



# From the Archives

## OUR FIRST LOOK AT THE SWATCH

BY STEPHEN FOSKETT / GRAIL WATCH

It has often been said that the Swatch saved the Swiss watch industry, and March 1, 2023 marks 40 years since its introduction. Although this view is mostly accurate, a look at the contemporary coverage in the *Europa Star* archives reveals some interesting details about the initial reaction and lasting legacy of this affordable Swiss watch. It received surprisingly little coverage for the first few years of its life, but the Swatch was recognized even then as a technical and marketing milestone.

**T**he Swatch was born from adversity, with the Swiss economy reeling as an ever-more expensive franc priced the entire nation out of mass-produced goods. Electronic quartz watch movements were taking hold at the end of the 1970s, with ETA introducing Europe's first mass-produced quartz movement in 1979. But it was another product introduced that year that presaged the Swatch: The ultra-thin Delirium. This prestigious and rare watch featured a movement integrated into the case back, and Ebauches SA head Ernst Thomke recognized that this radical design could be applied to a mass-produced watch as well. Engineer Elmar Mock was investigating plastic insulators for electronics and realized that the same injection molding technology could be used to create a watch case. Mock, along with colleague Jacques Müller, set down a sketch that would become the Swatch. The design was exactly what Thomke was looking for, and a small group quickly developed the design and, critically, automated mass production for this radical new watch.

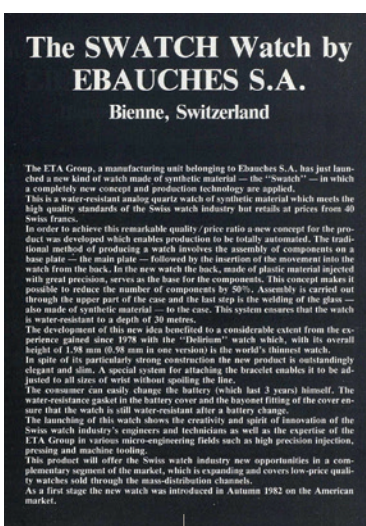
The very earliest mention of the Swatch came in Trade Bulletin, issue 955, in July of 1982. A simple list of newly-registered brand names includes "Swatch," registered by ETA S.A. of Grenchen. By this point, Ebauches SA was preparing to test-launch the affordable plastic watch in Texas in the fall. Though it was rejected by most traditional watch retailers, the Swatch was affordable enough that Ebauches SA could launch it through mass-market channels. This is one reason it was launched with a new brand rather than leveraging one of the many existing Swiss names.

A more thorough report appeared in the final 1982 edition of *Europa Star* for both Europe and Asia, as well as the Trade Bulletin. It is a fairly technical description of the watch, noting the similarity of the integrated movement to the Delirium

and detailing the novel technology used to construct the watch. It also includes a black and white photograph showing a few of the original Swatch styles.

Test-market advertising emphasized the wide range of styles as well as the rugged nature of the Swatch. But Ebauches SA was delighted when early adopters purchased a second watch in a different color, and even a third. Franz Sprecher seized on this opportunity, regularly introducing new colors and styles and encouraging Swatch collectors. This remains the foundation of Swatch marketing 40 years later.

The Swatch was officially introduced by Ernst Thomke at a press conference on March 1, 1983. Although he emphasized Sprecher's "second watch" idea, contemporary coverage was more focused on competition from Europe and Japan. Mondaine's M-Watch and Fortis' ID-Watch gave shoppers at retailers Migros and Inter



This article, published in November 1982, was the first in *Europa Star* to detail the radical new Swatch.



## These Swatches that throw the watch market into confusion

Spring 1983 was marked by a profound upheaval of the watch industry. It could even turn out to have been a real revolution, a fact that may to a certain extent surprise its protagonists: to wit, the factory of Ebauches S.A.

The event we are alluding to is the release of the "Swatch" which combines the low price obtained by entirely automated mass production with the quality assets procured by the use of avant-garde Swiss quartz technology. In fact, the Swatch is a remarkable watch — we were able to find this out personally — providing the wearer with remarkable advantages in spite of its price which is no higher than that of the demised "Roskopf" watch. Here are some examples of its performance:

- standard quartz accuracy,
- shock protected,
- waterproof to a depth of 30 m,
- highly competitive prices: 12 models sold in Switzerland, between 40 and 50 Swiss francs,
- very light: 20 grammes including battery,



At a price between 40 and 50 Swiss francs, the new analogue "Swatch" offers all the advantages of a quality Swiss quartz watch: high accuracy, water resistance to a depth of 30 m, shock resistance and long battery life. It weighs less than 20 grammes and is only 8 mm thick.



The "M-Watch". Its construction is traditional: a tried and tested quartz movement in a case of man-made material with metal band. Available in men's and women's versions. Water-resistant to a depth of 30 m, luminous tritium dial, centre seconds. Calendar on the man's version. Battery life: 2 to 3 years, simple battery replacement procedure (no need to open the case).



The "ID-Watch" is an inexpensive quartz model produced on a Ronda module by Fortis Watch, Grenchen for Interdiscount. This watch is a traditional type in the same price range as the Swatch. It has a polycarbonate case and a mineral crystal that can be replaced. It is guaranteed waterproof to a depth of 100 m, and can be repaired.

- battery life: 3 years,
- no servicing,
- automated production fully integrated.

Unlike other inexpensive quartz watches released afterwards in Switzerland, the "Swatch" is the product of a new technology evolved from the revolutionary construction of the famous "Delirium" watches, enabling spectacular achievements to be carried out at prices beyond competition.

At his press conference in Grenchen on 1st March 1983, Dr Ernst Thomke, general manager of ESA, declared that the "Swatch" might become not only the fashion watch of the future but also a second watch for leisure and sports activities in preference to cheap models from the Far East. If the predictions of Dr. Ernst Thomke prove right, there is no doubt that the release of the "Swatch" will mark a suc-

cess for the Swiss watch industry which will thus regain a footing in the economic watch category from which it was excluded after the collapse of the "Roskopf" watch, and the profits made will contribute to reduce to some extent the deficit of the ASUAG group.

Some people however visualize another scenario in which the "Swatch", with its remarkable technical and styling features, would be accepted by the majority of wearers as their principal watch since it possesses all the necessary qualities. It would thus eliminate various medium-price quartz watch brands and by so doing increase unemployment in the Swiss watch industry as the production of the "Swatch" requires almost no human intervention. One might also imagine a Far Eastern country flooding the market with models manufactured by a technique very close to that developed by ESA. All these, and many other speculations heard at the Basle Fair prove that the "Swatch" is much more than a mere gimmick and that its actual quality makes it a source of anxiety. It is really a first

Competitive offerings from Mondaine and Fortis quickly came to market in 1983.

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### INTERNATIONAL WATCH AND CLOCK NEWS

#### "Swatch Tennis", the Accessory Watch has Arrived

When the manufacturers displayed the first Swatch collection this spring, they announced the release of other models, conforming to the idea one has of a precious accessory. The two first ones are being marketed under the "Swatch Tennis" brand name. Styled in white they harmonize with a tennis outfit.

Swatch continued to introduce new styles, including the "Swatch Tennis" designs which appeared in Europa Star later in 1983.







## International Distinctions for the SWATCH and SWATCH Promotion



In 1984, Swatch recorded incomparable sales successes and also received top distinctions.

The most striking example of this is its election amongst the 12 "Products of the Year" by "Fortune", the leading American economics magazine. Since 1981, this magazine has established a yearly list of the 12 outstanding products of the year. With the Swatch, it's the first time a Swiss product has had the honour of being mentioned on this list — in such illustrious company as the American Express Platinum Card and Apple's Macintosh computer.

The Swatch also won a big instant success on the French market: only 6 months after its release, the French

magazine "Femmes d'aujourd'hui" awarded the women consumers "Étoiles de la Constellation" prize to the Swatch. Let us mention another distinction awarded in Switzerland: on the occasion of the "Verkaufsförderung '85" seminar which took place at the end of January in Zurich, the Swatch won the first prize in the consumer goods category with a big advance on its competitors. This prize was awarded to the giant Swatch presented at Frankfurt in March 1984 (see illustration). This 158 metre model hung from a high-rise building for 4 days during which it showed the exact time to the inhabitants. By this action the Swatch was entered in the Guinness Book of Records 1985.

The Swatch was an international hit, and Swatch heavily marketed the product.

A collage of various Swatch watches. The watches feature different face designs: some with solid colors, some with stripes, and some with abstract patterns. The straps are also diverse, including solid colors, stripes, and abstract patterns. The watches are arranged in a collage-like fashion, overlapping each other.

The Swatch S.A. Company was founded in 1984. A subsidiary of the SMN group (Société de Microélectronique et d'Horlogerie S.A.), it was set up to distribute worldwide the Swatch timepieces produced by ETA S.A., Ebauches Factory, Granges, Dr. Ernst Thomke is chairman of the Swatch S.A. board. A total of 3 500 000 watches were sold in 1984 and the figure is expected to double in 1985.

The success of the machine will surprise no one if it can do what it was designed to do: make an amazingly low price but at least as good as a car made by a quality mechanical watch. Swatch has a lot of things to recommend it. It was made possible by the use of an ultrasonic quartz crystal oscillator, which provides the time base. Unlike traditional quartz watches that use a 32,768-Hz oscillator, the Swatch uses a 327,680-Hz oscillator. The higher frequency automated assembly is carried out in one single assembly stage. The electronic module is mounted on a single printed circuit board, the integrated circuit and the crystal. Once the module is assembled, the quartz crystal is mounted in the motor module is put into place. This module is then mounted on a printed circuit board. The rotor and maintenance pins are then inserted. The final assembly is then finished by a self assembly robot that does the final assembly. The final assembly is then finished by a self assembly robot that does the final assembly.

5. "Free Street" - Impassable in thick conditions, will become flatter grey, or white.

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## A black and white photograph of a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a light-colored shirt. He is sitting in a chair, resting his chin on his hands, and holding a small framed picture of a woman in front of him. The man has a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

Swatch celebrated the sale of 100 million examples in 1992.

The Swatch provided a much-needed cash infusion for the Swiss watch industry, but it was more important than that. In shrugging off copy-cats and competitors, it demonstrated that consumers would seek out a genuine product. In this way, the Swatch is like the Rolex Submariner or Audemars Piguet Royal Oak: much copied but always in demand. It also kick-started a hobby of watch collecting among many of today's consumers. Who among us does not have at least one Swatch? ♦

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