

# BY CHUANG PECK MING **MAKING AN IMPRESSION**

*In a tough year when sales are down and most brands have played it safe with re-issues of iconic pieces, some have made a bold move with new and path-breaking watches*



**T**HE Great Recession has killed extravagance and crippled innovation in the luxury watch world. Since 2009, the big names in the business – which are mostly Swiss – have played it safe when launching new models because the market, after years of excess, has turned its back on exuberance – and caution has become the watchword in spending.

This means sticking to proven ranges and simple styles, making watches that were worn by our fathers, updating iconic classics and offering largely useful complications such as chronographs, annual calendars and GMTs.

The star of Rolex's new collection this year, for instance, is a revival of the much sought-after 1965 Cosmograph Daytona, with the Plexiglass bezel in the original model replaced by a ceramic rim in the latest version. Patek Philippe stitched together its existing chronograph and world time models and stuck an attractive price label on it. Omega expanded the case of its Globemaster unveiled last year and plonked an annual calendar in it.

At no time in the last seven years were such "safe" launches more visible than this year when sales have been tipped to dip further after shipments of Swiss luxury timepieces fell for the first time last year since the 2009 recession. Yet, despite the expectation that things will worsen, some brands have been bold enough to introduce new models into the market, models built from scratch with novel and innovative features. Here is a sampling:

**1. Bulgari Octo Finissimo Minute Repeater**  
(165,000 euros or S\$254,100, limited 50 pieces)

It is hard enough to make a minute repeater, harder

still to make a thin one. How do you squeeze a loud speaker into a tiny space? Bulgari, which unveiled the world's thinnest tourbillon watch two years ago, managed not only that but to do so with the slimmest repeater in the market while maintaining sound quality.

With a case just 6.85 mm high, Bulgari's new minute repeater is thinner than Jaeger-LeCoultre's Hybris Mechanica II (7.9 mm thick) and Vacheron Constantin's Caliber 1731 (8.1 mm thick) – the two slimmest minute repeaters previously.

How did Bulgari do it? Of course, it started with an ultra-thin movement (3.12 mm thick). This is then fitted into the case made of titanium which, apart from being tough and light, is also a low density metal offering the best possible sound diffusion.

The dial is also titanium. But instead of sticking markers on it to indicate the hours, insertions are made on the dial to represent them. This turns the dial and sapphire crystal into an audio chamber that provides maximum loudness.

**2. Chanel Monsieur de Chanel**

(S\$49,000 in beige gold, 300 pieces; S\$51,000 in white gold, 300 pieces)

While most of the big names are stepping up the launch of ladies' models, the women-focused French fashion house surprised the market with its first men's timepiece.

And it is not just any men's watch. Chanel designed and built it entirely on its own, with a little help from today's most respected watchmakers, including Romain Gauthier.

It is an ambitious effort for a first-timer as the self-winding watch boasts two complications – an instant jumping hour and a retrograde minute that usually only more experienced brands venture to make.

**3. Panerai's Radiomir 1940 Minute Repeater Carillon Tourbillon GMT**

(starting at US\$414,000 or S\$571,320)

This minute repeater-tourbillon-GMT combo, housed in a 49 mm case, unusually big even by Panerai's standards, is the Italian watchmaker's most complicated watch so far. It is fitted with a minute repeater mechanism that has taken four years to develop. Panerai, which has popularised big watches for the wrist, had never produced a minute repeater. This is its first – and is quite a feat, because not many watchmakers can make a minute repeater.

Panerai has gone further. It has produced a repeater that is better, if not more interesting, than the typical model. Instead of the standard two hammers and two gongs, Panerai's version has three – which allow for a more melodic sounding of the time.

Most remarkable, the Panerai repeater can be activated for a home or second time zone – only Louis Vuitton is known to have launched a complication like this.

The sophisticated skeletonising work on the watch is done not just to make it look great but, like the watch's red gold case, helps to make the repeater sound clearer.

Panerai's repeater may be an energy intensive complication, but the watch still runs for four days after winding. The timepiece is made to order and the price is expected to start at US\$414,000, depending on the strap, hands, cases and other special features that you want.

**4. Seiko's Credor Fugaku Tourbillon**

(US\$462,000 or S\$623,700, limited eight pieces)  
Tourbillons are known as “the most revered of watch complications”. But unlike the rest of the watch world, they are not hot in Japan. Perhaps that is why Seiko took so long to produce one.

This beautiful tourbillon launched under Seiko's top-end Credor brand is the first for the Japanese watchmaker in its 135-year history. Not many expected Seiko to unveil a tourbillon in this rather subdued market, even if it is in the luxury segment.

The gravity-defying complication is powered by an ultra-thin 3.98 mm thick movement with a 25.6 mm diameter, making it “the world's smallest tourbillon by volume”, according to Seiko. The Fugaku tourbillon is highly decorated, like a piece of art work that has the touch of every conceivable artisanal technique – marquetry, *maki-e* (gold lacquer), gem-setting, hand-engraving, skeletonisation.

Engraved on the dial is a striking picture of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* – the image which made 19th century Edo painter Katsushika Hokusai world famous.

**5. TAG Heuer Carrera Heuer-02T**

(S\$21,800 in titanium; S\$29,100 in limited edition; S\$27,650 in rose gold lugs; and S\$32,000 in rose gold bezel)

The new Swiss timepiece, an automatic chronograph combined with a titanium and carbon flying tourbillon, is more a marketing than technical breakthrough.

Priced this low, more than three times lower than the cheapest Swiss tourbillon in the market, the watch will not only expand TAG Heuer's market share but make one of the most sought-after

complications more accessible to watch lovers.

Over the longer haul, the Carrera Heuer-02T, based on a TAG in-house movement, could pave the way for the industrialisation of the largely hand-made complications, increasing their production and knocking the prices of tourbillons, minute repeaters and perpetual calendars more down to earth for the mass buyer.

This may not be all bad for wealthy collectors who value the personal touch of the traditional watchmaker. Mass manufacturing could make hand-made timepieces even rarer, which is at least what some collectors really want.

Even though the Carrera Heuer-02T's main components are factory-made, the fitting, assembly and adjustment work for the watch are still done by hand.

And it is no less superior than traditionally made tourbillons. The new chronograph-tourbillon is COSC-certified – the only Swiss watch of its kind to meet the high precision standards set by the official Swiss chronometer testing institute.

**6. Parmigiani's Senfine**

This new movement is not ready to move into a watch yet, but Parmigianni has chosen to unveil it at its concept stage because, when it is fully developed, it could be game-changer in watchmaking.

In the race to achieve extraordinary power reserve, watchmakers have concentrated on increasing the power supply – by building a bigger barrel or many more barrels in the watch movement.

The Senfine, meaning “eternally” in Esperanto, has turned to the other half of the equation – the movement's energy use. Only a non-watchmaker, free from traditional watchmaking conventions,

could have looked at it from this fresh angle.

Indeed, the idea for Senfine first came 12 years ago from a Swiss engineer Pierre Genequand. He noted that friction, caused especially by the regulator in the watch mechanism, is the main energy guzzler in the working of a timepiece. If only this could be reduced, if not eliminated, a lot of power could be saved and stored up.

Putting Genequand's idea into practice, Parmigiani in the last six to seven years has re-designed the regulator and replaced it with frictionless joints. The result is a movement with power reserve of up to 70 days. Once it is fully wound, you do not have to touch the watch's winding crown for the next two months.

Currently, most timepieces have a power reserve of only about 70 hours. The longest is probably A Lange & Sohne's Lange 31, which has 31 days' power reserve. Some of Panerai's more pricey models boast eight days' power reserve. Two years ago, Oris launched its first own movement in 35 years. It has power reserve of 10 days.

**7. Cartier's Drive de Cartier**

(starts at US\$6200 or S\$8432 in steel, to US\$19,000 in rose gold)

Cartier also went against market trends to launch a new vintage automotive-inspired men's line, which is identified by a new case that is a cross between the shape of a pillow and tonneau. The feel is sporty, but elegant.

Cartier has produced a number of iconic models defined by the shape of its case – the Tank, Santos and Crush. The Drive is the latest, which came very soon after Cartier unveiled the Cle last year, which has a case in the shape of the key crown of vintage timepieces.

Cartier says that the latter will be used for both men and women's watches. The Drive is strictly for men.

**8. Piaget Emperor Coussin XL 700P**

(S\$70,800, limited 118 pieces)

With this much-talked-about timepiece, the brand known in recent years more for its ultra-thin timepieces has shifted focus to watchmakers' perennial preoccupation: making a more accurate mechanical watch.

Quartz precision would serve as a good benchmark. Better still, steal some of the quartz know-how and adapt it without betraying one's mechanical roots.

Piaget was one of the Swiss brands which took part in developing the experimental Beta 21 quartz movement, which led to its first quartz watch 40 years ago. So it knows something about quartz technology.

This new timepiece is a quartz-mechanical hybrid. Yet it requires no battery to operate. A Swiss-made quartz-controlled generator is instead fitted to regulate the self-winding mechanical movement. Beating at a faster than normal frequency in mechanical movements, the 700P keeps time more accurately.

Seiko launched similar quartz-mechanical hybrid in its Spring Drive line in 1999. There are similarities with the 700P, but some of the executions are different. ■

