

CHAPTER 1

THE OBSOLETE WAY OF MAKING A WATCH

“It’s masochism!” declares Cyrano Devanthey, explaining why he and two of his colleagues are making a sophisticated 21st-century wristwatch from scratch using the discarded tools and techniques of a bygone age.

The watch Dominique Buser, Cyrano Devanthey and David Friedli are bringing to life is a return to the sources. They are taking back ownership of the ageless techniques that they learned at watchmaking school. Indeed, like any other complete watchmaker, they have spent four years learning how to make, assemble, adjust and case-up a timepiece. This was followed by work experience to consolidate their skills. “After years working as watchmakers, Dominique and I turned towards engineering. We became expert in computers and manufacturing software. We construct our watches in 3D, and the tolerances of a few microns can be magnified to several centimetres with a clic, as if by magic. We felt the need to become manual workers again and get closer to the raw material,” they declare in concert.

Devanthey, Buser and Friedli’s small workshop in the sleepy town of Buchs in northern Switzerland’s Canton Aarau, is fit for its purpose. It is entirely equipped with hand-operated and even hand-powered tools that were rescued from scrap when mechanical watchmaking collapsed in the 1970s. Although most were made in the early 20th century, their basic design and functions are as old as watchmaking itself.

The manufacturing revolution sweeping away rare and valuable skills is worrying to some hands-on watchmakers of the old school. Robert Greubel and Stephen Forsey, who make a handful of extremely sophisticated watches a year, decided to act. They established the TimeAeon Foundation which aims to preserve the crafts and techniques required to make horological works of art rather than mere products. The members are all trued-in-the-flat watchmakers who actually make watches. Among

them are the master of the exquisite finish, Philippe Dufour, and the expert in complex mechanisms, Felix Baumgartner, the co-founder of URWERK watches.

In 2012, Greubel, Forsey and Dufour taught a French teacher of watchmaking how to make an entire watch using traditional tools, in the expectation he would pass on the skills he had practiced. The resulting tourbillon wristwatch was the first in a project called *Naissance d'une montre* (Birth of a watch).

In 2019, Time Aeon announced the *Naissance d'une montre 2* projet, and the watchmakers chosen to build a watch in the most artisanal way were Cyrano Devanthey, Dominique Buser and David Friedli.