

A MASTER OF HIS TIME

As a restorer of classic and world-renowned timepieces as well as a watchmaker, Michel Parmigiani is one of a few master craftsmen who truly understands the watch.



Of all the top-level watchmaking firms today, Parmigiani Fleurier stands apart for a reason – its president and owner, Michel Parmigiani, is also its master watchmaker.

We recently had a chance to chat with Parmigiani about his collaboration with Bugatti. For Parmigiani, working together with a major car marque was a natural extension of his brand. The latest collaboration – the Bugatti Type 390 timepiece – was inspired by the shape of the Bugatti Chiron but was also something totally and completely new – the movement revolved around a world premiere, based around a central axis.

Did this make it an intrinsically better watch? Difficult to say, avers Parmigiani. “It’s easier to say it’s a completely different watch. It’s a concept watch that is completely new but works. Watchmakers present a lot of concept watches that don’t function. This one does.”

Parmigiani was challenged to create a timepiece that was completely different, with a mechanism that has never been seen before. “In the initial stages of development I had a lot of doubts whether this axial, coaxial system would work. After the concept watch was created about a year ago, I was pleasantly surprised to see that I had created a watch that functions perfectly well with a system that is unique and new in the market.”

Inspired by a Bugatti’s engine and gearbox, the Type 390 works on a modular movement. “The way the energy is transmitted to the dial and the hands through its worm screw, is also similar to the drive of the car,” he says.

Given its provenance, the timepiece can definitely handle anything that its wearer throws at it, extreme conditions included; but Parmigiani predicts that users will probably want it more for its pedigree. “Yes, if you have a metal bracelet, you can use it to swim, no problem and you can use it in extreme conditions though probably the cost [of it] will make the owner [hesitate]. It is a collection piece, rather, so it will be used with care.”

But what kind of a man can conceptualise and produce a timepiece that is both of its on-trend yet timeless? Parmigiani is a man of the world. He loves reading, gardening, being close to nature and going to art exhibitions. He is also something of a traditionalist when it comes to watches. He set up his workshop in the mid-70s dedicated to restoring

classic timepieces. During the day, he was a restorer, but at night, he devoted himself to his personal creations.

His work in restoration enriched his knowledge of timepieces while adding to his expertise as a watchmaker. Because of this, he quickly became known among watch museums and collectors. In 1980, he was entrusted with the maintenance of the Maurice-Yves Sandoz collection, which further cemented his career as a restorer, but also marked the beginning of his second career as a watchmaker. In 1996, Parmigiani Fleurier was established.

Apart from creating his own pieces, he has been commissioned by the Patek Philippe Museum for the restoration of its great timepieces. "Restoration is not repair," he says. "Restoration is bringing back to the original condition and it's a challenge; it's a very big responsibility because whatever intervention you do on this piece of clock or watch, it must not be irreversible, so you should not do something that you cannot reverse. It's like working as an archaeologist: you have background work that needs to be done, a lot of study, a lot of research, observation, before you can really start to do restoration. But it is very enjoyable, too."

Michel Parmigiani's concept of a watch is something that is mechanical – with elements that can be restored or replicated using materials that are made to last. The shape of his watches and the movements



may be avant garde, as they certainly are in his Bugatti T390, but like the great watches of the past they will always be restorable by talented master watchmakers such as he.

Perhaps more than anyone else though, this talented watchmaker and restorer knows that time is precious. "The dial and the hands represent the solar clock with the shade on the ground. And since human beings have discovered this, they know that within this time frame of this moving they have time to do a certain number of things. This is in our DNA, to know that there is this limitation and that time, to me, is something which is probably the only thing you cannot buy." **J**

The Bugatti Type 390 is like a precision engine on the wrist, with its fluid curves reminiscent of the Bugatti Chiron

