



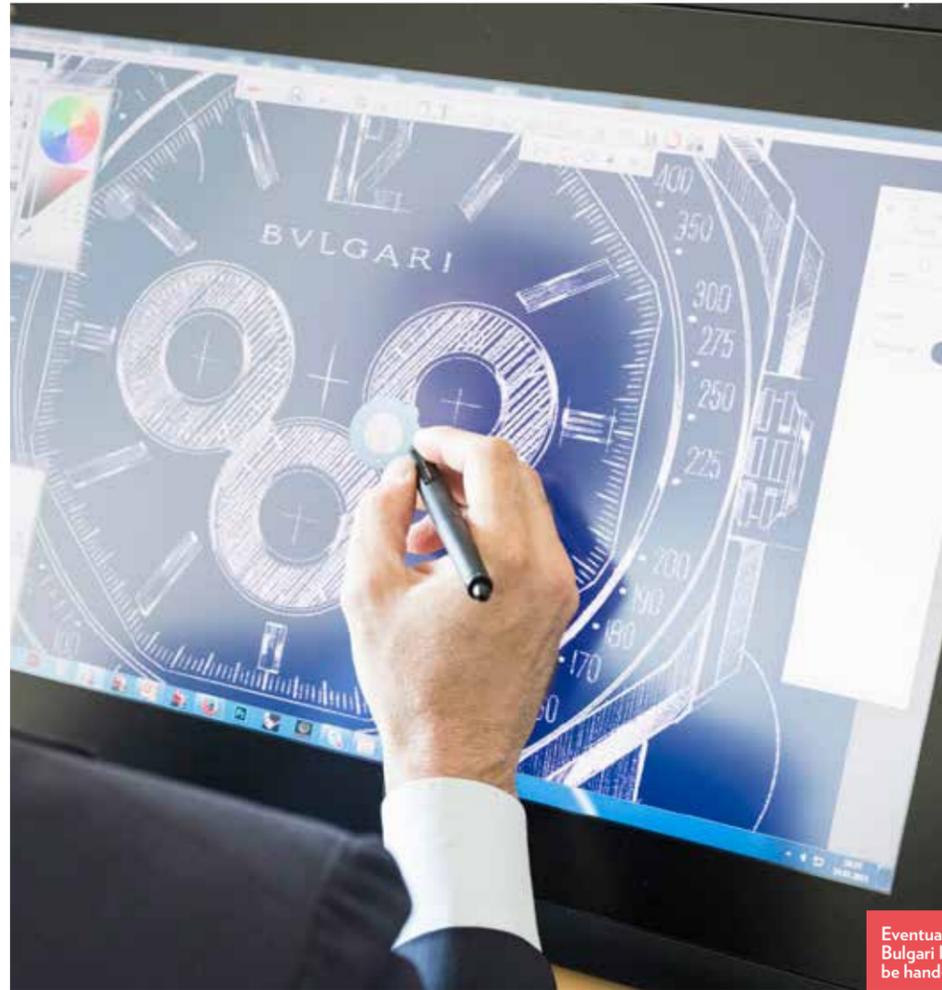
Think

Big

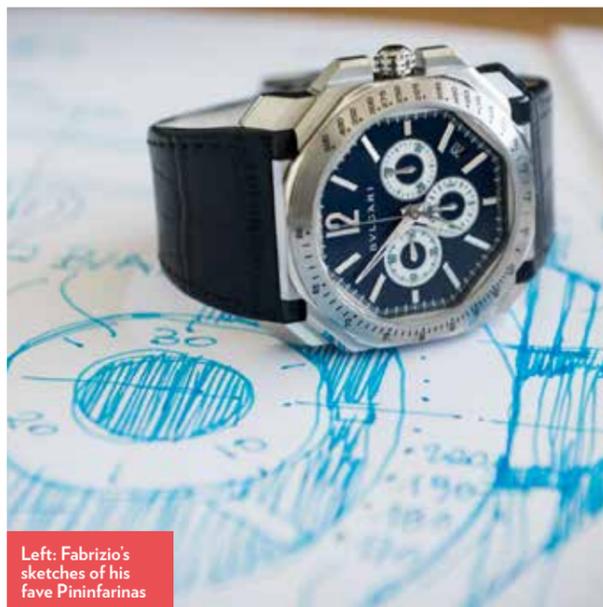
draw small.

A CAR IS LARGE. A WATCH IS NOT. SO HOW CAN YOU COMBINE THEM IN A MEANINGFUL WAY? BEST TURN TO AN EX-CAR DESIGNER WHO'S MOVED OVER TO THE WRISTWEAR DEPARTMENT. LUCKILY, WE HAVE ONE UP OUR SLEEVE...

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Eventually that Bvlgari logo will be hand-stamped!



Left: Fabrizio's sketches of his fave Pininfarinas



Fabrizio Buonamassa stands well over six feet tall, and – as he opens his arms to greet us – displays a wingspan of about three metres.

He is a Roman column of a man, slightly weather-beaten but still upright and imposing. Bracing for a bear hug, I'm somewhat relieved when the gesture turns into an ordinary handshake and a warm smile finds its way through his cropped red beard. From arm's-length I get a good look at his suit – a dark-blue two-piece with a slightly lived-in patina, finished off nicely by the matching navy dial and alligator strap of his weighty-looking watch.

If we'd arranged this meeting ten years ago, the venue would have been very different. Today we're in his office in the heart of watch country in Neuchâtel, overlooking a very shiny lake from the upper floors of an expensive high-rise. If we were to wind back time, we'd have met somewhere in the industrial north of Italy, in one of Fiat's design studios where Fabrizio worked on car interiors for Lancia and Alfa Romeo. But that was then, this is now, and these days he's the creative boss for the watchmaking division

of Bvlgari, the Italian luxury jeweller with a substantial operation here in Switzerland.

On his desk is a digital pad the size of a drawing board. Using a stylus, he makes broad, sweeping additions to a sketch of the very watch we see on his wrist – the Maserati edition of Bvlgari's multi-faceted Octo, a dressy chronograph with subdials inspired by the cabin instruments of the Gran Turismo – a car as hearty as Fabrizio himself. "You can't put a car on your wrist," he says, "but you can find similar design language and use it as inspiration to create a very convincing watch."

In this case, the language is cars, machines and other contraptions of which we very much approve, and in these matters Fabrizio is as fluent as they come. In the corner of his office is the twisted, burnished exhaust manifold from a Jaguar V10 F1 car, which he managed to smuggle on an Alitalia flight



"Do I look natural like this? And can you see the watch? You must be able to see the watch. It's inspired by the Colosseum, you know. That's why it has so many arches and dead gladiators depicted on it." Hmmm



by telling them it came from a Ferrari. Halfway up his bookshelf is a Honda V4 engine block, nestled among the works of Leonardo da Vinci and a design history of the Fiat 500. Other prime spots are reserved for a pewter model of an Aston DBR1, a signed rugby ball and a sketch of an Aprilia RSV. Then he opens a random page of his notebook, in which he's drawn some faithful facsimiles of his favourite Pininfarina-designed cars including the Ferrari 375 Superamerica, a Superfast II, a Maserati 6GCS and an Alfa Romeo 1600 – all recreated from memory.

So how do these influences, these disparate dialects, translate into a watch? "Good design is about constraint," he says, "and those constraints drive the aesthetics. I might be inspired by a beautiful engine, or even by the Colosseum in Rome, but sometimes you can't use those shapes to make a watch. So inspiration has to be appropriate, and it has to make sense."

This is where 'car-inspired' watches often fall over, especially those that attempt to cram in too much. "A car is a big thing," says Fabrizio, "with many elements, materials, textures and surfaces. A watch is often a circle just 42mm across! So you have to be selective and choose elements that work." And when it comes to those elements, there's one thing that's almost guaranteed to make a successful journey from road to wrist: the dashboard. Fabrizio should know, having designed the insides of cars such as the Alfa Romeo 156 with its tubular instrument binnacles and elegant *benzina* gauges.

His creations are typically Italian. They have a measured complexity and avoid the Scandinavian and Bauhaus minimalism that has become fashionable in other corners of the watch world. But unlike the man himself, the final products are still unavoidably small. "My problem," he says, "is that I like to make very big drawings. But when you shrink them down to the size of the watch, you lose some of the detail and impact. And you can't play around with prototypes, either, whereas in the car world you'll be given six months and 30 people to do clay modelling."

However, cars must meet safety standards and pass crash tests, often to the detriment of the perfect shape. Watches have no such requirements, so the designer has more freedom to break away from the traditional silhouette. Just look at the

Octo's layered, eight-sided case (the clue is in the name) with its hard lines and edges that could take your eye out. They look very much like the C-pillar of the first Ghibli, although this was a happy coincidence before the Maserati partnership developed. Still, it does show unilateral Italian thinking. As for other car connections, the second hand's pointy end is a Maserati trident and, well, that's about it. But if it were plastered in Maserati verbiage, it'd cease to become a proper watch and creep into the grubby world of merchandise.

Because let's face it, when you're paying thousands of pounds for a watch, you need to know it's the real deal. To fully appreciate this, we must leave the drawing board and take a short drive into the heart of Watch Valley – a 120-mile north-easterly arc through the Jura Mountains from Geneva to Basel, which cradles the factories, artisans and engineers who've made this region so famous. In fact, the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds is considered so important to the Swiss watch industry that the whole place is now a Unesco World Heritage Site. And it's here, between two smart apartment blocks on a quiet back street, where Fabrizio's creations are brought to life.

Of all Bulgari's facilities, the dial manufacture is the most important, especially in terms of aesthetics. The process starts in an old-world workshop full of lathes, clamps and presses, where each face is stamped and hand-cut before one lady solders on the microscopic legs – the size of seeds – on which the dial ultimately stands. Upstairs, the date windows and subdials are cut out by automated milling machines, before the whole face

is dipped in various chemical baths to give it a specific sheen and texture, depending on the model. That's before it's polished and painted in a sealed booth by a man in a biohazard suit.

In another room, the hands and indices and other dial markers are milled, often from precious metals, so the air is literally filled with gold dust, and there are special hoovers that suck up the expensive powders. Finally, each tiny element is manually applied to the dial – a laborious process that requires the steady hand of a brain surgeon. Even the Bulgari logo is stamped by hand using real paint and a miniature stencil, which might seem like a trivial detail, but, when it comes to watches – and as the big man Fabrizio can attest – it really is the little things that count.

"I might be inspired by a beautiful engine, or even by the Colosseum"

IN THE SHOWROOM

Whether you're being fired from a jet or hovering an Apache, there's a Bremont to grab your attention. And if you're into older stuff, check out The Victory – it's made with actual bits of oak timber and copper from Lord Nelson's ship. www.bremont.com

