



Tim and Bart Grönefeld

INTERVIEW BY CHARLENE CO

GOING DUTCH

THE GRÖNEFELD BROTHERS TAKE HIGH COMPLICATIONS TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

In the early 90s, Dutch brothers Bart and Tim Grönefeld packed their bags for Switzerland to work at no less than Audemars Piguet Renaud et Papi (APRP), and train under the brilliant Robert Greubel. After only a few months, they were asked to head their respective workshops. Taking on the challenge while speaking zero French and communicating only through gestures, but equipped with the passion for watchmaking, they would stay on for a combined tenure of 12 years, and go back to the Netherlands with the expertise and confidence for high complications as you could imagine one would gather from such intense exposure.

The brothers would no sooner set up their own company, focusing on the only thing they knew: high complications – in particular, tourbillons and striking mechanisms. In 2008, Bart and Tim wowed the watch community with their first watch, the GTM-06 tourbillon minute repeater, and two years later receive accolades for their One Hertz watch, which boasts an

independent dead seconds. They talk to us about their time at APRP, what they took from their years there, and the incredible pieces they introduced at Baselworld.

I understand that both of you spent some time at Audemars Piguet Renaud Papi? How did your time there influence the way you approach watchmaking?

Bart Grönefeld (BG): I started at Renaud et Papi in 1992. I was a young watchmaker – 22 years old – and the thing that was amazing for me at that time was they didn't have any simple watches. I was thrown into the deep. I came to Switzerland from Holland and started working there. Three months later, I was asked by Robert Greubel – he was my director at that time – if I wanted to be responsible for the workshop. And I didn't speak any French, so I had to learn French very fast. So at first, I was explaining by showing people how to do it. And that was a good experience. Tim came three years later.

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Tim Grönefeld (TG): I was also quite young and started straight away on tourbillon watches. Same story: after a few months, Robert Greubel came to me and said, "We want you to be responsible for the tourbillons." So, yes of course! That time I didn't speak French. We had to learn from all the people there.

BG: Language was not such a big issue. We spoke a few words in English then just showed them how to do it with our hands.

TG: We also became very productive because we couldn't talk too much!

How long were your tenures there?

BG: I was there for seven years, and Tim five years. The work was fantastic there. If it wasn't for the family, we would still be working there, I guess. But I got a girlfriend in my hometown. For two years we carried a long distance relationship. So I had to make a choice: stay in Switzerland or go back to Holland. And I talked to Tim, and asked: "why don't we create our own company?" My parents and grandfather were already watchmakers, so that's how our story started. My grandfather started in 1912 in watchmaking. Then my father took over the business, repairing and selling watches. We started our company in 1998.

How did your time at Renaud et Papi influence the way you create your watches?

BG: Without Renaud et Papi, we would never have done these kinds of watches. There, we learned all the high-end complications about high-end watches. And also, our friends were also working at high-end factories. We were only talking about high-end watches. We didn't know anything about ETA movements because we started straight away in high-end.

What is the watchmaking industry like in the Netherlands?

BG: In the history of watchmaking in general, the Swiss were not really important. It was more France, Britain but also the Netherlands. Like the pendulum, it was invented by Christiaan Huygens and later the hairspring. So without Holland there wouldn't be any wristwatches.

So why do you think are the Swiss getting all the credit?

TG: It just grew that way.

BG: Then it slowed down in the Netherlands – the clock making, the watchmaking.

TG: We do always get questioned: "You're not Swiss made?" There are also great companies in Germany, pretty recent, reborn companies. We could have taken an old name from a Dutch clockmaker, but we chose to use our own name.

And your family has a long history in watchmaking anyway, right?

BG: Yes, our grandfather started in 1912, but he didn't make his own watch. He was servicing and restoring old pocket watches. Unfortunately, he died when I was seven so I don't know much about him. But when I see his tools, and we still use a few of his tools, I think he was a pretty good watchmaker. The Dutch history of clockmaking and watchmaking don't really influence us. We are more influenced by the Swiss. Our training is there. The Swiss quality of finishing, it is very important for us.

Can you tell me more about your operation?

BG: Now, we have a total of eight people. Tim's wife is in the office and everybody else are watchmakers.

TG: Soon, there will be two more watchmakers, so there will be 10 people. It's quite busy at the moment. We're growing slowly.

So tell me about your working relationship, what is the dynamic between you two?

TG: To start a watch, we are working all the time together: think about it, draw it, study it. Making the watch, I'm the tourbillon man and Bart is [on] complications and also finishing.

BG: I figure out how to do the finishing on all the parts. And then Tim is assembling the cage, making the timing right. Then the assembling, we do it all together. Business-wise, we do pretty much the same. We always sit together like this. And to draw the shape of the bridge, we do it together. We used to have the same motorcycle and even the same car. Different wives, but they look pretty much the same. But when we were young kids, we used to fight.

I'm sure that still happens once in a while?

TG: We disagree but a day later we're ok...life is too short to fight.

How hands-on are you still in the actual watchmaking?

BG: We still do almost every casing up ourselves. We also do the first five movements from every new caliber ourselves from A-Z, from finishing to assembling so we exactly know what's inside. Later, the watchmakers are taught by us and they can do their





own thing, but we will still help them and check them. We also develop new things, we do all the traveling, writing emails – so we do actually everything!

How many watches does the company make yearly now?

TG: Between 35 to 50. A lot of time goes into these watches; it takes us four to six weeks to make one watch.

Would you like to maintain this level of exclusivity?

TG: We'd like to go to about 100 pieces eventually, maximum.

Can you tell me about your customers?

BG: At the moment, most of them are watch collectors. They understand the high-end finishing, high-end watches. But we also have a few customers wearing a Seiko watch and who buy a Grönefeld watch because they like the story, first time to see a high-end watch. But most of the time, it's collectors. We are now working on our retailer network.

How much of the watchmaking is done in-house?

BG: We outsource quite a lot, but the finishing we do ourselves, designing the movement. We work together with AP/Renaud et Papi still. We are really happy, proud that they produce roughly our parts and we do all the end finishing, the assembly, the design. But we are too small to have all the machines to do the parts.

TG: Maybe at the point when we can do 100 pieces a year, then we can look at that. So the 1Hz series...

BG: It's our second collection, before we had the tourbillon minute repeater. The 1Hz is the first watch with our own movement. Our first watch was the tourbillon minute repeater with basic movement from Christophe Claret, but that wasn't our own movement, it was also used by Harry Winston and some other brands.

Can you tell us more about the independent dead seconds?

BG: So here we have a gear train on this side of the watch; this is the gear train for the balance wheel – like a normal watch. And then we created another gear train here that drives this wheel with the pointed tooth and that's for the jumping seconds. So when you wind the watch, the power comes from this barrel to the escapement. So independent here means they have their own power source.

And the design?

BG: The case is 43mm, with a thickness of 12.5mm and all the bridges in the watch are made of stainless steel. That's also a point that makes us unique, the stainless steel bridges with these cut-out centers. So the letters there are like in 3D...and of course the hand finishing, beveled. We chose stainless steel because we have a lot of experience also in after sales. In after sales, we have seen so many bridges that have been abused by a watchmaker. It's impossible to



The One Hertz watch features an independent dead seconds, powered by a dedicated barrel. The piece features a solid silver dial and a movement developed entirely in-house, with stainless steel bridges and exceptional fine finishing

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restore a bridge which has a scratch on the Geneva stripes. So we try to avoid the Geneva stripes. We also avoid any plating – this is pure metal. And it's very easy to restore by a reasonable watchmaker. If in the future it needs restoration, almost any good watchmaker can restore, if there's a scratch here or there, they can restore it if they are capable.

The hands appear to be suspended.

BG: Yes, it's a very long pivot.

TG: Grönefeld is also about highlighting the complications. So in the 1Hz, the second hand is close to the glass. The same with the tourbillon, we highlight it by putting it close to the glass.

And the Parallax is the piece you presented at Baselworld?

TG: It has a completely new movement. It highlights the tourbillon also – we have created a mirror around the cage so even at an angle you can sometimes see the reflection of the balance wheel. The tourbillon cage is made of stainless steel.

BG: It's also called Parallax because the parallax error is really small. We raised the seconds dial ring in the air with pillars so the second hand is really close to the seconds hand dial. So that means you really have small parallax error.

TG: It's a feature we have built into this watch. We always found it strange that tourbillons are meant to be positioned instruments but when it comes to time setting, there are very



Grönefeld's workshop at Oldenzaal in the Netherlands, the same building where their grandfather, Johan Grönefeld, began his watchmaking career in 1912

The Parallax Tourbillon has a flying tourbillon housed in a circular cage that includes the oscillating balance wheel. The piece has a large central seconds hand, stop seconds, a power reserve- and winding-setting indicator



few watches in the world with a tourbillon where you can actually set the exact seconds. And when you do the time setting now, you push the crown, it goes to setting and you can set the time. So for example, if I travel between time zones, I can just change an hour without interfering the seconds. But if I want to do a precise time setting, I set the time and I wait until the hand comes to the top and then the watch will stop. Then you can set it to your master clock, to your reference clock to set the time correctly. When you push the crown again, the watch starts again.

BG: What's important for us is not only the design but also the usability. It's not only a decoration piece.

They are also rather reasonably sized, not too big considering all the features.

BG: Yes, relatively small but still not an ultra flat watch. The watch needs to be sturdy. If you go very flat, you'll get flat wheels. And if you see the wheels from the movement there, they are really solid wheels. We want to make solid movements. Even for the 1Hz, we couldn't make it smaller because the case as you can see is completely full because there are two movements in it: one basic gear train and you have the second



gear train. We have two escapements, the only thing is you don't have two...otherwise it's like two movements. For the winding setting mechanism, it's like a chronograph.

How has the reception been so far?

TG: Excellent. Better than ever. This Baselworld was really good. If you look at the Internet now, people have really nice stories. Clients are really happy. It's been really good. Especially now also that people can see the Grönefeld look – in the face, the dial, the hands, the DNA – it's really strong. ★