

Inspired by his Alfa Romeo racing days, Giuliano Mazzuoli has turned his hand to making watches with a stamp of originality, says Claire Adler

THE RACIEST WATCHES IN TOWN

Mazzuoli Contagiri watch



The former racing driver, stationery designer and now maverick watchmaker Giuliano Mazzuoli seems to be something of an expert at career changing. But with his relaxed Italian style, white designer stubble and über-hip Costume National trainers, he's taking it all in his stride.

A purist with an innate passion for design, Mazzuoli is a creator of beautiful and original objects rather than a businessman – as presumably only a former racing driver can afford to be.

In the library of the Knightsbridge Hotel, Mazzuoli and his fresh-faced son Emiliano show me the newest collection of Contagiri watches. Mazzuoli's first watch, the Manometro, resembled the pressure gauges found in racing cars. Now his newest offering, the bold and beautiful Contagiri, recalls the rev counter of the new 150,300 euro limited edition Alfa Romeo Super Car. Even the watch's crafted leather box echoes its bonnet and seats. With clean good looks, only one hand to tell the time, nifty mechanisms sure to be loved by gizmo junkies and three international patents, the Contagiri spins the traditional method of reading the time on its head.

Over three years in the making, there's not a pusher or a crown in sight. A lever built into the side of the watch which you pull out with a fingernail and pull again sets the watch into gear, allowing you to change the time. The retrograde dial in the form of an incomplete circle means at 12 o'clock the watch's only hand jumps back to zero at an accelerated speed.

Mazzuoli's link-up with the Super Car came about when Mazzuoli spotted Alfa Romeo boss Lapo Elkann on Italian TV wearing one of his watches. He contacted him and they soon started collaborating on the Contagiri project.

"When I raced Alfa Romeos in the seventies, the rev counter in the Alfa Romeo GT evoked the most powerful emotions in me", says Mazzuoli. "I think people will always appreciate simplicity because simplicity is the most difficult element in design."

The night after our meeting, the official Contagiri launch at Fulham restaurant Bibendum sees the venue fronted by a shining red Alfa Romeo Super Car and torch flames to welcome guests. Inside, journalists and loyal male and female customers – one is passing through London

Mazzuoli Mokina fountain pens





The Mazzuoli family

especially for the party on the way back to New York from the Cannes Film Festival – and high-profile football agent Kia Joorabchian all mingle in the company of a performance artist interpreting Mazzuoli's designs on paper, using a modest piece of charcoal.

But for all the media blitz and overt display of Mazzuoli's talent, this watchmaker is a rather freethinking fellow. When he first went to New York to try to sell the quirky notebooks he had designed – with a choice of wavy or oblique lines instead of straight ones – it was not long before he had a choice to make. The shop at the Museum of Modern Art wanted 10,000 of them and an American department store was about to place an order for 100,000. "Everyone started laughing when they saw those notebooks. I think they made the saddest people in the world smile", recalls Mazzuoli.

Still in New York, he excitedly phoned his wife, saying: "The MOMA wants 10,000", ignoring the mass market opportunity for his designs, instead embracing the excitement and prestige associated with exclusivity.

This is typical Mazzuoli. "The Giuliano Mazzuoli brand could be 50 times more successful than it is", maintains Giuseppe Ferro, London-based fellow Italian and Mazzuoli's UK distributor. "After four years of the Giuliano Mazzuoli watches, we have 12 retailers in Italy and we have turned down 25. In the UK, we have under 10. We are proud to have the watches sitting alongside the very best brands in the watch business – at Pisa Orologeria in Milan, Hausmann in Rome, Cellini in New York, Chronopassion in Paris and the Watch Gallery in London's Fulham. I think the design's simplicity has been the appeal of the watches in an overcrowded market."

That Mazzuoli has recently taken to designing watches feels almost

“ I think people will always appreciate simplicity because simplicity is the most difficult element in design ”

incidental. Admittedly, his ancestors made clocks in Tuscany and even designed the clock tower in the village where Mazzuoli still lives today, and he surely developed a sensibility towards mechanics at his first job in his grandfather's bicycle shop.

But it's Mazzuoli's fun-loving pen in the form of a coffee maker that can be found in the display cases at New York's Museum of Modern Art. The other pens he has made are all inspired by workshop tools. Mazzuoli is more a collector of cars than watches – he has eight Alfa Romeos dating from 1967 to 1972 – and he makes a point of avoiding watch magazines for fear of being influenced by other designs.

"My love for watches started relatively recently. It wasn't part of my youth", he says. "But our family paper business was focused on printing and advertising other people's products. It made me want to create my own product. The most difficult thing about making a watch was to come up with something that was not just another copy of what was out there already. I wanted something with a strong, unique personality."

So, what next? "I've never been fixated on anything forever", says Mazzuoli. "My problem is a lack of time to realise all my ideas, as opposed to a lack of ideas", hinting at some innovative sunglasses he's been quietly working on.

His son looks on proudly, but not without reservation. "My father came across some book specialising in glasses and I don't know how, but he has managed to find an original way for them to work. But for now, I want him to stay focused on the watches", he smiles. ■