

URWERK: Ancient origins and futuristic technologies

Vincent Daveau

When a man's passion for his trade manages to transform material to the point of giving rise to a new way of considering the universe of time, this is when a mechanical object goes beyond its primary nature to become evidence of human genius.... This is actually how one might describe the mechanical sculptures created by URWERK.



Representing far more than just watches, the works conceived by Felix Baumgartner and revealed in all their majesty through the designer's pencil skilfully wielded by Martin Frei embody a novel way of generating time. Rather than reinterpreting a simple mechanical grammar according to the personal taste of the watchmaker, these kinetic sculptures, inspired by an *avant-garde* vision of the reading of time, set the tone for a future in which the spatial distribution of time bears no resemblance to anything previously witnessed.

Founded in 1997, URWERK stems from the desire of a very young and brilliant watchmaker to free himself from the classical codes governing the reading of time, to rethink and revisit ways of expressing this within his field of competence. This rather unusual approach could be the result of an over-sized ego, the projection of a wish to differentiate himself from the rest of his profession. However, nothing like this motivates this watchmaker, who lives his passion with a modesty that speaks volumes about his genius.

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Zoom

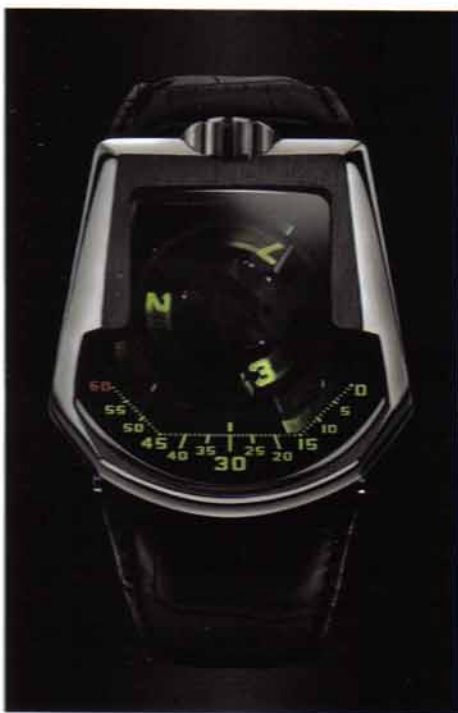


201

Demure appearances are deceptive because many of the exquisitely crafted parts are hidden inside the carousel. The matte black finish gives the watch an especially virile appearance.

The origins of time

The man who has succeeded, within barely ten years, in revolutionizing the laws of watchmaking, is not one



of the easiest watchmakers to locate in Geneva. Not that he's trying to hide himself, but he and his friends have installed their company at the far end of Carouge, beyond the perimeter of the heart of Calvin's city. Quite clearly, the choice of building with its functional architecture featuring a pergola built around a light shaft and recalling certain constructions that one might easily trace back to Ur or Babylon, was hardly fortuitous. The smell of lubricating oil hanging heavy in the air, like the incense in a sort of ancient Ziggurat, conveys the almost sacred notion of mechanical time as one discovers it in the various workshops scattered about on several floors. Indeed, visitors quickly realize that nothing is left to chance at URWERK. The company name itself is redolent with symbolism. URWERK is the fruit of an association between an attachment to Sumerian astronomical roots (the town of Ur in Mesopotamia) and the German name for 'watch' (Uhr). This double meaning reveals the quick-witted nature of Felix Baumgartner and Martin Frei, as well as their profound attachment to certain values.

In the presence of genius

Once through the door of the manufacture's workshops, the first thing



Felix Baumgartner and Martin Frei
 Founded URWERK with Baumgartner's brother Thomas in 1997. The first model, the URWERK 101 was developed in the first year of the company's operation.

that strikes one is Felix Baumgartner's expression. It is so gentle that one is almost ashamed to have come to disturb him in his communion with the matter that he is himself transforming into watches, at his workbench bathed in ►

predispositions that some of his contemporaries may lack, even they sometimes manage to keep up appearances. With an intelligent concept that is in fact fairly simple to understand, he manages to offer the watchmaking industry something really new. Rather than simply re-interpreting the reading of time, Felix is completely re-examining and redefining the means of conveying it. His big thing is satellite time indication. One might have imagined that this is well-explored territory, but this is actually far from the case. This way of handling the display of the information is practically unique and the brands that

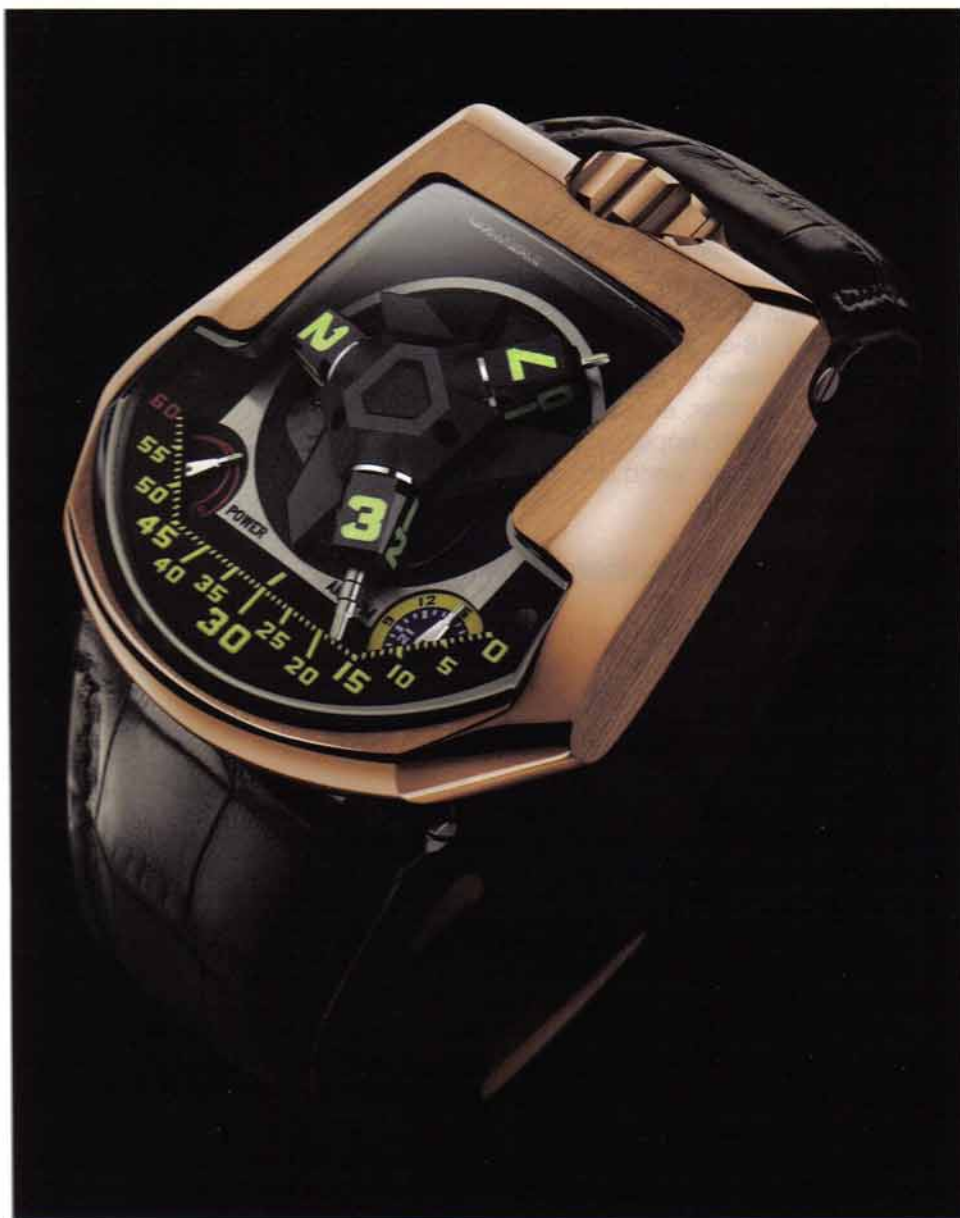
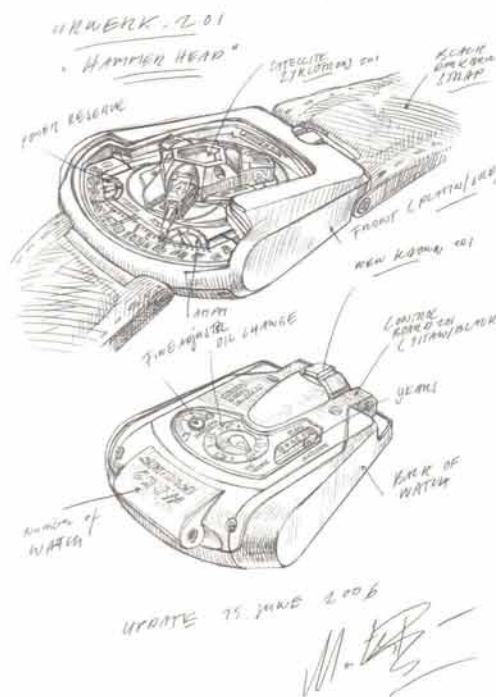
Calibre 201

Known as the 'Hammerhead Shark' by everyone at URWERK, this watch owes this name to an impressive aura of raw power.

have used it have mostly appealed to him in developing their models.

Model 103.07: a conical planetarium

Having achieved iconic status because there are enough that are being worn on the wrists of the movers and the shakers among watch trendsetters, this model is the latest expression of contemporary watchmaking, proud of its originality and keenly aware of its eye-catching power. Besides, not a day goes by without an owner of this type of watch deciding to wear it instead of another, because with this one on this wrist he knows for sure that real watch enthusiasts will not fail to notice it. One has to admit that Martin Frei certainly moved off the beaten track and



designed a case radiating a power that appears to be held in check. As if ready to leap from the wrist, it boldly offers a wide field of display, not so much to improve its legibility, as to afford the intensely personal pleasure of seeing the arms of the central framework slowly sliding to perform a full rotation every four hours. There is no need to be a scholar to grasp this, since each satellite carries three numbers and spins through an angle of 120° with each rotation in order to present the right figure in front of the segment carrying the precise minute scale.

Precision mechanics

Whatever people say, watchmaking can certainly look forward to some wonderful times ahead of it as long as there are passionate people like Felix Baumgartner setting new challenges for themselves and for their art. Who would have thought it possible that the well-regulated rotation of satellites weighing 160 times more than an hour hand, before actually seeing them gravitate within this subtle case with its cleverly ribbed dome? To reduce friction and avoid loss of energy, the watchmaker chose to make the non-suspended parts from a light alloy. He selected materials such as 'aviation-style' aluminium for the satellites that are set into rotation by 'Maltese crosses' and carried by a patented Carousel machined out of titanium. The whole ▶



Felix Baumgartner

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unit is placed on an elaborate module in ARCAP, a material that is stainless and naturally non-magnetic.

Seeing the invisible

Whereas the front is remarkably understated, the back, which is generally hidden from view, turns out to be extremely complex. The back of the 103.07 features the famous 'Control Board', a patented invention. In the first place, it allows for the precise adjustment of the minutes and seconds when starting the watch. Moreover, the unit also includes an indicator, displaying the 43-hour power reserve of the mechanical manually-wound calibre, reference cal. 3.03, which oscillates at a rhythm of 21,600 vibrations per hour. Moreover, the asymmetrical, three-dimensional case is also fitted with a small mechanism borrowed from Breguet and other watchmakers from the past, enabling an expert hand to fine-tune

the model without having to take it apart. Available in an 18-carat white or red gold case, this marvel of precision has been joined by another, endowed with an arrestingly futuristic appearance derived from the maritime world and from 'stealth' high technology.

Calibre 201: pre-futurism

This is a new expression, and one that people will doubtless remember in that it precisely expresses Felix Baumgartner's attitude toward 'recreational' watchmaking.

To a casual observer, the 201 watch, as seen in detached parts on a workbench, does look particularly complex. But these demure appearances are deceptive, because many of the exquisitely crafted parts are hidden inside the Carousel with a matte black finish that gives it an especially virile appearance. Everyone at URWERK calls this piece the 'Hammerhead Shark' because of the fin-shaped profile of the cambered sapphire crystal ... It owes this name to its impressive aura of raw power. One quite clearly gets the sense of wearing a frag-



Model 103.07

A watch that has achieved iconic status by being worn on the wrists of movers and shakers among watch trend setters.

ment of a B2 stealth bomber... the kind of aircraft that are impossible to counter. In a war of a different kind, one might indeed say the same of a timepiece such as this: the 201 represents such an impressive watchmaking accomplishment that competitors might as well give up attempting to match it. Those who are fa-

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familiar with the Opus V by Harry Winston will not be surprised to find a similar development in the 201. This is quite logical, since Felix Baumgartner developed the two projects in parallel. Nonetheless, the new multi-rotational version with the extension of the time marker has some-

thing ingenious that is not immediately apparent simply by watching it turn at the rate of 120° each hour.

In fact, the retractable or telescopic minute hands with their distinctly wasp-like appearance (accentuated by the greenish-yellow shade of their Luminova coating and the black PECVD surface treatment) exactly follow the minute track which is distinguished by two sharp angles that enable one to observe them being retracted. Actually, all the mechanical parts including the patented Carousel are set in motion by the transporter, a sort of cam feeler-spindle so complex to make that it called for a dedicated lubrication system ensuring it does not use up too much of the energy required to push the pointed component held back by a tubular spring with a thread diameter of 70 microns. As one might expect, the two elements that are visible on the angles of the piece are the power reserve on the left, and the day/night indicator.

The magic back...

Like its contemporaries, the 201 also features a complex back including the main characteristics of the 103.07

series. These include the 'oil-change' indicator informing the owner that a service is due; and the fine-tuning screw enabling him to vary the gain or loss by around 30 seconds. Moreover, a new indicator has appeared on this extremely complex back requiring a number of additional parts: the chronometric odometer. So, what is this new information? Simply an indicator of the cumulative usage of the watch which cannot be reset to zero; it too is connected to the winding crown and not to the calibre. Thanks to this small indicator, it will be possible a hundred years from now to know whether this watch has been worn on the wrist for 12 years, 35 years or 60 years... Models like this make it easy to believe that watchmaking is not a real profession, but instead an adventure playground for incredibly creative geniuses! ■

201

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