**JOURNAL**

# A Swiss watch company town

## For centuries Fleurier has been the center of crafts that turn timepieces into works of art

**FLEURIER, SWITZERLAND**

BY KATHLEEN BECKETT


PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIELS ACKERMANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**The village of flowers** Fleurier has long been a watch center, with, far left, its own watchmaking quality control center and, above, the Bovet Fleurier headquarters in nearby Môtiers.

Ever wonder why some watch companies have the word "Fleurier" attached to their names?

Just as the Vallée de Joux has been known as the birthplace of Swiss watchmaking, for centuries Fleurier, the village of flowers, has been the center for the decorative crafts of engraving, enameling and gem-setting that turn watches into works of art.

The town even has its own style of engraving, called fleurisanne, developed by Bovet in the 1800s, which uses distinctive swirls to convey the way the poppies in the fields bordering the river valley dance in the wind.

A visitor today to this small community of about 3,500 residents will find among the neat stucco houses and eccentric street art some obvious indications of its watchmaking attachment. One square is named the Place de la Horlogerie; a blue-and-white street sign announces the Rue de l'École d'Horlogerie, even though the school closed in the 1970s.

And the names Parmigiani, Bovet, Vaucher and Chopard are often heard — in stories of the town's past, the brands' own tangled history in watchmaking and, today, as the employers of a third of the town's population.

Fleurier is, indeed, a company town. Book a table for lunch at the Restaurant Les Six-Communes in Môtiers, the hamlet just a mile or so from Fleurier. Dining on local char in absinthe sauce are the movers and shakers of the area's industry: executives from Bovet, Parmigiani and Chopard; a fellow who makes watchbands; an engraver, and Fleurier's mayor, all table-hopping and greeting one another with enthusiasm. The president of one watch brand may have a child working at the competition, and probably worked there himself at one time. It's all in the (business) family.

Unlike the techniques in the Vallée, where farmers spent the winter months making watches, the artistry of Fleurier had a different genesis: the Huguenots. In the 16th century, persecution in Catholic France drove Protestants to Geneva, where they specialized in decorative arts. But a hundred years later the Reformation forced them to look for yet another refuge, and they went to Fleurier, about 50 miles away, where many of the townspeople already were stonecutters, masons and carpenters.

David-Jean-Jacques-Henri Vaucher is called Fleurier's first watchmaker, having set up shop in 1730. By 1750, the town had 459 residents, 103 of whom were Vauchers, and many were involved in various aspects of watchmaking.

In the early 1800s Édouard Bovet and his brothers were running an import-export business between Fleurier and Guangzhou, China, then known as Canton. Aware of the popularity of embellished pocket watches, he started Bovet Fleurier in 1822 to produce them.

He was not alone. "By 1860 there were 600 watchmakers and more than 40 families in Fleurier making watches for the Chinese," said Michel Parmigiani, the founder and owner of the watch company Parmigiani Fleurier. "The town had the largest concentration of millionaires in Switzerland."

By the 1970s, things had changed. The arrival of the quartz watch was so catastrophic that local people still refer to it simply as The Crisis. Factories closed, residents moved, businesses shuttered.

"People laughed at me back then when I said I wanted to be a watchmaker," said Benoît Conrath, now 53 and working at Parmigiani. "Back then, to be a watchmaker was to be unemployed. No one wanted mechanical watches. It was like using a horse and cart to travel."

It was Mr. Parmigiani who came to the rescue. He had grown up in a neighboring village, graduated from Fleurier's watch school and had his own workshop specializing in restoration. (He briefly owned Bovet, in 1989-1990.) Then in 1996, bucking the quartz trend, he decided to make his own watches, and to do so in Fleurier.

Parmigiani Fleurier was established with headquarters in a mansion formerly owned by the Vaucher family. Vaucher, which now makes watch components, began making parts for the new company. That same year, Mr. Parmigiani persuaded Chopard to base its watchmaking in Fleurier. The town's revival had begun.

"People would stop him on the street and thank him," recalled Mr. Parmigiani's daughter, Anne-Laure.

Then, Mr. Conrath said, a backlash began against quartz watches. "In the 1990s people realized that a watch was not just an instant instrument, but a luxury product," he said. "German and Italian journalists realized how beautiful a mechanical watch is and started writing about them.


"They saved the watchmaking industry in Switzerland," Mr. Conrath continued. "The watchmaking school in La Chaux-de-Fonds, which was in danger of closing, is now turning away students."

In addition to scores of independent specialists, working on their own or under contract to the larger local companies, Fleurier also has its own watchmaking quality control center. It was founded in 2004 by the four local companies to establish standards and to certify watch quality, and it operates in Bovet's former mansion. The building, which locals once called the "Chinese palace," also served as Fleurier's town hall for a time.

Bovet Fleurier, now owned by Pascal Raffy, has headquarters in a 14th-century castle on a mountainside in Môtiers, just past a little museum chronicling the birth of absinthe.

The antique Chinese cabinet just inside the entrance is a nod to the company's heritage. And in the work area, a wall of windows provides a sweeping view of the Val-de-Travers, location of the villages of Môtiers and Fleurier.

During a visit, a young artisan sitting near the windows demonstrated how to engrave a watch case with fleurisanne. He used a drypoint chisel to etch the design on the case's curved surface and then deepened the lines with a series of chisels with different tips. With the aid of a microscope that enlarged the pattern 25 times its actual size, he then tapped the end of another drypoint chisel with a tiny hammer, covering parts of the surface with dots so minuscule that to the naked eye, they could not be distinguished individually.

The workman then used an onglette, a larger chisel slender as a blade of grass, to demonstrate the bris de verre technique, covering a surface with tiny prism-shaped triangles to catch and reflect light. To show just how effective the decorative technique is, he placed a bezel covered with bris de verre next to a real diamond, and it was easy to see that the bezel had a brighter sparkle.

Such work has always been prized, but, as Anne Walther, Chopard's heritage manager, explained, "When mechanical watches started being popular again, watch brands went back to their roots.

"Engraving, enameling, bezeling, all done by hand, have come back," she continued. "Now customers understand that the more people give their touch to the watch, the more it gains in value."

Such watchmaking was in Ms. Parmigiani's blood. She grew up in Fleurier during the difficult '70s, then went to school in Neuchâtel to study engraving and watchmaking before joining her father's company. She lives in the town today. "Fleurier is a watchmaking village once again," she said. "Most of my friends work in the watch industry. We're always chatting about watches."

And there are several new businesses to serve them, like La Cabane du Hibou, with its stock of 2,000 toys; the restaurants Bouchon Gourmand and l'Arrosée feature fresh seasonal fare. And the Celle à Guilloud, a shop for absinthe, opened recently, too.

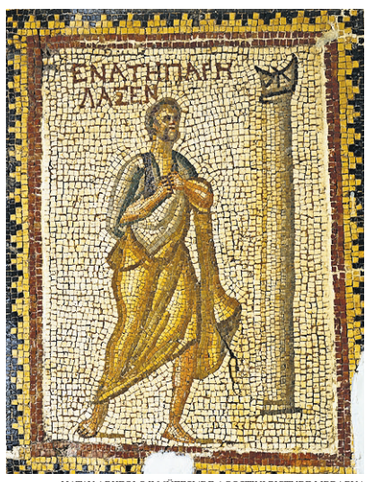
"People like to live where they work," she continued, "and when you have children it's very easy to live in a little village like Fleurier, where everything is close and everyone knows each other."

**ON DISPLAY**

# Antiquity on the clock

## A new exhibit shows how the ancient Greeks and Romans shaped our need to be on time

BY JOHN NOBLE WILFORD



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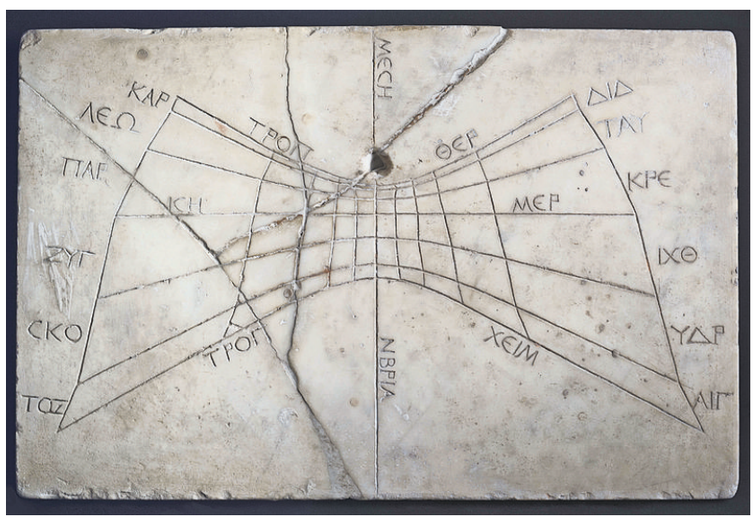

GUIDO PETRUCCIOLI/INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE/UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

**In the exhibition** Clockwise from near right, a mosaic of a man and sundial from 4th century A.D.; a horizontal sundial from Pompeii; and a portable bronze sundial, from Slovakia.

In a Roman mosaic from antiquity, a man on a street studies the sundial atop a tall column. The sun alerts him to hurry if he does not want to be late for a dinner invitation.

Sundials were ubiquitous in Mediterranean cultures more than 2,000 years ago. They were the clocks of their day, early tools essential to reckoning the passage of time and its relationship to the larger universe.

The mosaic image is an arresting way station in a new exhibition, "Time and the Cosmos in Greco-Roman Antiquity," that opened last month in Manhattan at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, an affiliate of New York University. It will continue until April.

The image's message, the curator Alexander Jones explains in the exhibition catalog, is clearly delivered in a Greek inscription, which reads, "The ninth hour has caught up." Or further translated by him into roughly modern terms, "It's 3 p.m. already." That was the regular dinnertime in those days.

Dr. Jones, the institute's interim director, is a scholar of the history of exact science in antiquity. He further imagined how some foot-dragging skeptics then probably lamented so many sundials everywhere and the loss of simpler ways, when "days were divided just into morning and afternoon and one guessed how much daylight remained by the length of one's own shadow without giving much thought to punctuality."

An even more up-to-date version of the scene, he suggested, would show a man or a woman staring at a wristwatch or, even better, a smartphone, while complaining that our culture "has allowed technology and science to impose a rigid framework of time on our lives."

Jennifer Y. Chi, the institute's exhibition director, said: "The recurring sight of people checking the time on their cellphones or responding to a beep alerting them to an upcoming event are only a few modern-day reminders of time's sway over public and private life. Yet while rapidly changing technology gives timekeeping a contemporary cast, its role in organizing our lives owes a great deal to the ancient Greeks and Romans."

The exhibition features more than 100 objects on loan from international collections, including a dozen or so sundials. One is a rare Greek specimen from the early 3rd century B.C. The large stone instruments typically belonged to public institutions or wealthy landowners.

A few centuries later, portable sundials were introduced. Think of pocket watches coming in as movable timekeepers in place of the grandfather clock in the hall or on the mantel. They were first mentioned in ancient literature as the pendant for traveling. The earliest surviving one is from the first century A.D.

Six of these small sundials are displayed in the exhibition. These were owned and used mostly as prestige objects by those at the upper echelons of society and by the few people who traveled to faraway latitudes.

A bronze sundial in the center of one gallery is marked for use in 30 localities at latitudes ranging from Egypt to Britain. Few people in antiquity were ever likely to travel that widely.

A small sundial found in the tomb of a Roman physician suggested that it was more than a prestige object. The doctor happened to be accompanied with his medical instruments and pills for eye ailment, as seen in a display. Presumably he needed a timekeeper in dispensing doses. He may have also practiced some ancient medical theories in which astrology prescribed certain hours as good or bad for administering meals and medicine.

Apparent time cycles fascinated people at this time. One means of keeping track of these cycles was the parapegma, a stone slab provided with holes to represent the days along with inscriptions or images to interpret them. Each day, a peg was moved from one hole to the next. The appearances and disappearances of constellations in the night sky yielded patterns that served as signs of predictable weather changes in the solar year of 365 or 366 days. Not to mention when conditions are favorable for planting and reaping. Not to mention good or bad luck would follow.

For many people, astrology was probably the most popular outgrowth of advances in ancient timekeeping. Astrology — not to be confused with modern astronomy — emerged out of elements from Babylonian, Egyptian and Greek science and philosophy in the last two centuries B.C. Because the heavens and the earth were thought to be connected in so many ways, the destinies of nations as well as individuals presumably could be read by someone with expertise in the arrangements of the sun, the moon, the known planets and constellations in the zodiac.

Wealthy people often had their complete horoscopes in writing and zodiacal signs portrayed in ornamental gems, especially if they deemed the cosmic configuration at their conception or birth to be auspicious. It is said that the young Octavian, the later emperor Augustus, visited an astrologer to have his fortune told. He hesitated at first to disclose the time and date of his birth, lest the prediction turn out to be inauspicious. He finally relented.

When the astrologer read Octavian's horoscope, he threw himself at the feet of Rome's emperor destined to be. With confidence that a great future was written in his stars, Augustus made his horoscope public. He exploited the Goat-Fish constellation, Capricorn, as his personal zodiacal sign and a symbol of power in the first century A.D.

For a long time afterward, emperors often used the imagery of Capricorn, a hybrid land and marine animal, to symbolize their power on land and sea and to illustrate their lineage as Augustus's successor.

The Time and Cosmos exhibition will run through April 23 at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 15 East 84th St. The galleries are open free Wednesday to Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., and until 8 p.m. on Fridays.

Put it on your desk calendar and also on other timekeeping devices, post Greco-Roman.