

DUTCH



TREAT

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Made by two local brothers, the Grönefeld tourbillon minute repeater is the first wristwatch of its kind made in The Netherlands

Having lived in The Netherlands for more than thirty-three years, I've gotten to know first hand some things about the Dutch and their personal worldview. I refer to the lack of 'ego' that so typifies the socialist nations of Scandinavia.

To get a idea of what I mean, take a typical Dutch phrase such as: *'Hoge bomen vangen veel wind'* means "Tall trees catch a lot of wind," or *'Doe gewoon dan doe je al gek genoeg,'* which translates as "Just be yourself and it's already crazy enough." Simply put, the Dutch don't go around telling the world they are really great at something, whatever their personal expertise might be.

Showing off your ego is considered bad taste here whereas in the USA if you don't tell people that you are just fabulous, the best and greatest at something, people think you are either no good, insecure or doomed to fail.

Imagine therefore my astonishment when rumors reached me of a minute repeater wristwatch being released soon in The Netherlands by two brothers named Grönefeld. Since I know almost all the minute repeaters made by the major brands as well as those

by independent masters like Dufour and Voutilainen, the rumor just seemed far-fetched—even if it had concerned a Swiss startup, not to mention the sparsely populated watch culture of Holland.

Admittedly, I also felt a little undone that such a project was supposedly taking shape only about one and a half hours from my home without my having an inkling of it. Nonetheless in the end it turned out to be true, as did a number of other novel facts, exemplifying the truly laid-back Dutch national character.

Family history

Although seemingly a newcomer to the watch marketplace, the name Grönefeld and the art of watchmaking turned out to have a family history just a few years short of one century. It originated in the small, ancient village of Oldenzaal located in The Netherlands quite near the German border. There, in a shop directly under the view of the ancient basilica church and its tower dating from 1240, Johan Grönefeld, the great grandfather of the present generation of watchmakers Bart and Tim Grönefeld, in 1912 began his career as a watchmaker.

Their present workshop is located in the same building as that used by their great-grandfather and their father, Sjeff Grönefeld. They therefore represent a continuous watchmaking family history that is exceptionally rare to find anywhere in the world today, even

more so when you search outside of the Swiss watch bastion.

Bart Grönefeld was born and raised in Oldenzaal and inspired by both his father and grandfather. He showed a penchant for technical mechanics from an early age. After the technical school in Oldenzaal and the Horlogemakers Vakschool in Rotterdam, he completed his education at WOSTEP in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. This was followed by a year working as a watchmaker for the exclusive jeweler Asprey in London.

After this, determined to go a level higher, he returned to WOSTEP to follow courses in complicated horology and in 1991 went to work at Audemars Piguet Renaud & Papi in Le Locle, where he headed the workshop for complicated watches such as minute repeaters, tourbillons and grand sonnerie wristwatches.

His younger brother Tim Grönefeld studied at the famous Dutch school in Schoonhoven with a specialization in watchmaking technique. Following in the footsteps of his elder brother, he received his diploma from WOSTEP and during his training there he was approached by APR&P to join their team. After a short

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time he was put in charge as department head for the assembly of tourbillons and other complicated watches. They both spent several highly productive years there, but after a while an inevitable urge to return to their roots brought them back to Oldenzaal.

If they weren’t in Switzerland, Switzerland would come to them, and shortly after their arrival they found a number of firms were more than happy to have them continue working for them from The Netherlands. In this way, behind the scenes they continued their work creating minute repeaters, tourbillons, and various other timepieces for all of the greatest watchmaking houses of Switzerland.

However that was not all. With requests for high-end repair services intense, and with few others able to deal with those kinds of repairs, they created a company just for that purpose. Called QWS (Quality Watch Service) it has a staff of fourteen full-time watchmakers who assemble or repair any watch of any and every kind of complication.

Swiss watch firms are not open about their alliances, and I was asked not to quote names; however a director of a major brand told me

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the secret to Grönefeld's success:

"In dealing with complicated watches, even our top people here have rejection rates that can cause problems for deliveries. Watchmaking is an art and a very difficult one at that. Bart and Tim are among the exceptional watchmakers in that they get perfect results all the time. This means that we can trust them to work for us even from Holland and we never have to worry about the results when the watches arrive to us."

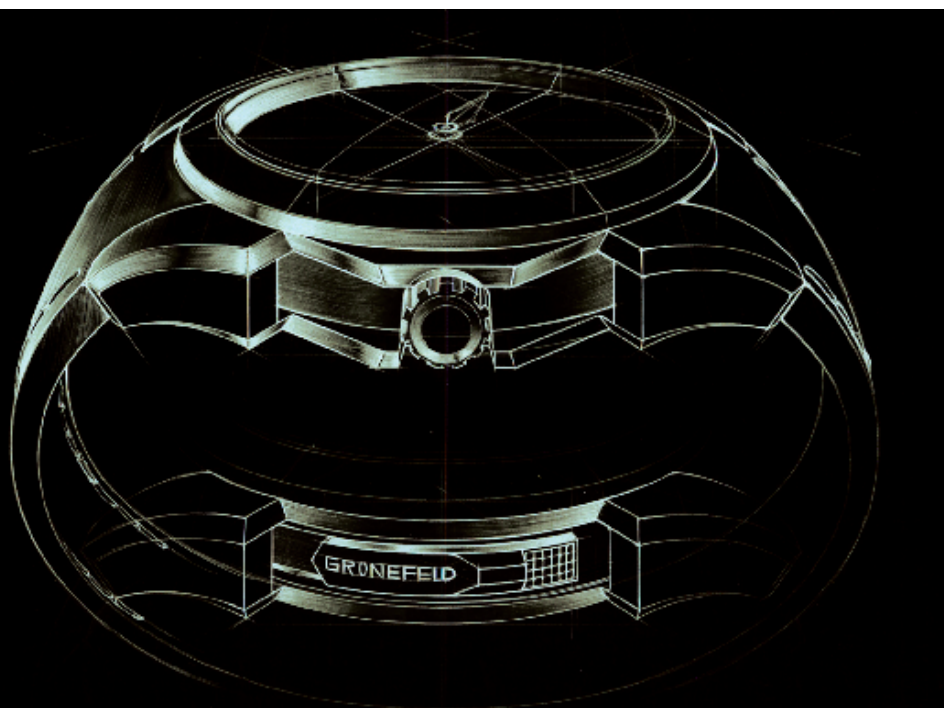
You can well imagine that for talented guys like these, the idea of creating their own brand was just irresistible; they had begun some years back with a step-by-step plan, and this fall they will be making the official release of the GTM-06, which has been in development for more than four years.

"We set out to create a minute repeater wristwatch for men, with a more robust and sporty character than the you usually find," explained Bart Grönefeld.

"Many repeaters are very classical in their orientation, with small lugs and cases, slightly delicate in their appearance and looking more back towards earlier centuries. This one had to be totally modern in feeling and look at home on the wrist in the cockpit of a Ferrari or Koenigsegg sports car. It's a different approach."

The use of the movement as the central attraction of the watch dial, encircled with a chapter ring

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of black Onyx, clearly accentuates this concept.

“The black onyx ring was a real headache for us. It is carved from solid onyx, shaped and polished then hand drilled with microscopic holes for the indexes to be fixated,” he continued. “We left the interior of the dial face naked, as it were, to allow a clear view of all the anglage and finishing of the movement, of course with an open view from the back as well.”

A particularly interesting as-

pect that is quite innovative is the construction of the lugs.

“We have a lot of experience with the sound of repeaters, and there are a lot of variables of course to be considered,” explains Grönefeld. “However, in our view it was a good idea to keep the case from becoming too heavy, as this might affect the sound. So we went to great lengths to create lugs that are large and fitting to the men’s repeater concept, yet have specially carved chambers within them to help the sound from being dampened. It sounds simple but it was difficult to get the perfect technical result.”

With its musical nature, utilizing miniature hammers and gongs to chime the hours quarters and minutes as requested by the user, in combination with a tourbillon escapement, the Grönefeld tourbillon minute repeater makes mechanical demands that go far beyond the majority of watches on offer today. It would not be an exaggeration to say that only a handful of watchmakers in the world, either inside or outside of Switzerland, are able to deal with horological creations comprising this type of extreme complexity. Even more amazing is the fact that this is the first and only grand complication wristwatch of this extreme mechanical intricacy in Holland’s history.

If Johan Grönefeld were alive today, he would be extremely pleased with what his great grandchildren have created on the foundations he laid out for them nearly a century ago. ☺