

SENSORY

A man with short brown hair, wearing sunglasses and a white long-sleeved shirt, is smiling as he handles the ropes of a sailboat. The boat is on the water, with a white wake visible. The sky is blue with some clouds. The mast and rigging of the sailboat are visible in the background.

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Sports
Cruise Control

InStyle
High on Heels

Traveller's Log
Monasteries in the Air

Scribbles
Triplet Joy

WATCHES

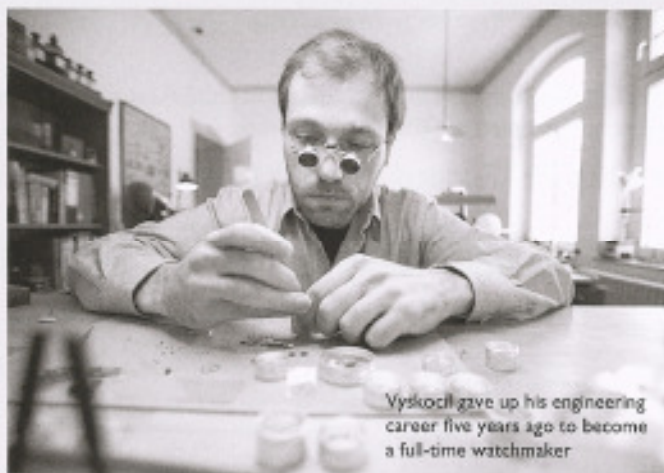
Text and Photos **Dr Bernard Cheong**

In this issue, we leave the world of brands, marketing and factories behind, and dive into the stratospheric world (in both price and ideals) of individual watchmakers – where the conception and building of a watch is by one individual alone.

This is one end of the watchmaking spectrum, where the entire watch, from the wheels and cogs right down to the case itself, is made by only one pair of hands. Such watchmakers number about five.

One such watchmaker is Volker Vyskocil, 40, a German who is a trained engineer. He gave up his career five years ago to become a full-time watchmaker. He works alone so quality control is absolute.

Vyskocil is currently making his first individual series of wristwatches which feature a unique time-setting mechanism that allows for precise individual setting of the hours, minutes and hacking seconds. His timepiece costs €20,000 at a



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minimum, as the demands of accuracy and detail allow time for only five of such watches to be made per year. These watches are made to last for centuries and constructed with an extreme attention to detail.

Vyskocil explains the essence of a good watch: "Measuring is one of the most important stages of producing a watch. In my workshop, I can 'catch' the 2/100 of a mm easily. This is the tolerance of most of the measuring

equipment I have.

"To work in the limit of 1/100mm takes a bit of concentration because I have to calibrate all measuring equipment very carefully, especially the tools, which are divided into 1/100mm. Also, I have to handle the gauges with care to avoid contamination of areas of contact," he says of the painstaking and laborious process of making a watch single-handedly.

"With high concentration,

I can use some of the 1/100 gauges. But it is scientifically not safe. I have, for example, micrometers which are divided into 1/1000, but the error results from the pressuring of the contact area in the range of 5/1000. This happens especially when you measure small pivots because the contact area is only a line (Herzian stress)."

Designing Art

According to Vyskocil, designing a watch movement is a kind of art – just like how an artist arranges his painting using colours, brush strokes and his point of view.

He says that there are several techniques to make a frosted finish. "You can polish the plate and use a rotating wire mop to produce a matt finish or you can polish the surface and blow glass pearls with a defined diameter on the surface.

"There's also the classic German way where the plates are polished (cleaned from all scratches). Thereafter, you use a special silvering powder or solution, which is levigated with a lap. Then, the silvering will be brushed with a brush of German Silver. Silvering and brushing are to give the typical surface. Gilding the plates is the last step in this process."

Is Vyskocil's watch a modern German timepiece? "In my opinion, it is a modern-day interpretation but not the only one which is possible."

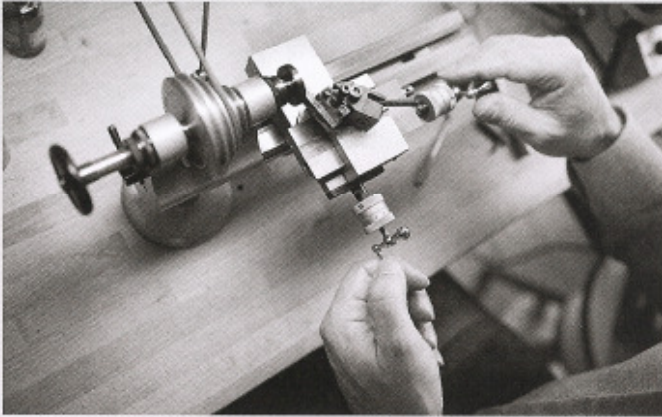
He explains that there are two kinds of interpretation. "One is orientated on the best performance. The stylistic elements come on rank 2. This kind of interpretation has to use a small balance with a high frequency.

Made By One

Watches made by a single craftsman are constructed with extreme attention to detail and may take up to a few years to produce



WATCHES



"My interpretation is tied up to a tradition which is lost in the 70s of the last century. At that time, the mechanical watch had to fight against the quartz technology and there was no place for the aesthetical aspects. Before this time, the watchmaker postulate a big and heavy balance with a moderate frequency as the 'key' to keeping the time most precise.

"My VA [watch] is a continuation of this gone tradition with absolute new unique features like the time-setting mechanism."

How long does it take to make a watch? "This is difficult to answer," he says. "To set up machinery for cutting a pinion can take up to five hours. The cutting process can be done relatively fast. Finishing the pinion also takes a while.

"I measure the time for making a part not in hours. It is more useful for me to calculate in days. To make a set of five wheels will take two to three days. The time to make a pinion may be two days.

"Bridges are something

special. I have never counted the days to making bridges because there are so many different processes until the bridges are finished. These processes are not running in one week or one month. For example, the process of milling the bridges is done by beginning the watch and the process of finishing near the end. So I don't count hours when I build watches. Only days.

He adds: "To build a set of five watches takes nearly one year of work because I cannot work all the time on the watch. I have to work in the office too! And the time for the building, constructing (designing) and calculating the watch is not considered. These take an additional one-and-a-half to two years."

Historically, from the 18th century, watches have more often been mass-produced than handmade by single craftsmen. The demand for utilitarian timepieces has created a system that still works well today. Mass, specialised production of individual watch parts, wheels,

pinions, screws, springs and cases are made by different individuals or factories. These individuals grew to be extremely specialised in their particular field. The final watchmaker was the "finisher" who assembled the parts he chose to create the watch he wanted, and then stamped his name or brand onto it.

Till today, very few factories

make the parts for the entire watch under one roof. As such, the work of singular craftsmen of extraordinary finish and detail is to be treasured. At the estimated rate of producing no more than 50 or so timepieces in total by all the single craftsmen combined each year, the demand for their watches is sure to exceed the supply for decades to come. ●

Time & Diamonds

(on a visit to Tempus watch exhibition, Singapore)

Signs of elegance
are quite apparent:
Cavernous tavern
surround like heaven.
A carpet of flowers
red and bold
invites good stream
of eager visitors
young and old.
Pedestal-high torches
carry wrist-deep watches
where time ticks untouched
as sartorial art.

I wander
between each attraction
like a herder
deep in action
with my children.
A glimpse here
a stare there
we multiply stains
of pointed fingers
on glass panes.
Beyond reach of harm
giant stalks of diamond
ooze heavy charm
before sweet maidens
dressed to disarm
high maintenance partners

and their spouses.
Elsewhere
a keen-eyed sculptor
with wrinkle-thick palms
bends over metal,
working silent magic
like no other.

There are gods
and goddesses
in this cauldron
of Olympian proportions
putting knowledge
of timepieces and diamonds
into attentive heads.

Wondrous artefacts
of sacred beauty
are not magnets
for childhood curiosity
except timeless masterpieces -
their faces festooned
with cute cartoon
of Mickey and Minnie.

If you tire
of all that glitter
cum horology fun,
there is always another
children's welfare fund.

— Dr Yoong It Siang

**"I don't count hours when I build watches. Only days."
— German watchmaker Volker Vyskocil**
