



# Daniel Roth's Complicated Life

BY IAN SKELLERN

The famed watchmaker's odyssey through the Jura region

**H**orology runs deep in the Roth family. Both Daniel Roth's grandfather and great grandfather were watchmakers in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Deciding to swap the snowy Jura Mountains for a warmer Mediterranean climate, Roth's grandfather moved to Nice in the south of France and opened a watch repair business in the sun. Playing and working in the shop from an early age, when the

time came for Roth to select a vocation, watchmaking was an obvious choice, so he enrolled in and completed a three-year course for budding watchmakers in Nice.

Diploma in hand, it was time to put theory into practice. Roth moved to La Vallée de Joux, the center of the world for ambitious young watchmakers. He initially found work in smaller ateliers before landing a prized position at Audemars

Piguet in La Brassus, where he spent seven years with the company and still regards them very highly. Roth then heard of an exciting new opportunity and boldly put himself forward ... to Breguet.

The Chaumet brothers, Jacques and Pierre, were Parisian jewelers who bought a very rundown Breguet and planned to restore it to its former glory. At that time (early 1970s), Breguet was virtually nothing but a

name; the only sign of horological life was a retail outlet shop in Paris.

The Chaumets envisioned Breguet's future back in Switzerland and they needed a very talented watchmaker and manager.

As talented and experienced he may have been, the young Daniel Roth did not appear to have the multitude of qualities needed for such a demanding position of responsibility. What won the Chaumets over was his honesty and openness. Jacques and Pierre decided that both they and Breguet had found their man and offered young Roth the position.

With the Chaumets' support, Roth went back to watch school in Le Sentier for a year to get a solid technical and academic base in complications, while studying all he could from the Breguet archives.

While studying in Le Sentier, Roth made a perpetual calendar pocket watch, which was sold under the Breguet name and quickly repaid the Chaumets' investment in his year's education.

Roth went on to introduce the perpetual calendar and a tourbillon into Breguet's contemporary wrist-watch collection. This helped to relaunch the popularity of these complications among the major brands.

Inspired by a vintage Breguet pocket watch, Roth then designed and developed the now iconic model 3130.

Roth spent fourteen very rewarding years with Breguet and stamped his imprint on both the watches and the company. His lasting legacy is what we think of today as that classic "Breguet look."

Unfortunately, the Chaumets ran into legal and business troubles and in 1987 they sold Breguet to an

investment company, Investcorp. With the Chaumet brothers in charge, Roth would have been happy to stay with Breguet for the rest of his working life. Unfortunately, when they left, his passion for working for the company departed with them.

#### Launching His Brand

Daniel Roth left Breguet to commence his next big adventure—his own brand, Daniel Roth. With an in-

The experience and skills he had learned at Audemars Piguet and Breguet led Roth to steer his new company toward quality and innovative design. Roth possessed the drive to make great watches, the facilities to make great watches and most important, the skills to make great watches. What could possibly go wrong?

Quite a lot as it turned out. A few short years later, new managers



## Daniel Roth's lasting legacy is that classic "Breguet look."

spired distinctive new shape, a large loan from the bank and a distribution agreement with Siber Hegner, a Zurich-based international distribution and marketing group, he set about creating a new brand that would revolve around interesting, innovative, quality timepieces.

at Siber Hegner tightened the budget and declared that the return from the distribution of the Daniel Roth line was insufficient. The decision was made and the rug was pulled.

Impending disaster was diverted by a white knight in the form of the Tay family, owners of Singapore-based



Jean Daniel Nicolas  
Two-Minute Tourbillon

The Hour Glass. The Tay's purchased a majority share of the Daniel Roth brand in 1994 (THG also purchased 51 percent of the Gerald Genta brand in 1996) and sufficiently re-capitalized the brand to get the banks off Roth's back. However, financial losses occurred in the late 1990s, in

part because of the struggling Asian economy. In response to those difficult years, The Hour Glass sold both the Daniel Roth and Gerald Genta brands to the Italian jeweler Bulgari in 2000.

Roth was presented with a fait accompli and was asked to sign over

his minority shares in the company to Bulgari, who would only do a deal with The Hour Glass for 100 percent ownership. He relinquished his remaining shares and after fulfilling his contractual obligations he decided to leave the company that bore his name.

### Rebuilding the Family Name

Roth was unsure which direction his future would take at this stage; however, Daniel Roth would become his own master once again.

At 55 years old, having achieved more than most men in the industry, he was not giving up. Roth decided to start again, to design and build the watch that he wanted. This new watch would be a testament of not only to his formidable skills; it would display the craftsmanship that he believed was fast disappearing in the modern world of haute horology.

Daniel Roth spent the next two years visualizing, designing and developing his new creation. The new company, Jean Daniel Nicolas, would be a family affair. Jean, Roth's son, had inherited his father's patience and steady hands and was joining him in an apprenticeship. Nicole, Roth's wife and a former watchmaker herself, would try to keep the two men moving in the right direction and add her considerable skills and experience to the new enterprise.

Daniel sat down at his bench and began his work. Slowly, design met function. After years of work he realized his new dream. In late 2003 the first Jean Daniel Nicolas Two-Minute Tourbillon was born. →

# Roth on Roth

WATCHMAKER DANIEL ROTH TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW BRAND, HIS NAME AND HIS OLD BRAND

BY IAN SKELLERN



With his new brand named after his son, Jean Daniel Nicolas, Roth is back at the bench. He recently spoke to *iW* about the past, his new venture and the state of watchmaking.

***iW:* Looking back at the route you took to get where you are today, Daniel, it appears to have been a very twisted and bumpy road. Was it worth the effort?**

**Daniel Roth:** I cannot say I planned things to go the way they did, and

things did not always—if ever—go as planned. Perhaps the experiences I've had, both good and bad (smiles), were all necessary to get me here now.

There are always many pressures; however, the pressure now comes from within rather than from

outside influences. For the first time in many, many years, I am not only free from most outside pressures, I am able to devote all my energies into doing what I want to do.

**Which is...?**

(Laughter) Making beautiful watches. I feel very fortunate that I have been given another chance and I just want to work and work and make the most of it.

**Your son, Jean, has started an apprenticeship with you. How is that working out?**

Very well. I had some hard, strict teachers in my youth; at times perhaps too hard, and while I would not wish that on anyone, they did instill in me the attitude of not accepting "good enough." Everything had to be done correctly. Over and over and over until it was "just right." I think that attitude is lacking among many new watchmakers today. Constraints of time and money have led to modern training being rushed; assembly takes over from manufacture and craft. There is nothing wrong if a watchmaker chooses not to do the very best they can—not all watches need be, should be, or can be the most expensive and the best. What I lament is that young watchmakers

are not choosing because they are not able to choose! The tragedy is that they just do not know what their best could be. If I do my job correctly, Jean will know! (smiles)

Jean was getting bored with the cutting and filing exercises I had been giving him recently, so I gave him a small pendulum clock and asked him to skeletonize it instead of the exercises. It is a much more interesting way to learn—and more difficult. He is using the piercing saw of his great-grandfather to cut out the plates. Not only out of tradition, but because that old saw is better than the new ones available today.

**You chose to make a two-minute tourbillon as the first offering under your new brand, Jean Daniel Nicolas. Why a tourbillon?**

Because nobody is doing a tourbillon like mine! (laughing) Tourbillons are very special to me. I have a strong affinity for tourbillons. I feel they are alive; they give a watch life, joy and soul. They make me happy when I see them moving.

**Why a two-minute tourbillon?**

The development of the movement, the technical aspects, ran concurrently with the design of the case and dial. I did not develop the movement and then afterward design the case and dial. The whole watch, the movement and case, was designed as one complete piece. When I started to think about using the tourbillon cage for the seconds, it would not work with a one-minute tourbillon as only 180 degrees was visible—the tourbillon bridge and dial covers the top half. The two-minute rotation made it possible to have the design

I liked. In that instance it was function—two-minute rotation—following form—180 degrees available for seconds.

The double arch of the tourbillon bridge is an example of the contrary; form following function. Without those high curves, you could not see the 0 and 60 second marks. The movement inspired and influenced the case and vice-versa.

**Tell us more about this innovative new watch?**

Basically it is a two-minute tourbillon with sixty-hour reserve de marche beating at 18,000 bph.

**Why did you choose such a slow, by today's standards, beat rate?**

Mainly because I like to see the balance beating. It seems pointless to

would not be happy with more than three or four seconds a day error.

**Does a tourbillon add to accuracy?**

Perhaps in its original form (in a pocket watch) the tourbillon was useful, though there has always been debate even about that. In a wristwatch I do not think it adds to better timekeeping. A faster beat rate would be much more effective—and much easier! I do not make tourbillons for that reason. I make them because of the craft involved and how they make me feel.

**When people think of Daniel Roth they don't think of round cases. Why the new forms?**

This is a special form! At Daniel Roth we occasionally received requests from potential clients for round cas-

*It seems pointless to have a beautiful, slowly rotating tourbillon cage housing a balance that beats too fast to see.*

have a beautiful, slowly rotating tourbillon cage housing a balance that beats too fast to see. It is nice to be able to see the tourbillon cage rotating and the balance beating. I want my watches to last as long as possible and the lower torque of 18,000 bph should help them do so.

**How important is accuracy to you in a handcrafted watch such as this?**

I think you need a certain level of accuracy—above all else, it is a watch first and foremost so it should tell the time well. Personally, I

es. They liked our complications and style but not the form, so I knew that the demand was there. Because I anticipated that the market for my new watch would be small—and I did not wish to lose any precious clients who wanted a round case (laughing)—I decided to offer the watch in the two case shapes.

Another motive, as strong as the first, was the challenge of making something special, something unique, in a round case. I suppose part of the drive for the new form watch was to show that the last time (with the



## Jean Daniel Nicolas Tourbillon

### Technical Description

**Calibre:** JDN2000L powering a 2-Minute Tourbillon with a Power Reserve Indicator.

**Jewels:** 23

**Beat Rate:** 18,000 bph

**Barrels:** 2

**Power reserve:** More than sixty hours

**Size of movement:** 33.0mm (diam.) x 5.7mm (height)

**Movement material:** German silver and steel

**Dimensions of round case:** 39mm (diam.) x 10.5mm (height)

**Dimensions of form case:** 40.7mm (long) x 32.7mm (width) x 11.4mm (height)

Daniel Roth brand) was not a lucky one off. I wanted to show that I could do something unique once again ... and even better! With a round case the challenge is even harder than with a form watch. Virtually everybody is trying to do something different in a round watch; however, how many achieve that goal? I believe that anyone seeing one of my round case watches will both see and feel that it is very special and unique.

I should point out as well that there are two distinct movements: round and form. There is no spacer involved! (laughing)

**Why did you choose the 3/4 plate over the more traditional Swiss bridges?**

I felt that the 3/4 plate went better technically with the tourbillon. It also pleased me aesthetically as well. The dial side is elegant, rich in texture and multidimensional. I like the contrast of having a comparatively austere back.

**You appear to spend a lot of time polishing tiny parts. Just how polished do they have to be?**

I want my movements to be as perfect as I can possibly make them. As

I have made only a few movements to date—well nearly a few—two (laughing), I am still learning just how good the finish can be. Some parts I have polished for over a week because I could still see them getting better and better by the day. A client, in all probability, could not see the difference between two days' polishing and ten days' polishing. I can, however, and that's what counts. I stop polishing when the finish stops improving. It drives Nicole [his wife] crazy sometimes; over a week on one small part! (shakes his head in disbelief)

**There are very few watchmakers left who can achieve such superb levels of finish. Would you let us in on some of your secrets?**

It is fairly straight-forward when you know the main tricks.

One. Never try for a fine finish on a dry day. I always wait for rain or clouds and fortunately that is fairly frequent in La Vallée de Joux! [laughing]

Two. The mix of alloys of the zinc [metal polishing block] being used is very important and is little appreciated these days.

Three. Years and years of patience, practice and skill. Once you have achieved what you are after the first time it gets easier because you know it can be done. Before that it can be heartbreaking. It is much harder than it looks, which is why many collectors appreciate fine finishing.

**How many watches do you hope to make per year?**

These first two watches have taken

approximately three years. Perhaps I can do three in the next twelve months? I really don't know as yet. Because I am making all the parts myself, except for the balance and a few screws, it is slow work. Perhaps in a few years I can make five per year—who knows?

**How have your clients been keeping up with you?**

In Asia, a few people have been following what I have been doing since I left Daniel Roth. One Hong Kong client has followed me since Breguet and said that if I made a new watch he would buy it. And he did! I hadn't even started thinking about the design then. (laughing) I have already had a few Japanese reporters and photographers visit and publish an article in the Japanese press. Shellman [an up-market Japanese retailer of independent watchmakers] heard what I was planning at the very start and placed an order for my first two pieces—round and form—having

just seen a drawing. That vote of confidence was a big help in kick-starting the project.

Curtis Thomson [a regular *iW* contributor] posted a short article on ThePuristS.com after a visit here last year and that generated quite a bit of interest as well.

**Is it hard seeing your name on a company that is no longer yours?**

I have turned the page on “Daniel Roth” and am working toward a new future and I hope they can do the same. The company Daniel Roth will always be special to me, as so much of me went into it.

**Do you have a philosophy that has guided you through the years?**

To do my very best, to keep learning and to pass on what I know. I have always strived to make the very best watches I could. I could not sleep easily if I knew I could have done better. More important still, I believe, is to impart the knowledge I have to the next generation. I know Jean has the skill to be a good watchmaker. If I haven't transferred my knowledge to him then that will be my fault—not his.

**When you retire and look back at what you have done, what will you hope to have accomplished?**

I will be happy if people think that I have made a few good watches. No, many good watches and a few superb watches! I hope these watches I am making now will be appreciated as among the very best available ... anywhere. I would like a master watchmaker look at one of my watches in one or two hundred years' time and say “They really knew how to do things properly back then.” (laughing) ☺

