

BEHIND THE BRANDS

A Viking past and a stellar future

One Swedish company revels in cultural references while another focuses on outer space

LINKÖPING, SWEDEN

BY PENELOPE COLSTON

In a dark forge outside this historic university city, sparks flew as Johan Gustafsson hammered a metallic sandwich of layers of nickel, iron and two types of Swedish steel. His aim was to create the characteristic stripes and swirls found in Damascus steel.

He once created knives with the material, which the Vikings used to make their swords. But in recent years, he has also sliced it into thin rounds to make watch faces for Gustafsson & Sjogren, or GoS, the independent label he and his business partner, Patrik Sjogren, founded in 2007.

Since then, they've created four collections of mechanical watches that are designed and produced at the forge and at their atelier in Linköping, about 125 miles south of Stockholm, the Swedish capital.

GoS is one of a few labels that produce watches in Sweden, a country of 9.5 million people. In the watch world, Sweden is best known for Daniel Wellington, an affordable line of minimalist quartz watches mass-produced in Asia, whose success made global headlines. A subgroup of mostly quartz micro-brands are designed and marketed in Sweden and manufactured in Switzerland or Asia, many of them crowdfunded startups, said Tomas Jonsson, himself a Swede and founder of the blog which-watch.org.

"Following the huge international success of Daniel Wellington, minimalist dress watches seem to be what every new brand is shooting for," he said in an email interview. "Worth noting is that almost no brand does the manufacturing themselves. Only design and marketing is done in Sweden, with a few exceptions."

Last year at Baselworld, the international watch and jewelry fair, GoS introduced a prototype of the Sarek, an ornate mechanical watch that combines Swedish cultural themes with the patterned steel, their signature material.

The steel's swirly effect is produced when Mr. Gustafsson repeatedly hammers and folds the heated metal, eventually producing a 164-layer piece. He finds the spot where the ripples and layers are most visible and pleasing, then cuts it into watch dials. The rest is discarded.

The dials come in several color combinations, which Mr. Gustafsson coaxes out of the forged steel with an oxidation treatment — for example, one model

had bold swirls of jade green, royal blue and fuchsia. Customers are invited to select their favorite patterns and colors when ordering the Sarek, which starts at \$7,800 and comes in models for men and women.

The Sarek's name and design are an ode to Sweden: The dial's wavy pattern resembles the complex network of waterways that traverse the Sarek National Park in Swedish Lapland. A moose-leather strap is a nod to the park's bull moose, which are the largest in Sweden.

The Sarek's crown, the winder, is modeled after the hilt on a Viking sword, and the detailing on its stainless steel case is based on designs Mr. Sjogren discovered while researching Viking jewelry.

GoS watches come in walnut boxes made by a woodcarver nearby, and a local engraver customizes them. "We didn't want to only express watchmaking and steelmaking," Mr. Sjogren said. "We wanted to pull as much Swedish handcrafting into the GoS universe as possible."

The men say the watches have been well received and that their customer base is expanding — models have been shipped to every continent except Antarctica. They now turn out 30 watches a year and are aiming for 50, an increase owed in part to the Sarek's success, Mr. Sjogren said.

Still, some reviewers have suggested that the ornately colored and patterned dials on GoS watches are not to everyone's taste. "But that is true for any of the timepieces made by independent watchmakers," Elizabeth Doerr, editor in chief of Quill & Pad, an online watch publication, wrote in an email. "They polarize and they elicit emotion. If they didn't, they probably wouldn't be much good."

"And I do believe that GoS's risk has paid off as the micro-brand is slowly but surely beginning to establish itself among the sort of clientele that looks for handcrafted, artisanal products," she added.

While Mr. Gustafsson works the forge, Mr. Sjogren runs the GoS studio in downtown Linköping, where he and an assistant assemble the watches and adorn them with details like gold hands resembling Viking arrows and spear heads. He also modifies a few parts the company imports from Germany and the watches' Swiss movements, which he equips with GoS signature features, like rotors made from the Damascus steel.

The men's partnership is not unlike the steel in their watches: a synthesis of

different elements making up a solid whole. Mr. Sjogren is the watchmaker, engineer and marketing manager; Mr. Gustafsson the craftsman at the forge.

They met in 2007 through IHU Urmakarskolan, the Swedish horological school where Mr. Sjogren studied. Mr. Gustafsson had contacted the school in hopes of finding someone to help him work his steel into a watch. "I've always liked watches. I've always loved art," Mr. Gustafsson said. "A lot of ideas crossed my mind. I was thinking about watches. I was thinking about pens."

After nearly 10 years of collaboration, the men consider the \$19,000 Winter Nights, a 2013 model with a Damascus steel case, as one of their greatest achievements.

"I was skeptical at first," Mr. Sjogren said. "I'm an engineer, which is bad in a way because I always see problems. But we sat down and really discussed what we wanted to do, and it has gone very well."

Another name in Swedish horology with roots in both past and present is the award-winning Halda Watch Company, which designs and assembles its



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watches on the outskirts of Stockholm using a mixture of domestic parts and Swiss movements. Founded in 1887 by the Swiss-trained horologist Henning Hammarlund, a maker of pocket watches who built his first timepiece out of wood, Halda now produces about 300 watches a year that are designed for use in space and on Formula One race-tracks.

The Space Discovery and the Race Pilot models each have two modules — electronic or mechanical — that can be docked to a patented wristband. The Race Pilot can also be bought with the Trackmaster, an instrument the com-

Creative sparks

Johan Gustafsson, top, and Patrik Sjogren, above, founders of the Swedish brand Gustafsson & Sjogren. Their work includes the Sarek, above left, with a wavy-patterned dial that looks like the waterways in the park of the same name.

pany introduced last year that is designed to help drivers record and improve their lap times.

The electronic module on the Space Discovery, a limited edition timepiece priced at \$13,200, has a G-force sensor among its other space-themed innovations. It was developed in collaboration with the Swedish astronaut Christer Fuglesang, who tested it aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery. For the mechanical module, Halda teamed with Svend Andersen, a Danish watchmaker based in Geneva, who modernized a 1970s high-beat movement especially for the watch. While astronauts have worn the

Space Discovery during missions, Halda clients still are waiting to do so. "We have customers who have bought tickets for private space travel, but none of them have been yet," said Par Dahlman, Halda marketing and communications representative.

Halda's chief executive, Mikael Sandstrom, revived the brand in 2009 after leaving Sjoo Sandstrom, a watch label he founded in 1986 with a fellow engineer and watch enthusiast, Christer Sjoo.

Today, Sjoo Sandstrom designs and assembles 2,000 to 3,000 units a year in its Stockholm workshop using Swiss parts. Prices range from \$3,000 to \$20,000.

The company, according to its website, introduced the first fully Swedish-designed and manufactured wristwatch in 1993. And, in 2014, it teamed with the Swiss movement house Vaucher Manufacture Fleurier to produce the Royal Capital, an ultra-slender luxury timepiece that uses the Vaucher caliber 5401 movement, celebrated by watch enthusiasts for its micro-rotor. Last year, the company released the Royal Steel Worldtimer, which has an additional hour hand for juggling time zones.

"With the Royal Capital, we welcomed our customers to a new era," Felix Formark, Sjoo Sandstrom managing director, wrote in an email. "And we gave Sjoo Sandstrom the chance to offer a new level of exclusivity."

SPOTLIGHT

Just another joyride

When Carson Chan stopped tinkering with automobiles, he turned to building wristwatches

HONG KONG

BY MIKE IVES

In the early 1990s, Carson Chan persuaded the owner of an automobile garage in Los Angeles to allow him to work there without pay in exchange for access to its jacks, hoists and air compressors.

Mr. Chan spent long hours there, tinkering on the Porsches that he raced on weekends at tracks around Southern California. "You're in an environment that if you kind of like cars, you'll dive right into it, and I did," he said.

But when Mr. Chan moved back to his birthplace, Hong Kong, in 1997, he was unemployed and automobile-less, he said. So he pursued another mechanical pursuit: building a wristwatch from its parts.

"I found out that all you need is a tiny table and some tools, and you could work on it like a car," he said.

Two decades later, Mr. Chan, 48, is an established figure in Asia's luxury watch scene. And as head of the greater China mission of the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie, a nonprofit industry group in Switzerland, he offers watch training courses for watch professionals who target Chinese clients.

Mr. Chan also has a quirky watch collection that includes nearly 100 specimens, some of which he assembled himself from obscure or antique components. He deconstructed several 1936 Rolex pocket watches, for example, and put their movements inside some military-inspired watch cases that he asked a local factory to manufacture.

"What sets him apart is his in-depth technical knowledge," said Sean Li, the Hong Kong editorial director of Revolution, a luxury watch magazine based in Singapore. "He's one of the few watch collectors I know who actually has a watchmaking bench where he practices his skills, and gets hands-on experience on what he is teaching."

A report by the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry said that although Swiss timepiece exports fell in 2016, monthly export volumes rose in December for the first time in 18 months. It said the China market, which had ex-



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Work and fun
Carson Chan in his Hong Kong studio and, above right, his Omega Speedmaster Mark 3 in stainless steel.

perienced an upturn since the summer, had also grown that month.

Mr. Chan said one upshot of generally weak watch demand is that prices for new models have been falling. For example, he said, a 2017 Ulysse Nardin Marine Tourbillon Grand Feu Enamel

representative for the auction house Bonhams. He said that a former boss and fellow Porsche-racing aficionado in California had given his name to a Bonhams executive who had asked, "Do you know anybody in Hong Kong who knows cars and watches?"

Mr. Chan said his initial work at Bonhams consisted mainly of shipping catalogs around Asia and translating for Chinese-speaking clients. The Asia mailing address in the company's catalogs from that period was his 400-square-foot apartment in Hong Kong.

That work led to a job in 2003 as the general Asia-Pacific manager for Richard Mille, then a new watch company based in Switzerland. But when he



started, he said, the watch market was at rock bottom because the region was recovering from the Asian financial crisis of 1997 and 1998 and a 2003 outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome, known as SARS.

"Nobody cared about watches, so that was a big challenge," Mr. Chan said. "But then, you know, it depends on whether you're an optimistic person or not. When things are at the bottom, there's nowhere to go but up."

The market eventually took off, Mr. Chan said, and he returned to Bonhams as head of watches and Asia managing director. From 2007 until his departure in 2014, he said, what began as a skeletal operation in Hong Kong grew to one that had 45 employees spread across China, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan.

Mr. Chan said that his strategic approach at Bonhams was to bring new products, such as whiskey, cognac and Leica cameras, to the auction market. He said he also promoted watches by in-

dependent brands like Richard Mille and MB&F. "Today the market has changed — all the auction houses are accepting these brands," he said of such smaller, independent watch labels. "But we did the first push."

Mr. Chan's friends say that he takes a similarly independent approach to collecting.

"Every watch he wears has a unique story," said Winston Koo, a private collector in Hong Kong who has known Mr. Chan for more than 15 years. "That makes me wonder what other horological treasures he has stashed away in his safe."

On a recent morning at his studio, Mr. Chan spread some of his favorite watches out on a wood table that overlooked his workbench, a cigar humidifier, a rack of wineglasses and a pair of vintage Veloset and Moto Guzzi motorcycles.

At one point, he gestured to a pair of watches by the German company A. Lange & Söhne that were made in 1892 and 2004. On first glance, they appeared to have very little in common. But Mr. Chan turned them over and showed that their movements, made of German silver, were uncannily similar.

He also held up some Omega Speedmaster watches from the 1960s — the same model, he said, that Neil Armstrong had worn during his 1969 moonwalk. Mr. Chan said that he had gone through a phase of collecting Speedmasters from the 1960s and 1970s and that he had always been fascinated by their design.

"It looks like they're from the future, but they were made 40 years ago," he said.

Mr. Chan said that on a practical level, mechanical watches are clearly outdated in the smartphone era, just as human-driven cars may soon become irrelevant in the era of self-driving ones. However, he said, focusing on the history and technology behind watchmaking may help brands survive for many more generations.

He said the key was learning to see watches as art pieces, not just machines. "Why do you wear a watch? You don't need it — you have your phone," he said. "So it has to connect with the consumer more deeply."