

A CUT ABOVE WATCHES



The Skull Bang Watch from Hublot, far left, is made entirely of black ceramic and has a stylized skull on the dial. The HYT design combines hydraulic technology with mechanics.

HUBLOT (LEFT); CHRONOPASSION

An eye for the unusual and the next big thing

PARIS

Chronopassion's founder is a trendsetter, inspired by timepieces of the past

BY FELICIA CRADDOCK

As a boy, Laurent Picciotto was entranced, he says, by the complex timepieces his father collected — the more complicated and technically improbable the better.

In the 25 years since he opened the cutting-edge watch boutique Chronopassion on the fashionable Rue Saint-Honoré in Paris at age 27, Mr. Picciotto has earned a reputation as a passionate watch enthusiast with a taste for the unconventional and an eye for the next big thing.

“Laurent is considered a trendsetter for the fine watchmaking world,” said Fabienne Lupo-Magnaudet, president of the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie, in an e-mail interview this month. “He is one of the pioneers of new horology.”

His reputation is based on his part in the inception and development of a substantive roll call of brands, including Urwerk, MB&F, Panerai and Richard Mille.

When the founders of Urwerk, which was set up in the late 1990s, came to him

chanical watches last month.

“The first reflex I have when I have a first sketch, a first idea, is to go to Laurent and to say ‘Laurent, let me come to Paris, let me sit down with you, I want to show you something,’” said Vincent Perriard, creator of HYT, who described Mr. Picciotto as “the godfather” of the company.

“He’s a sounding board, he’s one of those guys who tells you way in advance you should change this, or you should add that, or you should ask that person,” he said. “He knows and understands what will be a success and what won’t be a success in the future.”

The loyalty that Mr. Picciotto has earned from his fledgling brands has proved a considerable asset, winning him first-round deliveries of highly sought-after pieces — including, for example, two Panerai limited-edition watches that prompted eager collectors to fly half way around the world to line up for outside his door and, more recently, the Hublot Skull Bang Watch, an all-black, skull-motif creation that fits remarkably well with his elegantly gothic rock n’ roll personal style.

His success is notable at a time when other small independent retailers are struggling in the face of a wave of luxury brands opening flagship stores worldwide.

“Today we have megastores everywhere, brands everywhere, there are less and less independent people in retail,” Mr. Picciotto said. “The cards are in the hand of the brands. The target for a retailer is to get an identity, but at the end of the day you need brands to sell. So we need them, but they feel now that they don’t need us.”

But, Mr. Picciotto insists, Chronopassion was never a commercial venture; his desire was always to create the shop he had dreamed of with his father, a place where the world’s most unusual watches could be found under one roof.

“Most of the time a watch retailer tries to find suppliers that are legitimate,” he said. “If he takes a brand he wants to see customers at the very start, but that’s not my priority.”

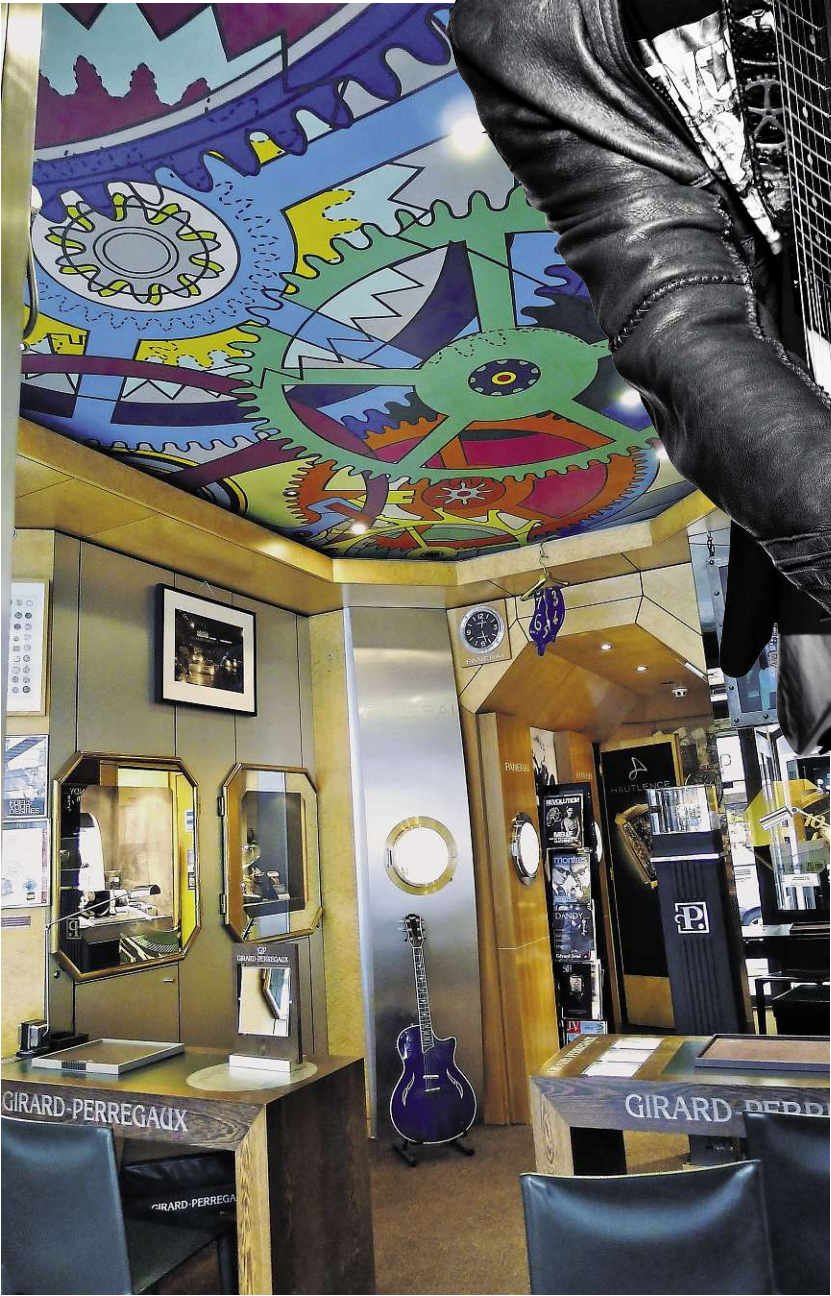
“I’m O.K. to carry brands with big notoriety and the capacity to be mainstream, but it’s really the product that interests me. Does that new watch bring something to the subject, yes or no? That is more important for me than carrying the most powerful brands.”

“He knows and understands what will be a success and what won’t be a success in the future.”

they didn’t have enough money to buy the metal for their watches, Mr. Picciotto recalled in a recent interview. But their science-fiction designs reminded him so much of 1960s comic books that he couldn’t resist backing them, he said.

With his fellow Frenchman Mr. Mille, Mr. Picciotto spent many long hours in the late 1990s developing the RM 001 Tourbillon — a timepiece priced well above €150,000, or \$130,000 at the time it was introduced in 2001. He recalls Mr. Mille regularly throwing it against the wall of his shop to prove its toughness to potential customers.

Mr. Picciotto’s latest triumph has been HYT, a young brand with a groundbreaking design that combines hydraulic technology with mechanics, a piece of horological irreverence that Mr. Picciotto encouraged with enthusiasm. He received his first HYT H1 hydro-me-



CHRONOPASSION

thing that they were not.

“Sometimes there are people who play the guitar,” he said, pointing to a Taylor T5 on the wall of his shop. “They buy a watch and afterwards they take down the guitar and they sing a song, which is deeply far from when I was 12 years old on the steps of the Place Vendôme.”

“People express their happiness,” he said. “Passionate people take quite a lot of time to get a plane to come and see the last crazy toys. And that’s what I like, because I get to share in that. So for me it’s like a toy shop, it’s like a playground, because people just come and say ‘O.K., I want to be surprised: This is your mission.’”

Surrounded by some of the world’s finest watches, alongside his guitars and replica cars, Mr. Picciotto appears to be living his childhood dream — an achievement that is perhaps the secret to this industry rock star’s success.

Laurent Picciotto, above, founded Chronopassion, left, on Rue Saint-Honoré in Paris when he was 27. His desire was to create the shop he and his father had dreamed of, a place where the world’s most unusual watches could be found.

A retailer who obliged even Cartier to negotiate for three years before he agreed to carry their line, Mr. Picciotto has a well-founded reputation for exclusivity. But that extends solely to the brands he carries — not to his customers. There, he said, his desire for inclusiveness is paramount.

“Even if somebody comes into the

shop because it’s raining outside, I’m ready to show him the most expensive pieces that we have; I don’t care if he’s able or not to afford them,” he said.

Recalling the strange sense of pomp and ceremony he felt as a boy on visits to the hushed boutiques of Place Vendôme, Mr. Picciotto says he has tried to make Chronopassion every-

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