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RICHEMONT

IWC'S DA VINCI THROUGH THE EUROPA STAR ARCHIVE

GUEST COLUMN

Español

By Stephen Foskett / Grail Watch

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A watch enthusiast and tech professional based in the US, Stephen Foskett has been one of our most avid readers since we've started publicising our archives. On his site Grail Watch, he has written remarkable articles making use of Europa Star's past issues to resuscitate forgotten names or explore more mainstream models. In this special feature, he dives into our archives to uncover the history of IWC's Da Vinci, a quartz pioneer turned mechanical with time. Enjoy the ride and the read!



Wristwatch enthusiasts like me might not have been reading Europa Star in the past, as it was essentially a trade magazine, but their online

archive clearly shows that we have missed out. Considering that history (“provenance” as they say) is one of the strongest selling points for today’s watches, it strikes me that the folklore of our industry has sometimes overshadowed the truth, and this can be remedied by looking back at the coverage of the past.

This is the reason that I joined the Europa Star Club and why I spend hours browsing, searching, and discovering in their archives. I will demonstrate the value of the archives by investigating the history of an important model, IWC’s Da Vinci.

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What is the Europa Star archive?

Before we begin, we should consider what is (and is not) contained in the archive. As of today, the archive contains almost every issue of two different publications: The Eastern Jeweller and Watchmaker, from 1950 through 1995; Europa Star, from late 1959 through today.

The Eastern Jeweller and Watchmaker was aimed at professionals in East Asia, South Asia, and Australia. In the 1950s it contained a great deal of introductory content, including basic watchmaking tutorials, as well as local news and information about the watch and jewellery trade. It also included special sections on ladies fashion, jewellery trends and regional event coverage. Some early issues include articles in Hindi, Japanese, Chinese, and Thai, but most of the articles are in English throughout its run.

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“EJW” became known as the Asian edition of Europa Star in 1966, along with Orafrica, and other localized editions which are not yet included in the archive. I will continue to refer to the Asian edition as “EJW” in this article for consistency. For the most part, the content in EJW is the same as that in the European edition of Europa Star, with a few important differences.

For the first two decades, most content in Europa Star is in French, with English and German translations in later pages. This mix changes in the late 1970s, with an increase in English content. There is a great deal more coverage of the French watch industry in Europa Star, in the 1970s and 1980s, and most of this is written in French with no translation provided. The mix of advertisements is quite different right through the run of EJW, and this can be a boon for those of us looking into “export” brands.

In each decade, the focus of Europa Star shifts subtly, from facilitating international trade in the 1950s and 1960s to promoting the entire watch industry in recent decades. It was not traditionally written for “people like me,” the customers of the watch industry, but this has changed in recent years. Given the democratizing influence of the Internet, especially in the case of this online Club, the coverage has expanded, as readers have discovered the publication. Regardless of the time period in question, there is much to learn from the archives.

Although the magazine is not always comprehensive, it did cover most important developments in horology over the last 70 years: the rise of electric and tuning fork watches, the explosion of quartz and the changes followed, the rebirth of the industry with a focus on complicated and in-house mechanical movements, and the rise of luxury groups. It is interesting to see the contemporary reaction to these events, and to watch as the brands and models change over time. Finding the first mention of a watch in Europa Star is proof not just that it existed but of the conditions that surrounded its creation.

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The pages found in the Europa Star Archive are watermarked up until recent issues, and this can make it challenging to read in places. But users can purchase credits toward clean reprints if needed. This is especially helpful when one locates a particularly interesting illustration or photograph. These reprints are provided automatically on request and can be downloaded through a web portal in jpeg and pdf format.

Searching the archive

The search function of the Club allows one to search the entire archive for keywords and sort or limit results by year. This is extremely useful when researching the history of a particular model of watch, since it shows when a model or version was first covered.

When searching the archives, native English speakers like myself will probably look for the English versions in EJW since they are easier to read. But it helps to have some understanding of French and German, or to be familiar with Google Translate. It is also important to consider the spelling of important terms in English, French, and German. Even the Basel Fair can be hard to locate without knowing that it was written “Basle” in the middle of the century and is “Bâle” in French!

The search results are displayed with a text excerpt and image of the page in question for ease of use. This is extremely helpful to “weed out” duplicate results such as advertisements or less useful ones. It also helps uncover the corresponding page in English in the EJW edition.

A click brings up two facing pages of the magazine in a HTML5 browsable format. I find that a quick glance back and forward to adjacent pages provides context for these results. It also leads to serendipitous discovery and hours “going down the rabbit hole” into other topics! This is especially true after a click on the “play” button, which passively pages through the issue.

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Example: uncovering the history of the IWC Da Vinci

I will now walk the reader through my own process for research using an interesting example, the Da Vinci model from IWC. This name has appeared on important models for over half a century, marking the progress of IWC and the industry through many important transitions. But it is not as well-documented as popular models from Rolex or Omega, and the quartz version is something of a mystery. So let's start here.

I will begin by logging in to the Club and verifying my account using my email address on record. Then I will click “Search the Archive” and enter “Da Vinci” in the Search Box. For now, I will not limit my search at all and will simply use a reverse chronological sort to locate the earliest appearance.

We see Leonardo da Vinci himself mentioned a few times in the 1950s and 1960s, but not relating to IWC. A 1958 article about Benvenuto Cellini is actually quite interesting, given the resonance of that name to modern watches, but I shall bookmark that for future reading. Also interesting is the Nivada Da Vinci model of 1968, with a novel “square round” case. I became fond of this brand after purchasing a Nivada Antarctic watch at auction. Another bookmark!

We locate the original IWC Da Vinci in coverage of the 1971 “Foire de Bâle.” Paging through issue 68 of Europa Star to get some context, we see that this Da Vinci was used to illustrate the range of electric and electronic watches shown at the Fair. But this same piece notes that these newfangled watches “represent as yet only a tiny fraction of the Swiss watch industry’s exports.”

“We locate the original IWC Da Vinci in coverage of the 1971 Basel Fair.”

I had heard that the Da Vinci was IWC’s first quartz model, but this would be a year too late. IWC today claims that the Da Vinci appeared in 1969, but this must refer to internal development since it would be a year too early. It is well-documented that IWC, along with over a dozen other Swiss companies, introduced the Beta 21 quartz movement on April 10, 1970 at the Basel Fair. This would be the earliest date that the Da Vinci could have appeared in public. Time to look deeper.

There is no other mention of the Da Vinci from IWC until the automatic model of 1985, so we are presented by a puzzle. Perhaps the Da Vinci name simply wasn't included when Europa Star covered the 1970 Fair, or perhaps it wasn't the first quartz watch from IWC after all. A quick search for "International Watch Co" in 1970 shows that indeed, IWC's Beta 21 watch is left without a name on the dial other than "quartz electronic" and has a large round case entirely unlike the Da Vinci pictured in 1971. One cannot say for certain that the hexagonal Da Vinci model was not introduced in 1970 but it certainly was not covered by Europa Star.

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What can we say about the Da Vinci pictured in 1971 then? It featured a hexagonal tonneau case with an integrated bracelet that looked quite modern for the time. Indeed, the overall shape is reminiscent of something from the mind of Gérald Genta, and this might not be far from the truth. Indeed, a retrospective published in 2000 credited Genta

with the Da Vinci. I researched other IWC models from the late 1968s and early 1970s and was surprised to find a match. Issue 120 in 1970 features an IWC automatic watch with the same case and dial as the 1971 quartz model. The commentary in that issue notes that this is a large watch with a “perfect combination of case and bracelet.”

The mystery deepens. What we know is that IWC produced two interesting models in 1970, neither using the Da Vinci name: an automatic watch with a hexagonal tonneau case, and an early Beta 21 watch with a large round case. The Da Vinci seen in 1971 combined these elements. Research outside the archive shows that the Da Vinci case, while quite thick, might not have been big enough to hold the first Beta 21 movements. IWC likely waited for the thinner second-generation movement, which fit in an existing case.

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Although the Da Vinci name is not used again in Europa Star until the seminal 1985 model, we do see the expected evolution of the company's quartz models. The case was changed by 1974, with rounded edges and a wider center bracelet link, and this was again used for both automatic and

quartz models. This model is noted as “thin” which means it must have used a later quartz movement, as the Beta series was always quite thick. IWC would bring the Da Vinci into the Genta-inspired SL line of steel sports watches in the second half of the decade, but this is missing from Europa Star.

The second major IWC Da Vinci model appears in 1985. IWC revived the name on one of the most complicated watches produced to date in an effort to leverage mechanical models as a demonstration of the value of Swiss watchmaking. This new Da Vinci was featured in a wonderful article in issue 152 alongside the titanium Porsche Design Chronograph and Genta's Ingenieur SL Quartz. The article begins with a photo of Günter Blümlein, the man most responsible for leading the company out of the quartz crisis. It also features a number of the complicated pocket watches from which this Da Vinci model drew inspiration.

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Once again it is beneficial to leave the search and open the entirety of Europa Star issue 152 to see the context for this story. An editorial by Valentin Philibert talks of the oil crisis, trouble for Omega, the purchase of Heuer by TAG, and the construction of a quartz movement factory in India by France-Ebauches. Given these dark clouds, it is quite remarkable indeed that Blümlein and IWC would produce a complicated mechanical watch like the Da Vinci. But the gambit worked, and the Da Vinci would be seen as a mechanical shining star, showing the way out of the darkness of the quartz crisis. As noted by Europa Star's Philibert, “the future does not only belong to computers.”

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A remarkable advertisement for the model in issue 159 of 1986 (see above) calls attention to the fact that a watchmaker in the year 2200 will be required to change the year indication. It includes a photo of the tiny vial containing the new wheel needed to update the perpetual calendar display. And it includes an amusing note for that watchmaker to “marvel at the ingenuity of the old masters.”

“A remarkable advertisement for the model in issue 159 of 1986 calls attention to the fact that a watchmaker in the year 2200 will be required to change the year indication.”

Also in that issue is a piece on the “Black Da Vinci” (see above). This watch was produced in ceramic, another element that would lead to the world of haute horology: exotic materials. The combination of mechanical

complications and exotic or precious materials would be the recipe for the next decades of development for the Swiss watch industry.

1988 saw a surprising about-face for the Da Vinci model, as the “Kleine Da Vinci” is revealed. This is a quartz model for ladies, measuring just 24 mm across and leveraging the Jaeger-LeCoultre “Mechaquartz” Cal. 630 chronograph movement. This model is shown in issues 168 across from the Jaeger-LeCoultre’s own Odysseus. It is covered in more detail in issue 170 alongside the similar Portofino and Engineer chronograph models for ladies.

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A special piece in 1991's issue 189 presents the "turbulent history" and "promising present" of IWC, including special mention of complicated models like the Da Vinci and the 1989 "Grande Complication." The following year we learn of a face lift to the Da Vinci model. Paging through issue 193, we discover that the industry has changed radically since its 1985 introduction, with similar models from Breguet and Daniel Roth on facing pages. The industry had truly changed in just a few short years.

The next major advance came on the 10th anniversary of the Da Vinci perpetual calendar. A split seconds feature was added to the existing chronograph mechanism, as seen in Europa Star issue 210 from 1995 (see above). By this time, the pages of the magazine included tourbillons, minute repeaters, and other novel complications, and the impressive Da Vinci was somewhat diminished, despite having ten hands on four dials.

An IWC advertisement from issue 213 talks of the “renaissance of the complicated mechanical watch” and this was certainly true. Articles in this issue show the new Jaeger-LeCoultre Master series, mechanical models from Chopard, and “Geneva’s gifted young watchmaker,” Franck Muller. To put this into context, I thoroughly enjoyed a 1997 article on the “internal competition” created by Blümlein inside the restructured LMH group.

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The third major development in the Da Vinci line appears in issue 282 in 2007. The new Da Vinci is a line of watches, including a perpetual calendar chronograph, a non-chronograph perpetual calendar, and a three-handed model with date. This is also only the second time Kurt Klaus is mentioned in Europa Star, despite being the original designer of the model.

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More important is the new Da Vinci case, a tonneau with an almost-hexagonal shape reminiscent of the quartz original. It is strange that this resemblance is overlooked. In fact, the article refers to the “original Da Vinci” of 1985, ignoring the quartz model entirely. Note that there are two different tonneau cases: a highly complex one with traditional lugs and a simpler one with center attachment. The former is used for the complicated perpetual calendar models, while the latter is reserved for the simple automatic.

The next year, in issue 288, we get a look at the time-and-calendar Da Vinci Automatic. This one looks almost identical to the original quartz model from issue 68, 37 years earlier. The circle is complete, and we now know all about the first three stages of development IWC Da Vinci, thanks to the Europa Star archive. The Da Vinci line was again refreshed in 2017, this time returning to the round look of the 1985 model, but this is not covered in Europa Star.

Summary

Keeping in mind the editorial focus of the magazine, and the fact that it was intended to cover the industry rather than to be a yearbook of watches, it is nevertheless an important resource. It is especially useful as a primary source for information about the watch and jewellery industry and its products, since it provides contemporary accounts as well as photos and some technical information.

We can use this to fact-check the folklore that is handed down in horological sources and passed by the manufacturers themselves. Although we cannot definitively disprove claims

like the 1969 release of the Da Vinci or the use of a hexagonal case in the earliest models, we can show alternatives. And this in itself is illuminating.

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