

A Watchmaker Who Seizes the Moment

Ups and downs in the industry, coupled with a tragic loss, have taught Ludovic Ballouard that the most important time is now.

By Kathleen Beckett

Reporting from Avusy, Switzerland

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Time may be divided into past, present and future, but for the independent Swiss watchmaker Ludovic Ballouard, the only time that counts is the present.

It's a philosophy he developed the hard way, through personal suffering and loss. Watching his wife, Eveline, endure cancer for 10 years took a toll. "I realized you have to live in the moment," he said. "Time is now."

Mr. Ballouard's work, known for being innovative yet iconoclastic, expresses his *carpe diem* approach to life. On the rule-breaking Upside Down watch introduced in 2009, 11 of the hour markers are displayed upside down on the dial — the only one right-side up tells the current hour, the present.

As he sipped espresso in his atelier about six miles outside Geneva, he took one of his Upside Down watches out of its case and showed how it worked, turning the hands until the number of the current hour flipped up. Then he showed the clear, skeleton back, with the B01 movement he created, and pointed out that he had used 200-year-old techniques.

“I got the idea when I was repairing old watches,” he said.

His other watch style, the Half Time with the B02 movement he created, came out in 2012 in homage to Eveline, who died in 2017. The watch, he said, expressed the “spirit of love as two pieces on the dial come together” to show the time. The hours on the dial are unreadable except for the current one. “The past is gone,” he said. “The future is unknown,” and only the present hour “clicks in place, so you focus on the present moment.”

His Upside Down and Half Time watches are “a very classic design, not show-offs, but classic with complications,” he said. He works in red gold and platinum and dials can be malachite, meteorite, aventurine, lapis lazuli, osmium or studded with diamonds, enameled or guilloché by the noted horologist Brittany Nicole Cox, who “only works for me,” he said.



Mr. Ballouard's watches: the Half Time, on the left, and the Upside Down. Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

The numerals on the custom-made watches can be Roman, Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese or Thai. The buckles on the often-alligator straps form the letter B. Each watch is presented in a box made of oak from Brittany, France, where Mr. Ballouard grew up.

The waiting list for his watches is 18 months and that's fine with him. “We want to remain small,” he said. The price of the standard Upside Down model with a platinum case is 87,000 Swiss francs, or about \$76,000, excluding taxes, and the most expensive Upside Down with an osmium dial is 180,000 francs, excluding taxes.

The watches are made in his atelier in the village of Avusy in a 200-year-old building that once was a post office. His work room, while compact, is open, airy and modern, with one big square work table for him and two assistants. Last year they made 35 watches — 30 Upside Down, five Half Time.

Pride of place is given to an antique pendulum clock that had been in his family home in Brittany. As a child, “I always listened to its chimes,” he said.

Back then, his passion was airplanes and his hobby was building model planes from scratch. In 1989, he graduated from watchmaking school in Rennes, France, and worked in Dinard restoring the instruments and timepieces on airplane instrument panels.

“It was the best experience,” he said. “Many of the pieces were ancient,” and in repairing them he learned the many ways they had been constructed over the years.

Determined to pursue a career in watchmaking, he moved to Geneva in 1998. He got a job at the luxury watchmaker Franck Muller and stayed for three years.

Along the way, Mr. Ballouard met Eveline, who worked at Vacheron Constantin, and he then began freelancing for that brand before signing on with F.P. Journe for seven years.



Mr. Ballouard working on a movement. Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

The experience was tremendous, he said. “After four years I started making the Grand Sonnerie,” a complicated, prestigious type of watch. “The more the complications,” he said, “the more it pleases me.”

In 2009, after the financial crisis hit the industry, Mr. Ballouard said F.P. Journe downsized and he was out of a job. He had been thinking of starting his own brand, and Eveline encouraged him to do so.

“She told me to follow my heart,” he said, adding that because of the crisis, “suppliers had a lot of time. They needed customers. I could ask for anything, and I didn’t have to wait. I could get movements in two months instead of two years.”

Wasting no time, he started Montres Ludovic Ballouard — now called simply Ludovic Ballouard — and by the end of 2009 he had introduced the Upside Down.

One particularly prestigious assignment came from Harry Winston to create the Opus XVIII watch, and to do so in just 11 months. He hired staff to help, and the watch debuted at Baselworld in 2013.

But his wife “was getting more and more sick,” he said. “That’s when I realized the past is gone, the future is unknown. Only the present moment is real.”



The Gaga Watch created by Mr. Ballouard’s 5-year-old son, Gabriel, held in his and his father’s hands. Gaga is Gabriel’s nickname. Reto Albertalli for The New York Times

So he set about creating a new present. Within months of her death, he moved from busy, bustling Geneva to Avusy, where he has a cottage near his atelier with his wife, Flavia, an Italian business executive, and their 5-year-old son, Gabriel.

Mr. Ballouard said he entertained clients and watch fans in Avusy. His specialty is raclette, which he serves in the field, with a view of grazing goats, using a tractor as a serving table.

One client who Mr. Ballouard said was a regular visitor is Edward Tonkin, a retired car dealer in Portland, Ore., who owns two Upside Downs and one Half Time, the first one Mr. Ballouard made.

“I fell in love with this amazing, unique, never-before-done-and-not-since-either timepiece, but not nearly as much as I fell in love with Ludo,” he wrote in an email.

“His creativity knows no bounds, and he is a most passionate curator of his craft,” Mr. Tonkin wrote. “A true watchmaker in every sense of the word.”

Mr. Ballouard, however, insists that the creation he is proudest of is Gabriel. Together they have started what the watchmaker calls “a collaboration, Ludovic Ballouard et Fils.”

“Gabriel is such an artist, he made his own watch,” Flavia said. It’s called the Gaga watch — Gabriel’s nickname — and features the child’s design of bright colors on the face of the Upside Down.

It’s the watch his father wears, every day, past, present and future.