



1. Laurent Picciotto's Chronopassion (271 Rue Saint-Honoré, Paris) is an horological adventurer's dream — the result of one man's fervor for iconoclastic timepieces. Click the slideshow to see more of what lies behind Chronopassion's steel doors.

A Chronopassionate Affair

BY MELISSA LWEE-
RAMSAY, PHOTOGRAPHY

Melissa Lwee-Ramsay: Chronopassion is known for its bold selections and as *the* go-to place for special and unique timepieces, but how did it all begin and what was the vision you had for the shop?

BY PIERS CUNLIFFE

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*Founder of Paris
watch-collector mecca
Chronopassion,
Laurent Picciotto
shares his love affair
with unique timepieces
and why new
discoveries continue to
excite him even after 25
years in the industry.*

Laurent Picciotto: I started **Chronopassion** in 1988 — so it has been almost 25 years — because my father was a collector and we were always interested in special watches. During that time, in order to get a special watch, one had to go to different places just to find three, maybe four different options as most of the time it was only the jewellers who carried such watches. For the first two years I started by selling only Gérald Genta — it was, of course, during the golden age of the brand — as Genta was one of the rare individuals making complicated watches. I discovered quite quickly that the brand was so unknown and so expensive that it was quite tough. So after two years I took a gamble. I went to the Basel Fair and picked up what were, in my opinion, the interesting pieces from brands that I liked and I came back from that fair with 14 or 15 brands. It was a dangerous bet because it could have been a huge success for me but at the same time, I could also have been setting myself up for a big fall as I only had a very small number of customers at that time. Thankfully, the gamble paid off and so that was how I started to specialise in special timepieces from a mix of both institutional and niche brands.

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You say that you started Chronopassion because your father was a collector even though you didn't come from a watch background, but even your father wasn't so sure that it was a good idea; what made you stick to your guns?

In the beginning he told me that he thought I was nuts because I knew nothing about the watch business or industry. But I told him, 'it's ok, because I think we have a card to play because there must be many people like you who want a shop where they can find special timepieces and not have to source for them from different places.' Secondly, the market was very poor but I felt that things would change. If you look at the magazines around 25 years ago, they dedicate one, maybe two pages to watches and watch coverage was rare. By 1995, watch communication was getting stronger and people started to understand the beauty of watches and around 1998, the market really picked up. The craziest years for us were between 2000 and 2008. And now, where we're at today, watches are everywhere.

Still, you've had a pretty good run as a talent-spotter and tastemaker, being among the first to champion brands such as Richard Mille, Urwerk and Maximilian Büsser's MB&F from their very inception. What's your secret when it comes to spotting a new brand and what was it about the three I mentioned that enticed you to support them?

I knew Richard (Mille) before he started his own label. One day he just came over and told me he wanted to do his own brand, where there would be no limits when it came to movement and no price restrictions and asked if he could brainstorm with me for two hours every week, to which I agreed with pleasure. Very quickly the two hours became 10 hours a week, then 20, and then I saw him every day. This was back in 1999 and at one point — we were in the basement — I told him, 'Richard, I've got customers and suppliers, I cannot spend all my time with you but I will be your retailer for sure.' He replied by asking me if I wanted to be a shareholder of the company, and I did so.

It's really all about instinct for me. I remember the brother of Felix Baumgartner (of Urwerk) coming by one day with no appointment, and coming up to me to say 'we have a new brand but we don't have the money to even afford the metal, but I can show you a prototype and some drawings'. I thought they were wonderful and so I asked him how I could help. Likewise for Max (Büsser) whom I knew way before he launched MB&F — I followed his career from Jaeger-LeCoultre to Harry Winston until the day he quit Harry Winston and told me he was going to do his own brand. From the get-go, I told him 'Okay, I'm with you. I may not know what you're going to do but I know you — that's enough for me to know that you will come up with something that I would be interested in'.

As the number of collectors has grown over the years, have you found that there are now more of them who, like you, are looking for new watch discoveries?

It really depends. There are some who come and they say, 'alright, I'm ready to buy something quite expensive but I don't want it to be something that people know', and then there are others who want to be quite demonstrative with their purchase. But a lot of the time, the kind of customers we get at **Chronopassion** would just send me a mail or pop by and they will say 'try to astonish me' and that's what we do, we try to astonish them with something special. So really, my business is more about buying than selling. I'm very rigid in my choices, so brands know that if we take a piece, it's because we really want to carry it and a lot of the time, it's a gamble but it's also a process of discovery for me and that's why after 25 years, I still enjoy coming to the shop every day.

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Chronopassion

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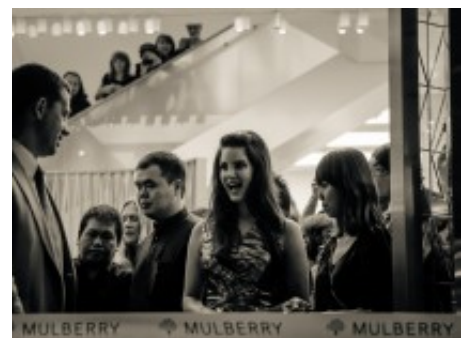
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