his cards close to his chest on the details during Baselworld. But he said the brand was partnering up with Intel and Google's Android system to develop a smart watch vaguely based on its classic Carrera model; it will be released before the end of 2015.

The Google logo was the most apparent sign of this new force in the watch industry but of course the name on everyone's lips was Apple. Armageddon, we were warned; something as seismic



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and scandalous as the digital-watch revolution of the 1970s. At Baselworld though, which took place a month before the Apple Watch hit the shops, most CEOs and retailers weren't so much worried as simply cautious about what will happen next.

"A very important journalist has just said to me, 'What I think we should do is ask every important person for their opinion, write them down, put them all in a bowl and, in three year's time, take them out and see who's right'," said Stephen Urquhart, president of Omega. His take was one of optimism: perhaps the Apple Watch will engage a younger consumer who will discover a love of timepieces after relying on an iPhone to tell the time. "Maybe later they'll upgrade to something that has a different mission; that has much more emotional value."

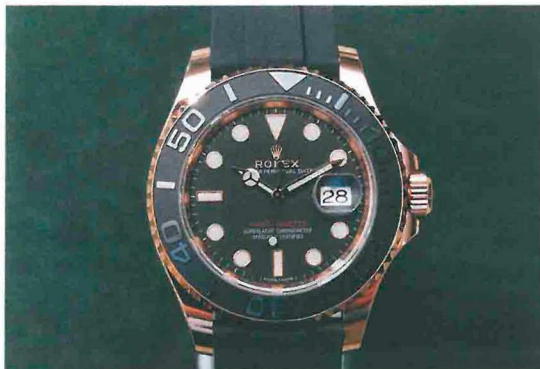
A sense of uncertainty revealed itself in many of the launches at Basel, which were invariably classic and accessible, with many brands focused on bolstering the upper-middle of the market. "The watch business is booming as a whole," said Shinji Hattori, president and CEO of Japanese brand Seiko. "There is good growth in the accessible or affordable luxury category. Consumers are renewing their interest in high-quality timepieces and purchasing them again but they are looking for something substantial."

Continuing last year's trend, many brands chose to refine the technology and mechanics of favourites instead of releasing showy headline-grabbers. Rolex debuted one of its most precise women's mechanical watches, for example; Rado launched one of its lightest-ever timepieces.



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- 01 Visitors in the main concourse
- 02 HyperChrome Si3N4 Automatic by Rado
- 03 Oyster Perpetual Yacht-Master by Rolex
- 04 Limited-edition H3 by HYT
- 05 Omega president Stephen Urquhart
- 06 Baselworld side entrance
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- 08 LED welcome at the fair's entrance



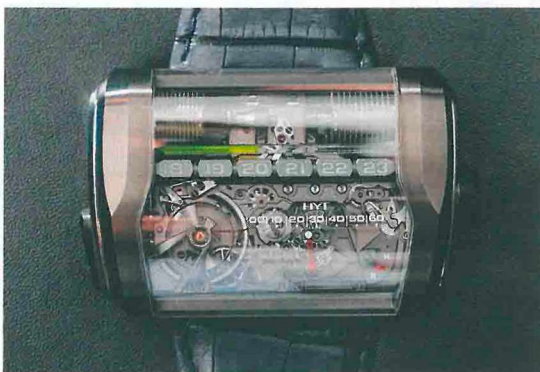
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Three big breakthroughs

01 Rado HyperChrome Si3N4 Automatic
As the first brand to develop ceramic watches, Rado is known for innovation. It went one further this year with the ultra-light new HyperChrome, made of silicon nitride ceramic: one of the hardest materials you can find. It is 30 per cent lighter than the usual model. Perfect for people who like wearing big watches and live in humid climates.

02 Rolex Oyster Perpetual Yacht-Master
For the first time, Rolex has introduced an elastomer "Oysterflex" strap to its smart and sporty Yacht-Master, which is offered in two sizes: 40mm and 37mm. The strap, which is made to fit when purchased in store, includes a patented cushioning system.

03 HYT H3 Titanium and Platinum
One of the most exciting concept watches at Baselworld, the H3 is the newest model from HYT and exemplifies an entirely new timekeeping system. It comes in charcoal grey PVD-coated titanium and platinum, and the series will be limited to 25 timepieces.



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With the market slowing in greater China (in 2011 it made up 8.5 per cent of the market; last year it was just 6.3 per cent), not to mention the price of the Swiss franc rocketing up 40 per cent in January, playing it safe visually was perhaps to be expected. The Swiss watch industry is a heritage one and most brands' reaction to economic developments has been to hold their nerve. Many were confident that the allure of a proper watch will withstand any threats – be that the Swiss economy or Californian technology. "Emotion, status, dreams, sentiment and aesthetics: these are all important notions," said a sardonic Urquhart at Omega. "If they all disappear then OK, you'll just have an instrument with a heart of stone." Only time will tell. — (M)



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