

CLASSIC DRIVER

40 years of watches by Porsche Design

Lead

To celebrate Porsche Design's 40th anniversary, horological expert Gisbert L. Brunner looks back on a history of memorable watches that were 'different', but always contemporary: the famous, mostly black chronographs from the pen of F.A. Porsche himself.

Surprisingly, Ferdinand A. Porsche ('F.A. '), the man considered one of design's greatest, and the father of the 911, would never have considered driving a black car. "You see the tiniest bit of lint on black paint," he said.

"Black is not a colour, but a 'condition', a 'state of being'." None of which stopped the 38-year-old from surprising the market with an all-black wristwatch in 1973.



The decision to establish the Porsche Design Studio in 1972, in the small Austrian town of Zell am See, and to venture into the tricky world of watchmaking was explained by F.A. with a succinct statement: "I asked myself the simple question, can watches be made differently?" At the time, the watchmaking industry was undergoing a phase of severe upheaval and was heading for a potential crisis.

Quartz watches with digital displays were changing the face of the Swiss watchmaking world. "I wanted to create a watch that matched a car. Black like the speedometer and the rev-counter - because that would be the most legible." This was how the first, by now legendary, Porsche Design Chronograph was born.

The watch's looks were based on a piece of logical reasoning by F.A. Porsche: "One shouldn't hide something when one doesn't understand its full capability. One must address the function of each individual object and grow with it." The resulting look, with its completely black metal surface, would have a huge influence on many generations of watch stylists. The grand old man of industrial design was never much interested in versatile (ultimately short-lived) electronics in watchmaking. "Wristwatches represent a set of values not equalled by quartz crystals." Hence the decision to make the first chronograph with an automatic Valjoux 7750 movement, which premiered in 1973.





Watches, of course, are not just designed, but must be manufactured. It was not an easy undertaking. Faced with something completely different, the conservative Swiss watchmaking industry was sceptical. Even the management of the maker Orfina had its doubts. The sensitive question of production volumes resulted in a puzzled shrug of the shoulders. But, somehow, the project got under way and the resulting success bore fruit on both sides. In the course of time, more than 50,000 design-oriented watch fans chose a timepiece that would become a true classic, inspiring many copies. The significant black look did present a weakness, though: sharp edges exposed to wear started to lose their coating.

Which made Porsche ponder... then he had an idea. This idea carried him to IWC Schaffhausen in 1978, where his passion for trying to achieve the impossible was shared. The cooperation first resulted in a 'compass watch', which had already been planned in 1976, and which combined two precision measuring instruments. "Not everybody needs a compass every day. But some might need it from time to time. But then it would be vital!" is how F.A. Porsche saw it.





But that was not enough. “This was coming closer to my ideal as a designer: design as function and technology. Or, form and material need to follow function.” For this reason, the distinctive double-decker case was made of reinforced/hardened light alloy, which was also antimagnetic due to the compass. “With our combined abilities we were able to create something new out of an old theme.” This was also the case with the chronograph made in titanium, a revolutionary material that F.A. Porsche championed in watchmaking. “Things exist in our imagination before they have actually been created, because the technical developments lag behind.”

Together with IWC, F.A. Porsche created what seemed nearly impossible: relentlessly functional cases made from light, tough and non-allergenic titanium. For the designer it was the ideal material for 'personable understatement'. In 1991 the compass watch received a titanium case and was ultimately ordered by the German Navy. They needed a specific professional instrument for their mine clearance divers, waterproof up to 200 bar (a depth of 2000 metres). The underwater Porsche with the name 'Ocean 2000' was the result – a massive success for the company. The 'Ultra Sportivo' and 'Sportivo 02' followed, both exemplifying F.A. Porsche's creed that there should be watches “able to be worn unobtrusively”.





The split with IWC happened in 1995. In the autumn of that year, the Porsche family had acquired the Eterna brand. When the agreement with the Schaffhausen company ended in March 1998, 'Porsche Design made by IWC' was a thing of the past. It was now 'Porsche Design manufactured by Eterna'. For legal reasons, the continuation of the latest model range was no longer possible... which is why the classic, 'Original' model from 1973 made a comeback, in a limited run of 1998 pieces and formed from stainless steel with a matt-black chrome coating. The movement was the tested and proven Eta 7750. After the swiftly sold-out black 'Original', there were plain stainless steel and titanium versions. F.A. Porsche had not changed the design. "A formally coherent product needs neither decoration nor enhancement. It should be enhanced simply by the purity of its shape. The form should live through the minimum, intelligibly presented and should not distract from the product and its function," he said.

More or less everything that left the Eterna works adhered to these lofty principles of design. Porsche Design's influence was felt in the technically complex 'Indicator' or the 'Flat Six' line, but Ferdinand A. Porsche's hallmark signature was missing. The reason - the age and health of 'the master', a man born on 11 December 1935.



The Porsche family and Eterna separated in 2011. But this had no consequence for the agreement with Porsche Design, hence Eterna's presentation at the 2012 Baselworld exhibition of 40 years of F.A. Porsche design. The anniversary in honour of the great man will showcase three of his greatest watch designs in their original configurations: the black chronograph P'6510, the compass watch P'6520 and the iconic titanium chronograph P'6530.

"What sparks an enthusiasm for watches?" F.A. asked in the 1980s. "Is it its function as a measuring instrument? Or its appearance... in other words, its design?" Answering the question himself, he said: "With due diligence by a talented, 'artisan' designer, both aspects can be addressed."

Photos: Porsche Design

Gallery

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