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The Grönefeld Brothers

The Dutch brothers who are taking the industry by storm.

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

Two of the industry's "good guys," brothers Bartholomeus Albertus Johannes (aka Bart, BG) and Tim Lambertus Joseph (TG) Grönefeld are making waves in the Swiss watch industry, even though they are based in the small town of Oldenzaal, the Netherlands. I caught up with them while they were in Geneva for the 50th anniversary of WOSTEP, the Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Educational Program..

How is business?

TG: Better than ever. Since the start of our independent brand, Grönefeld: The Horological Brothers, business has been growing every year.

This year, we launched our fourth watch, the 1941 Remontoire with an eight-second constant force mechanism. This is the watch that really puts us on the map. Sales and pre-orders have never been so good. We are looking very positive for the future.

How are things different today than five years ago?

BG: On one hand, we see that at every launch of a new watch, we are getting increasingly known by a larger public. This also leads to more orders and revenue. On the other hand, we are spending more and more on marketing. We have always exhibited at Baselworld and for the first time next year, we will be exhibiting at the SIHH as well. We feel very privileged that we may attend the SIHH, especially because we are Dutch and not a Swiss brand.

TG: Five years ago, we were struggling to get known by the collectors. These days, things are going much better since we have won some serious awards, and people are starting to see Grönefeld as a serious independent watch brand.

Is it easier or harder today for an independent brand like yours?

TG: For the existing independent brands like us, it is getting easier since the interest in independent brands is growing. I think it is getting harder these days for new independent brands. Many of them don't have their own movements and only a few, like ourselves, are developing new movements with interesting complications from A to Z.

BG: We began our marketing through social media. To get serious content out, we invested in great photographs and we employed someone to take care of that. The new brands play this same game, but there are so many about nowadays that, I assume, it's getting tougher. To build a brand, you must have been around for some time to get the trust of your retailers and final consumers. Now we are on our fourth serious timepiece, and we see that confidence is growing and people are taking the leap to go into independent horology. I hope the newcomers also do serious watchmaking, so that they will not damage the trust that existing brands, like ours, have built so far.





Clockwise from top left image: Grönefeld Parallax Tourbillon; Bart Grönefeld; Bart and Tim Grönefeld in their workshop; the brothers in their office.

What is the biggest challenge facing your brand?

BG: To have steady cash flow. Especially at the beginning, it was truly an emotional and financial rollercoaster. But now, with more experience, we manage to calculate well in advance and to stay calm. Growing business means more sales but also more investments in future technical developments. After all, our customers expect Grönefeld to survive and to come up with exciting new models every year. This keeps the value of their watches.

TG: To keep the prices for our watches as low as possible. There will always be a lot of handwork involved in what we do. Since we want to keep our quality as high as people now expect; we cannot cut corners there. But we can keep the costs of cases and movement parts low only if we order them in relatively big numbers. This involves huge investments from our side. We are glad that we are a family business and that we can bear these costs ourselves.

How do you like working with your brother?

TG: I like it very much! I don't believe that I could have the same experience with anybody else. Every day we have new challenges and we have to make decisions. With my brother, we may make major decisions in only a couple of minutes or over beers.

My brother is not only my business partner but also my best friend, I don't consider working with him like work. We enjoy life and we do what we like to do. That's one reason that we make great watches.

have learned a lot from our teacher Antoine Simonin in WOSTEP. Now we are creating our own watches with a very strong movement DNA, pure watchmaking and a very high-end level of finishing for a reasonable price.

BG: If I tell you, it's not a secret anymore! I guess working hard, being persistent about quality, making something that blows people's minds and being honest are the keys for success. We still have a way to go but we are

building watches in our workshop. But also new developments and communicating with clients. But the nicest thing of having your own brand is the personal delivery of one of our creations.

TG: I like my job because it is very different every day. I am a watchmaker but we do everything from designing, production and communications. The very best is when we deliver watches to the clients and see that twinkle in their eyes.



BG: We are very complementary for the work we do in the workshop. Tim is an expert in timing and escapements and I'm the guy who takes care of decorating and finishing, and I'm more into the science of special mechanisms. At the office, however, we are less complementary. Here, we do almost all tasks together. We have a responsibility not only to our own families, but also to the families of our staff. Now we have a team of 12 people, including the both of us, and 11 of them are watchmakers! My brother and I are best friends, and together, we keep our family business alive. I'm very fortunate that we can work so well together. We both have someone to talk to personally and business-wise. We can really trust each other.

What is your secret of success?

TG: I guess that we are lucky with our family history and that we have worked in great places like Audemars Piguet Renaud and Papi where we learned a lot about high-end watchmaking. Also, we

confident we are on the right track.

What do you like about watches?

BG: For me, the challenge lies in finding, or reviving, interesting mechanisms, making them reliable and with perfect hand-finishing. Building timepieces with zero compromises.

TG: A mechanical watch is pure mechanical art and can give you a sense of calmness in this crazy and rapidly developing world.

Do you remember your first watch?

TG: My first watch was an Ebel Chronograph with the El Primero movement. I still have it in my collection.

BG: At the age of six or seven I got a simple, hand-wound secondhand watch. I don't recall the brand but it wasn't a top-quality watch. With my first salary, I bought my first quality watch — an Ebel Chronograph with El Primero movement.

What gets you up in the morning? What do you enjoy about your job?

BG: First, I need a coffee. Then

The 1941 Remontoire, the fourth timepiece launched by the Grönfeld brothers, features an eight-second constant force mechanism, and is available in red and white gold, with varying colors for the dial and strap.

Is it important for you to be on time?

BG: I am always on time. I don't want to miss a thing.

What do you like to do when you are not working?

BG: Tim and I share an AC Cobra. It is a very efficient way to empty the brain. I also like spending time with my two daughters. Great seeing them grow up.

What is your brother's biggest strength?

TG: His knowledge about complicated mechanisms and hand-finishing. He always finds solutions to problems or finds techniques to make things better.

BG: He's the master of escapements and timing. He's also very capable at managing our staff and our finances.

What would you not like people to know about your brother?

BG: That he used to be my sister. Just kidding. ★