



YEARS

EL PRIMERO

1969



1969

CHAPTER 1: El Primero, birth of a legend

An object is never born by chance: it represents the fruit of an era. It stems from the customs of a given age, and sometimes anticipates them. The lifespan of objects born of fashionable uses will not outlive the period in which they arose. On the other hand, those created ahead of their time are likely to endure. Such is the case with El Primero. The El Primero movement was launched on January 10th 1969 after a full seven years of gestation. Flash-back....



EL PRIMERO!

Le premier
chronographe
automatique
du monde

El Primero
de
ZENITH

El Primero's development took place within an extremely competitive environment. Several watchmaking companies, including Zenith-Movado, Seiko and the Chronomatic group, composed of the Hamilton-Buren, Breitling, Heuer and Dubois Dépraz brands, were in the running to launch the first self-winding chronograph... "The Zenith chronograph had to be the first automatic chronograph to be released on the market, while remaining keenly aware that there were Japanese and Swiss competing. It all played out within a few months and they were all introduced within almost the same year", recalls Marc Roethlisberger who was part of the Marketing team at the time.

Zenith was therefore the first manufacturer to publicly launch its own automatic chronograph. On January 10th 1969, at a press conference held in Le Locle, it announced the birth of El Primero, with its heart beating still does - at 36,000 vibrations per hour. "Zenith and Movado launched the world's first automatic high-frequency chronograph on January 10th 1969" ran the headline of the press release. The movement was launched under the name of MZM Holding, Mondia Zenith Movado, a consortium created in the late 1960s. Thanks to its high frequency, the El Primero balance could split the second into ten equal parts, allowing the large seconds hand to display 1/10th of a second.

The press release went on to state: "The Zenith S.A. watch factory in Le Locle has just achieved an extraordinary performance by combining two high-precision watches into one. (...) Another accomplishment is that both mechanisms are housed in a smaller volume than a traditional chronograph," wrote the *Express* regional newspaper of January 10th 1969. El Primero is the "first high-frequency automatic chronograph in the world", announced the press release. "Until now, no researcher had ever succeeded in uniting the mechanism of a chronograph with that of an automatic movement within the same watch. Zenith and Movado not only succeeded in this extraordinary feat, but also managed to accommodate the entire automatic chronograph mechanism complete with a date inside a space smaller than that required by a conventional chronograph. The movement thickness is a mere 6.50 mm, a truly incredible performance". Taking the challenge a step further, watchmakers offered two different versions of the calibre from the outset: a "classic" variation with a simple calendar, and another with additional day of the week, month and moon phase functions.

Why was the calibre named 'El Primero'? Serious thought was devoted to the name in the autumn, shortly before the launch. The Zenith management now knew that their Le Locle-based

Manufacture would win the race and would be the first to launch its automatic chronograph. But what name should it be given? After a few brainstorming sessions, the name 'El Primero' was chosen. Meaning 'the first' in Spanish, it is a melodious word with a dynamic intonation that resonates well in all languages and is easily understood. So El Primero it was.

Today, the major challenges facing mankind are essentially focused on safeguarding the planet and the human race. We live in survival mode, whereas the period in which El Primero was launched was one of expansion: we wanted to discover other worlds, to colonise space and the planets. Stanley Kubrick's film *2001 Space Odyssey* was released one year before the launch of El Primero in 1968. The script was co-written by Stanley Kubrick and Arthur C. Clarke, who had already written the novel *The Sentinel* in 1948, the film's source of inspiration. It is in this context that the first high-frequency ultra-thin automatic chronograph was born. People who chose to wear an El Primero were fully part of their era, in this technological world that was sending people to the moon. On July 21st 1969, through their black and white TV screen, they saw Apollo 11 make its lunar landing and Neil Armstrong take his first steps on the moon. And a few months after this feat, in October 1969, they could finally afford a more accessible feat: the El Primero chronograph, when it was made available to the public. We lived in a world governed by mechanics, but 1/10th of a second measurement heralded the beginning of a new world where electronics would prevail. "In the major world markets where competition is increasingly fierce, the merit of this outstanding creation reflects favourably on the Swiss watch industry as a whole", said a Zenith press release on January 10th 1969. El Primero was publicly presented at the Basel Fair in 1969. The Chronomatic group's calibre 11 was presented to the press on March 3rd 1969 and Seiko launched its first automatic chronograph in May 1969, but none surpassed El Primero in the collective consciousness. It is undoubtedly one of the only movements whose name is known throughout the world.

* Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*, published by Fayard in 1979.

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CHAPTER 2: The great secret

To understand the destiny of the El Primero movement in the 1970s implies making the effort of recalling a date 11 years before its birth.



1970

1979

In 1958, Gérard Bauer was appointed President of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry. While his background was not in the watch industry, he had a vision and was convinced that electronics, which began to develop in 1948 in the United States, would play a decisive role in the watchmaking world. He thus succeeded in convincing Swiss watchmakers to join forces and create the Centre Electronique Horloger, the same year that the American brand Bulova launched the Accutron, the first electronic watch equipped with a 360 Hz vibrating tuning fork and acting as a regulating body. The Centre was created on January 20th 1962 with a man from General Electrics at its head: Roger Wellinger.

Quartz research was conducted in the strictest secrecy: the project, called "Beta", was completed in August 1967. In November of the same year, ten «Beta 2» models took part in the Chronometer Competition held by the Neuchâtel Observatory and won the first ten places, ahead of Seiko models. Yet the Japanese company pipped the Swiss to the post with the market launch of the Astron-35 SQ, the first quartz watch, at Christmas 1969, a few months after that of the El Primero chronograph. In 1970, 16 Swiss brands created a consortium of market quartz watches equipped with the Beta 21 movement. Zenith was part of the adventure. The Swiss were quickly joined by the Americans - Motorola, Texas Instruments, and National Semiconductor - but none caught up with the Japanese Seiko and Citizen.

What was the future for El Primero within such a context? The greatest danger for the El Primero was to come from within. On May 28th 1971, the company was sold to Zenith Radio Corporation, originally a radio and then television manufacturer based in Chicago. The holding company MZM (Mondia Zenith Movado) was dissolved and, at the close of the general meeting of June 21st 1972, was named Zenith Time SA. From that moment on, the future of Zenith was entirely in the hands of the American administrators.

During this period, the El Primero movement still appeared in the manufacturer's catalogues, but that does not mean it sold well. It was competing with quartz and automatic mechanisms no longer got top billing. As a result, surprising Zenith watches with the El Primero movement were emerging, featuring oversized cases strangely similar to those equipped with the Beta 21 calibre. The first quartz movements were bulky and had to be housed in a large case, while trying to hide their shape by means of the design. Inspired by an electronic watch case, Zenith found an appropriate response.

After all, man had walked on the moon! How long would it take to launch the first mission to Mars, promised by science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein in his book *Stranger in a Strange Land* published in 1961?

The design of the time challenged the functionalist aesthetics that had prevailed in previous decades. In the 1970s, form no longer necessarily followed function. This explains why these watches, equipped with the El Primero movement, whose size has remained unchanged, have a larger case than the engine they house. Their form is futuristic, spatial. "The durability of physical laws, the immutability of timeless and inalienable achievements that constituted the anchor point of standardisation for modern society is shaken by the new pop culture ideologies", writes Alexandra Midal in her *Introduction à l'histoire d'une discipline*. The 1970s saw the emergence of "Pop Design", encouraged by the rise of new technologies that made it possible to create other possible shapes. We began to see the appearance of round, thick forms, such as the El Primero case bearing reference number AH 781, in particular, closely followed by an El Primero with an unusual design reminiscent of television screens. It is worth recalling that during this period, the role of television in the home was becoming increasingly important: when El Primero was launched, there was only one channel and it broadcast in black and white. In the 1970s, we began watching colour television, which became a skylight opening onto the outside world that we watched from our living room. A new way of conquering.

The year 1974 marked the start of a complete break: Zenith began slowing its production and there were no longer any new El Primero designs in the catalogues of the time. The American administrators no longer believed in the future of mechanical watchmaking, but they had faith in quartz. In 1975, in the midst of the watchmaking crisis, they decided to cease production of mechanical movements and then, in 1976, to dispose of the stocks of tooling and machinery required to manufacture the movement. The El Primero was sold off cheaply and orders were given to scrap everything that could be recovered. Enter the man who saved the El Primero movement, and with it the entire Manufacture Zenith. His name was Charles Vermot.

Charles Vermot was in charge of Workshop 4, and despite the crisis, despite the fact that jobs in the watchmaking sector had been halved, he still believed in the future of mechanical watchmaking. He was so convinced of this that he decided to write to the American management in order to convince them to change their mind. "Without being against progress, I note that the world often goes through various cycles. You are wrong to believe that the automatic mechanical chronograph will die out completely. I am thus convinced that your company will one day benefit from the whims and fashions that the world has always known", he writes. He asked for permission to maintain a small workshop where all the tools necessary for the manufacture of El Primero would be kept. His request remained unanswered.

Against all expectations, and against management orders, the person in charge of Workshop 4 decided to safeguard the tools necessary for the manufacture of El Primero in the greatest secrecy. He was driven by a much greater fear than that of losing his place: he wanted at all costs to avoid the disappearance of unique watchmaking expertise. He was aided and abetted in this task by his elder brother Maurice Vermot, a Zenith employee responsible for the manufacture of presses. The first step was to find a safe place for discreet storage of what Charles Vermot regarded as a treasure: all the presses, cams, operating plans, cutting tools and manufacturing plans necessary for the creation of the El Primero movement. The Manufacture Zenith had 18 buildings, only one of which was not connected to the others, making it the ideal choice.

Because he was violating hierarchical orders, Charles Vermot could under no circumstances be caught red-handed in his rescue operation. He therefore had to pass the tools through a deserted passage at the back of the building, and to act at night, something unthinkable today due to contemporary security systems. At the time, there were in fact many time clocks, but Charles Vermot had the keys to the Manufacture. He was a workshop manager and enjoyed the confidence associated with his responsibilities.

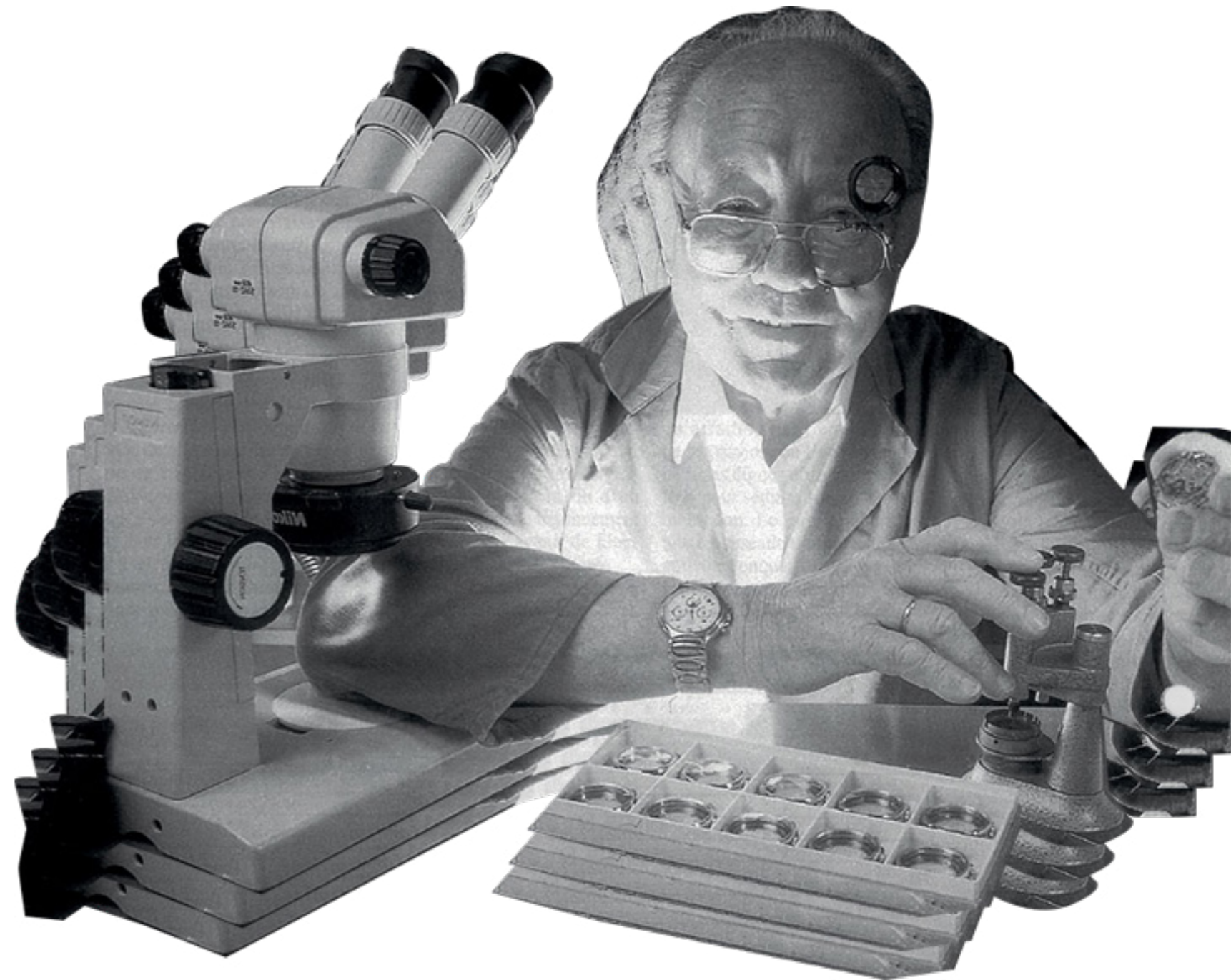
Today, climbing the 52 steps leading to the attic, one can easily imagine the effort made

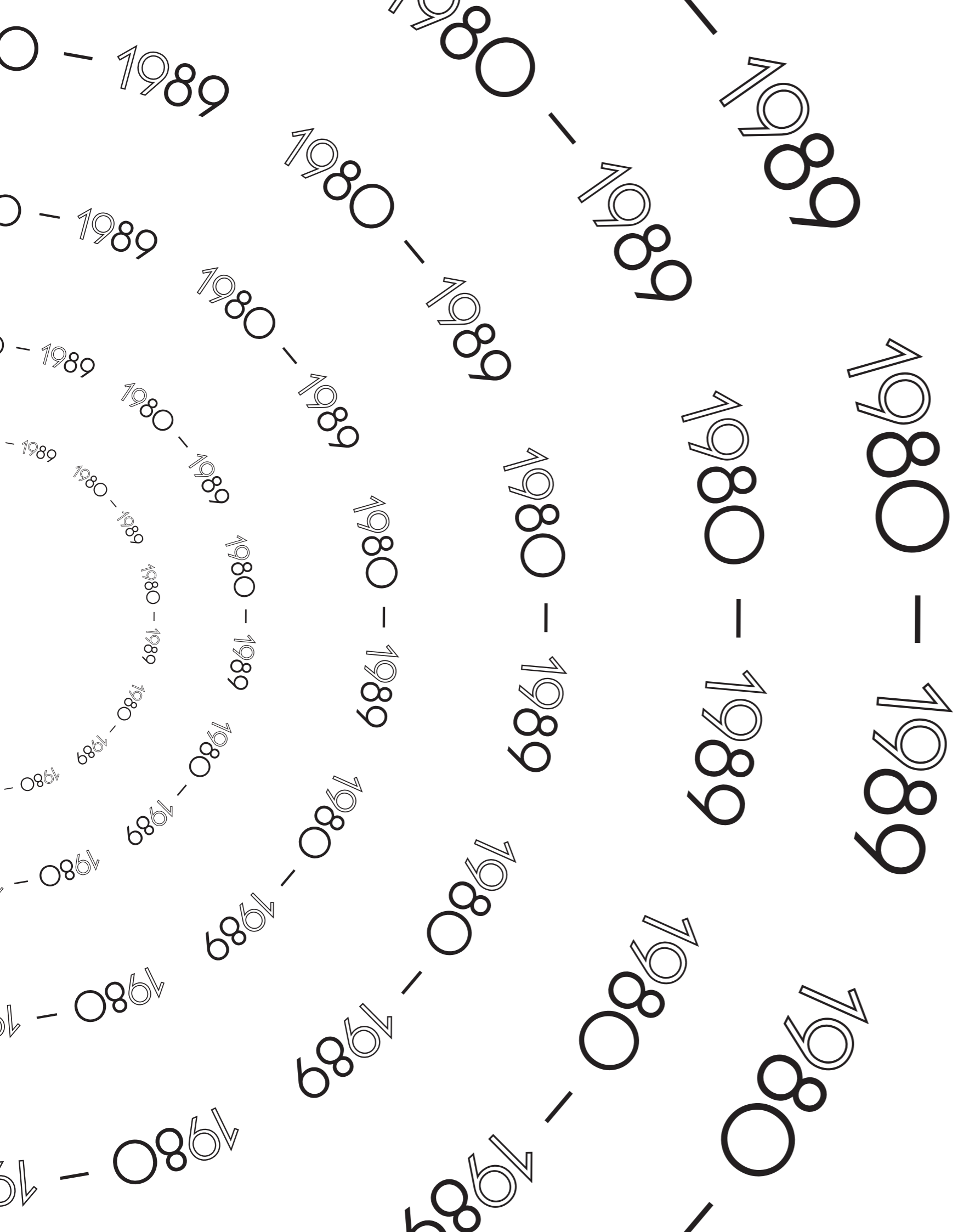
by this man, with the help of his brother, in carrying the precious tools. One can guess his fear of being discovered. But Charles Vermot fought for his ideas, wagering on the future, prepared to mortgage his present: this gave him strength and courage. In all, he managed to save about 150 presses along with many small tools and cams. Without these presses, it would be impossible to produce El Primero. Indeed, the tools had been specially designed for this movement and were part of the trade secrets.

The lifespan of a press is as long as the life of the component: anything from 20 to 30 years, if maintained. A press was worth about 40,000 francs at the time. If this tooling had been thrown away, as the Americans had ordered; if this manufacturing know-how had been lost, the investment necessary to reconstitute all the parts that Charles Vermot had hidden would have amounted to seven million francs. However, no one would have invested such a sum to revive the production of a movement and Zenith would no longer exist to this day.

After storing all the tools, Charles Vermot had this part of the attic walled up, so that no one would discover its secret. Entirely dedicated to his role, overruling considerations of his own safety, he firmly believed in El Primero's future, even if that future were to be written without him.

By 1976, Zenith was no more than the shadow of the factory it once was. Staff were few and far between and watches produced in the workshops were equipped with ETA or Citizen quartz movements. The rare mechanical movements in use were also sourced from ETA. The company was no longer profitable, and the Americans wanted to get rid of it, so in 1978, Zenith Radio Corporation sold Zenith Watches SA to a consortium of three Swiss manufacturers, including Paul Castella, the owner of Dixi, a company specialising in the machine tool and watchmaking sector. Paul Castella was a legendary figure in Le Locle, exceptionally humane and keenly concerned with preserving jobs in this stricken region. Zenith was not yet saved, but it was finally in the hands of a man who knew and loved the industry. His goal was to save a Manufacture that belonged to the Swiss industrial and watchmaking heritage.





CHAPTER 3: Rebirth

The story of El Primero's rebirth is so beautiful that you might think it was invented. It is the stuff of legends, with all the necessary ingredients: adversity, justice, correctness, disobedience, as well as a hero, a happy end and a touch of magic.



In 1976, when Charles Vermot made the decision to hide the tools needed to manufacture the El Primero calibre, this foreman of Workshop 4 showed extraordinary bravery and vision. "I would have been prepared to bet my life on the conviction that one day production of this chronograph would restart," he told the RTS Swiss national television channel in 1991. You become aware of the power of his intuitions his certainties when you visit the famous attic, which has remained in its original state. Most of the parts resting on the shelves are historical calibres. And if the more than 150 presses he had hidden are no longer there, it is simply because one day, after about ten years of oblivion, they were able to emerge from hiding and find their place in broad daylight.

After the takeover by Dixi in 1978, Zenith was saved, but its nature changed: the company also became a movement supplier to certain major brands. Two of them played a decisive role in the renaissance of the Manufacture: Ebel and Rolex. Despite the quartz race and notwithstanding the much-heralded Swatch, Pierre-Alain Blum, Ebel's boss, wanted to have an automatic chronograph with an exemplary movement to offer in his 1981 catalogue. He therefore bought up some of Zenith's stocks of El Primero calibres. But that was not yet enough for Zenith to take the risk of restarting production of the calibre. Who could say if this craze would last?

Enter Rolex. The brand with the crown logo was convinced of the renewed interest in automatic chronographs. It wanted to modernise its Daytona model and equip it with an El Primero

calibre. The latter was a reliable movement, apparently the best automatic chronograph calibre on the market, which perfectly matched the face of the watch with its 3, 6 and 9 o'clock counter configuration. If high frequency was a concern, it could simply be downscaled to 4 Hz, corresponding to customary 28,800 vibrations per hour movements used by Rolex. Talks with Zenith began.

There was a problem, however, since Rolex needed a reliable 'motor' in large quantities, but that was back in 1984, when a press cost about 40,000 Swiss francs and more than 150 francs were needed to manufacture El Primero, which would involve around seven million francs. Zenith could not afford to invest that kind of money. It was then that Charles Vermot's act of resistance was remembered. During the rescue, some of his colleagues had mocked him and his attachment to this movement, to the brand's watchmaking past. The time had come to acknowledge that his move had saved the day and much more besides...

The engineers then turned to the "saviour" and asked him to bring all the tooling back out. The stubborn and discreet hero was overwhelmed: everything he had imagined had suddenly come true. He had labelled all the press, all the tools, he had kept and filed all the dossiers and instructions useful for its restart. "The filing and archiving work carried out by Mr. Vermot enabled us to be operational quickly enough to restart production", says Jean-Pierre Gerber, technical director at the time.

Thanks to Charles Vermot, who received an El Primero chronograph as a reward for his gesture, as well as an invitation to “a nice dinner” and a special trip, the production of the El Primero calibre could resume. A ten-year contract was signed with Rolex. The first movements were delivered in 1988 and the first Daytona watches equipped with a Zenith movement were presented at the Basel Fair that same year.

Moreover, the favourable wind blowing across the Manufacture apparently gave it a desire to take to the open sea. In parallel with the first deliveries for Rolex, Zenith relaunched production to equip its own models and chronographs with its own in-house calibre, thus fully restoring its status as a Manufacture.

Know-how was not enough however; the fact had to be made known and the product had to find buyers. In 1920, Zenith had been living up its name and selling watches all over the world. The crisis had cast it into oblivion... Enabling the Manufacture to regain its place on the Swiss watchmaking scene meant entirely rebuilding the brand image and ensuring its continuity through powerful new designs, preparing it for a return to the spotlight.

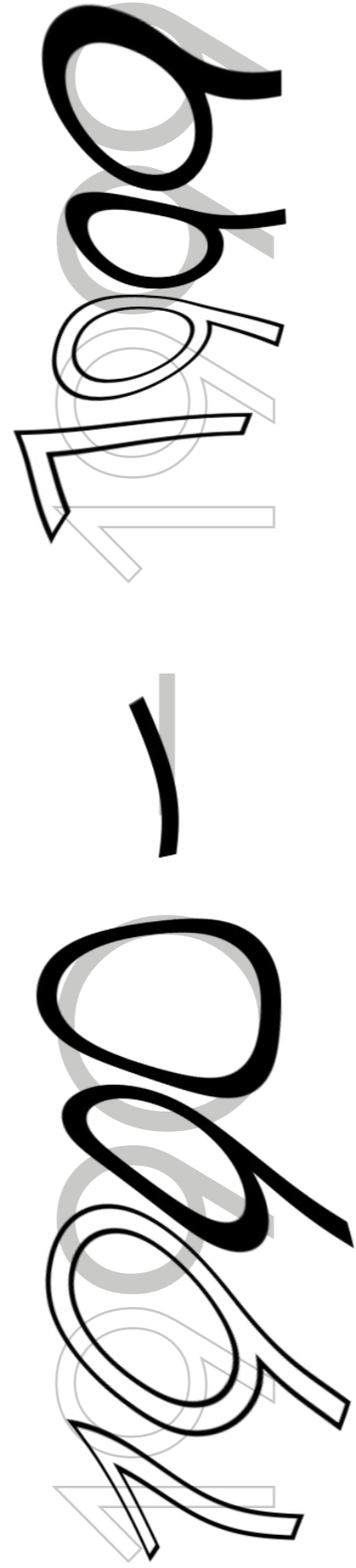
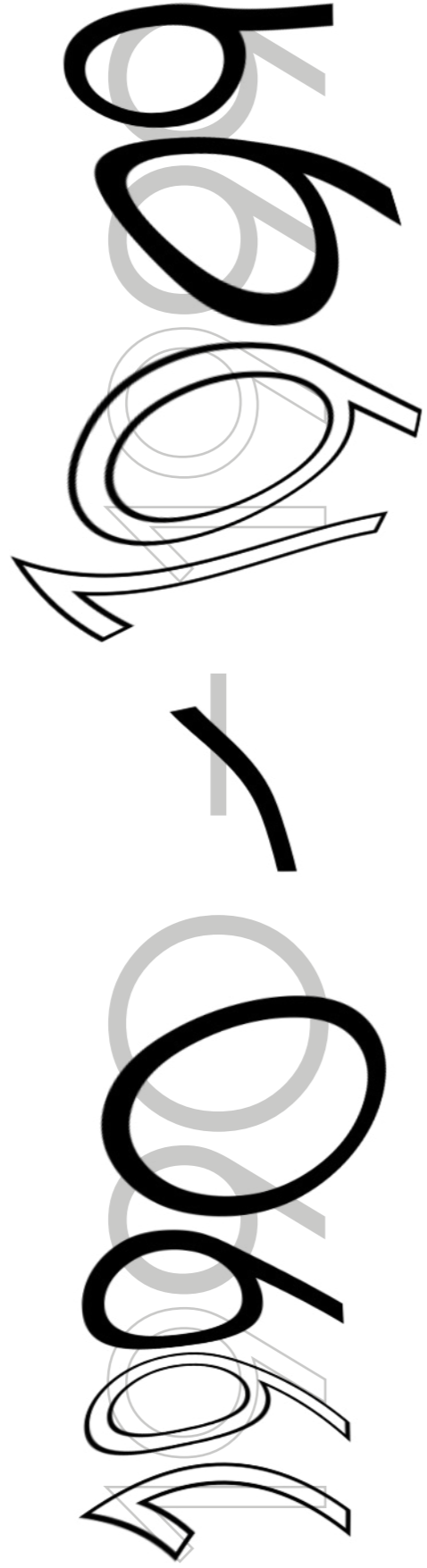
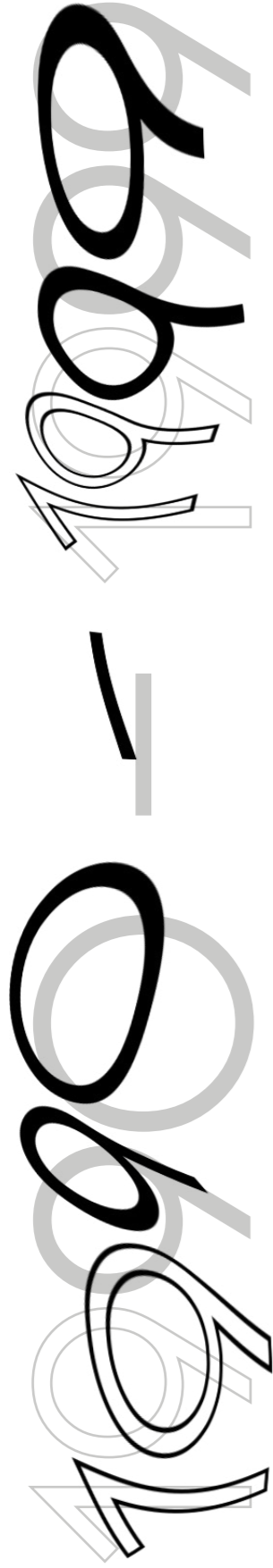


CHRONOGRAPH



Charles Vermot





CHAPTER 4: Revealing the movement

Zenith had relaunched production of its El Primero movement following the contract with Rolex. But it was time for the Manufacture to regain its lustre and fully embrace its know-how by relaunching watches equipped with the famous miraculous movement while bearing the name of Zenith on their dial. This began with new chronograph models to support the company's flagship lines: Academy and Cosmopolitan. For the first time, the Manufacture revealed through the back of its models the calibre that was its pride and joy.



Then came a line entirely dedicated to chronographs: the De Luca line, launched in 1988. Its models were inspired by the successful aesthetic codes of the time, evoking the design of the Daytona, of which the first models equipped with the El Primero had just been released in Basel. With the De Luca, Zenith entered the 1990s.

In 1991, one year after its 125th anniversary, the Manufacture chose to celebrate the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation with two exclusive models equipped with the two variations of the relaunched El Primero: a chronograph-chronometer with a simple date, issued in a 900-piece limited edition; and a chronograph-chronometer with day, month and moon phase, in a 250-piece edition, all housed within a yellow gold case. The catalogue accompanying these two models provided a reminder to anyone who might have forgotten this legendary movement, by summing up its qualities in a few key sentences: "El Primero, the first automatic chronograph movement in the world and the only one in its category to measure short times to the nearest tenth of a second. The legendary El Primero encapsulates all the knowledge of its time". Confident in the quality of its movement, the Manufacture offers a five-year guarantee to purchasers of its timepieces.

The first appearances of the El Primero through a sapphire case-back, which remained fairly timid in the 1980s, were fully highlighted in the 1990s with the top-of-the-range ChronoMaster line, which proudly displayed its flagship movement through the transparent back of these models in the catalogue. Since this time the idea was to highlight watchmaking artistry and not merely industrial know-how, Zenith created a timepiece with a very classic design, inspired by the pocket chronometers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The goal was to create a truly archetypal watch.

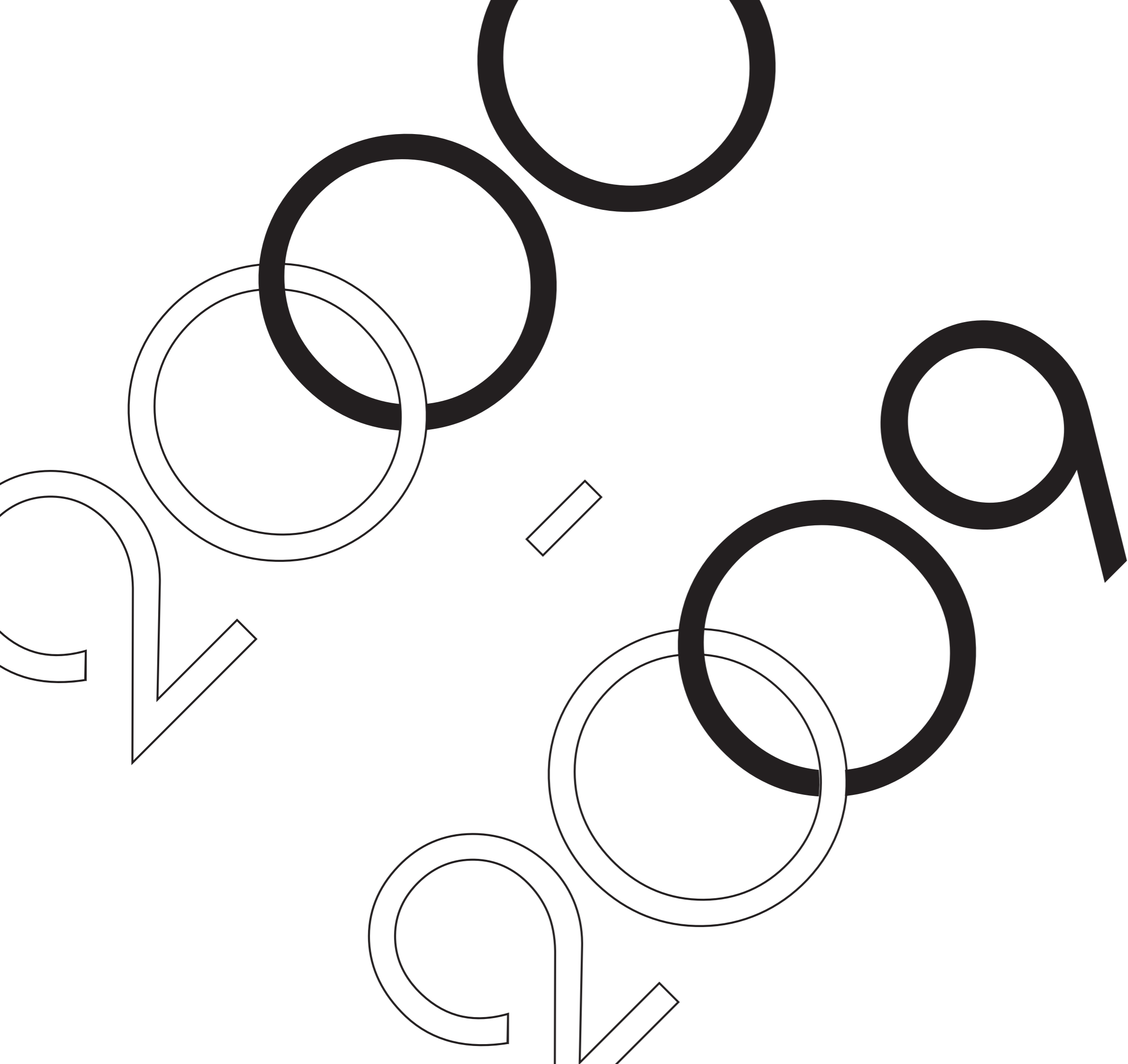
This return to classicism is also explained by the historical context. The 1990s were marked by polarising events. The wars in former Yugoslavia

and the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda were like a step back in time to the darkest years of humanity. On the other hand, the end of Apartheid in South Africa with the arrival in power of Nelson Mandela, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc leading to the end of the Cold War, were windows onto a world in the making that everyone hoped will be better. No one could thus guess what the future held and in a changing, uncertain world, we generally fall back on unchanging values that offer reassurance. Hence the timeless face of these models.

The ChronoMaster served to reposition the El Primero. The 1997 advertisement dedicated to it shows a man's hand resting on the belly of an expectant mother, with these words: "When worn, this Zenith watch will work for a lifetime - or even longer". This powerful advertising message thus strongly implied that this was an object made to be passed on across generations.

The marketing department also had a brilliant idea: engraving on the calibre a number visible through the sapphire back and serving as an identifying mark. Customers acquiring a ChronoMaster received a coupon to be returned to the Manufacture and ensure their names were entered in the ChronoMaster collection register. A means of building customer loyalty and attachment to the brand: Zenith became a "Love Brand" even before the term was invented. The adventure could begin again....

This approach was further strengthened two years later when El Primero - which had been constantly improved yet featured the same functions - was equipped with the new Flyback function specially dedicated to aviation enthusiasts and enriching the Rainbow Flyback models launched in 1997. Like the advertising messages accompanying the ChronoMaster, the Flyback ads focused on transmission: "From now on, you have more than the passion for flying to pass on."



CHAPTER 5: Recognition

When LVMH bought up the company in 1999, a takeover that came into effect in 2001, the history of Zenith and the El Primero movement took a new direction: an upward path that would rise to the stars. At the end of the 1990s, luxury groups understood the importance of developing a watchmaking branch, of wagering on mechanical watchmaking which was enjoying renewed interest from a public of enthusiasts, and of buying up brands with high added value.



Zenith was one of those companies brimming with assets: it was a full-fledged Manufacture with a production facility capable of creating its own movements, a magnificent history, several flagship movements with their own legends, and a phenomenal development potential in the eyes of the new leaders. Several groups were keen to acquire the Manufacture, but LVMH won the day.

LVMH intended to set off to reconquer the world with Zenith, and in particular the American market. However, it found itself in conflict across the Atlantic with one of the previous owners: the Zenith Radio Corporation, which held the rights to the name "Zenith" on American territory. After negotiation, the group obtained the right to use the brand in the United States in 2001, in exchange for which it would pay for rights to the homonymous brand. Zenith could continue taking flight.

By joining this luxury group, which was highly familiar with the rules of marketing, Zenith would have to learn to shine in the spotlight - as befitted its new destiny - and thereby justify the *raison d'être* of its symbol: the star.

Upon settling in at Le Locle, the new management became intensely aware of the gem in its hands and decided to position Zenith in the very top of the range. The word "Impossible" was banished from the Manufacture: Zenith was to shine brightly in the watchmaking firmament, whatever the price to be paid.

Already legendary, the El Primero movement would now become desirable - and ever more precious. It was under the aegis of the LVMH group that El Primero welcomed ever-more sophisticated horological complications: in 2004, the movement adopted a tourbillon for a model named Grande ChronoMaster XXT Tourbillon, resulting from three and a half years of research and development. This was the first high-frequency tourbillon on the market. It was followed by a perpetual calendar, the Grande ChronoMaster XXT Perpetual Calendar; and in 2005 by a minute repeater, the Class Traveler, an exercise that required the filing of 30 patents. Finally, in 2007, Zenith combined the tourbillon and the perpetual calendar within the same timepiece belong-

ing to the Academy line. El Primero clearly had no limits.

From 2003 onwards, the size of the calibre changed slightly and became increasingly highlighted. After being revealed through the sapphire crystal case-back, the heart of the EL Primero would appear through the front, in direct communication with its owner, through a purpose-built dial opening. Every time the owner of an El Primero watch looked at the time, he would now see the heart of his watch beating at 36,000 vibrations. The model was named ChronoMaster Open and lived up to its name. The movement was becoming a star in its own right.

A feminine version was released in 2004. It was called the Star Open and the opening was heart-shaped. Zenith had clearly understood that the women of the 2000s wanted a timepiece that could express who they are and not what watchmakers imagine them to be. The time had come for them to buy their own watches, a model that displays their purchasing power and power. Just as they wore boyfriend jeans, they wanted a watch that didn't reduce them to reading the time on a pink mother-of-pearl dial lined with a bezel set with diamonds. They wanted to shine differently. Zenith gave them the opportunity to do so in 2005 with the launch of a tourbillon model specifically designed for them: Starissime.

Zenith perfectly understood - or at least intuitively sensed - the complexity of the new century that was dawning. The term globalisation was coined by the Davos Forum in 1993, took on its full meaning at the beginning of the 21st century. We had entered an era of superlatives and self-exposure, driven by the emergence of what would become known as "social media". Facebook was created in February 2004. It did not yet have the power it would gain in the next decade, but one could nevertheless feel the beginnings of its success and its impact on individuals and communities around the world. Users could share what they like as a "tribe", and it so happens that what they like is everything that is out of the everyday and propels them out of their ordinary lives. Zenith, the survivor, the brand that has constantly reinvented itself, is truly "the stuff of dreams"*

*William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1610-1611.

2010



2010

CHAPTER 6: Towards absolute precision

During this decade that is drawing to a close, we are witnessing an accumulation of contradictory phenomena that, for the most part, escape us. And when it comes to understanding the notion of the passage of time, we are forced to make constant adjustments. Never before have we so intensely crammed our time with so many tasks and distractions. And paradoxically, never has the “present” so monopolised both thoughts and conversations. A look at the growing number of followers of the writer Eckart Tolle, author of the book *The Power of Now*, is enough to grasp the extent to which this present that escapes us is one of the essential elements of our quest for happiness. Our contemporaries swing between these two extremes, accepting in spite of themselves the fact of living in a world governed by a form of discrepancy that encourages continuous over-adaptation.

Faced with this multi-speed vision of time, Zenith sought to grasp this notion of immediacy, offering its customers the opportunity to touch it with their eyes, to literally “see” the present. El Primero was the first automatic movement capable of measuring tenths of a second. With its seconds hand performing a full spin of the dial in ten seconds, the El Primero Striking 10th, launched in 2010, is able to display tenths of a second.

This timepiece was created in a complex era in which we focus on ourselves, assembling into micro-tribes to which we decide whether or not to belong, tribes that sometimes even become communities. Instagram, which was launched the same year as the Striking 10th in 2010, has strongly contributed to this phenomenon. This new social media has encouraged immediate reactions: no more need for speech, it only takes a fraction of a second to indicate your appreciation thanks to a “like”. The El Primero Striking 10th is an object that sums up this decade of immediacy in which certain people struggle to find meaning.

The Manufacture could have stopped there in its quest for extreme precision if its faith in its know-how had not pushed it to go beyond its own limits. In 2017, Zenith launched the Defy El Primero 21, which was able to measure and display a mechanical value that was difficult to reach: one hundredth of a second. This is made possible by an ‘engine’ oscillating at 50 Hz, ten times faster than its legendary predecessor. The heart of the movement beats at a dazzling speed of 360,000 vibrations per hour and the central chronograph hand makes a complete turn of the dial in one second – a feat that has ushered the company into the world of ultra-precision.

That same year, Zenith presented the Defy Lab, equipped with a revolutionary new monobloc oscillator made of monocrystalline silicon. The latter replaces the balance-spring used in mechanical watchmaking since its invention in 1675 by the Dutch scientist Christiaan Huygens. With the Defy Lab, which beats at the extremely high frequency of 18 Hz, Zenith reaped the benefits of years of studies done by the research and deve-

lopment division of the LVMH group. A know-how that has logically been transferred to the brand with the guiding star, known to hold the record achievement of 2,333 chronometry prizes.

Zenith’s future will naturally be part of this line of technological innovations that constantly push the limits of feasibility and of extreme precision. Indeed, why not imagine that one day the El Primero will display one thousandths of a second?

But for now, back to the present and this legendary movement which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Fifty years old, the age of ‘unreasonableness’, when one can reinvent oneself to take on new challenges. Nothing is impossible when you are 50 years young. To celebrate El Primero’s half-century, the basic movement has been reworked and improved to facilitate its assembly. It naturally maintains all its aesthetic and technical characteristics: it is still an integrated high-frequency movement, the date indication is kept, as are the lateral clutch and column wheel. It comprises a few less components than the original model and the Manufacture has added certain elements it deemed important, notably including the stop-seconds device and a greater power reserve, which was previously to 50 hours due to the high frequency which requires a lot of energy. Its construction enables a modular approach: it will be able to beat tenths of a second while displaying it at certain times and at others not, as well as offering the flyback function.

Those who work on this movement on a daily basis, who know its slightest subtleties, speak of it as an object with a soul. In the words of one watchmaker from the Manufacture: “The El Primero bears its name well because it is the first in everything: the first to be so precise, to beat at 36,000 vibrations. You feel a sense of pride in working on this movement. It is so accomplished! It has been saved, put back into production and constantly improved. Many complications have been added, as it has evolved and grown, while remaining as noble as ever. It is also beautiful! This movement is historical: Zenith is El Primero and El Primero is Zenith.”



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YEARS

EL PRIMERO