

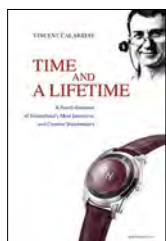


Golden Bridge

Portrait

VINCENT CALABRESE OBSESSIONS OF A NEAPOLITAN WANDERER

BY PIERRE MAILLARD



Just published by Editions Slatkine, *Le Temps d'une vie* (in English 'Time and a lifetime') is Vincent Calabrese's

novel-like autobiographical account of independence. It tells both his own story and that of the Swiss watchmaking industry.

Vincent Calabrese has just brought out a book that anyone gravitating around the watchmaking "ecosystem" should consider reading. Although it reads it like a fully-fledged novel, describing the very singular personal journey of an extraordinary watchmaker born into a poor family in Naples, it also gives us many insights into the world of Swiss watchmaking. Vincent Calabrese is obsessed. Obsessed with existing, with creating, with innovating, and with telling the whole story. In fact, without these obsessions and his thirst for independence, he would probably not be the person he is today. And without this Neapolitan wanderer, the Swiss watchmaking landscape would no doubt look very different. Vincent Calabrese is temperamental, he's as stubborn as a mule, does exactly as he pleases, is not afraid of facing up to the big boys, and he'll always tell you exactly what he thinks of you, good or bad.

He's an agitator, a troublemaker, a spanner in the works, an awkward customer, a fearsome opponent with the grip of a Rottweiler.

At the same time, he's also a tireless worker, an exceptional creative talent and a gatherer of energies. A genuinely good, modest man, with no hidden agenda, who likes to foster healthy competition and emulation among peers and rivals, Calabrese is the originator of the AHCI (Academy of independent creative watchmakers). What a contrast Vincent Calabrese makes in this sullen environment that is the big-brand-name watchmaking sector, with all its jealousies and suspicions. Yet the self-taught craftsman could not care less and even when, sometimes, his path has been strewn with obstacles and hardships and he has been tempted to give it all up, he has never allowed himself to be defeated.

From Naples to Le Locle

Vincent Calabrese's journey began in 1944 in Naples, where he was born into a poor family. He lived together with his parents, his brother and sister in a *basso*, a space measuring 30m², which gave directly onto a noisy narrow street in old Naples. Of his father, a former master baker, who had come home from war an invalid to join the ranks of the unemployed, he once said that he was "*honest and generous, yet obsessed with the thought that he was being exploited, an illiterate man for whom violence was his sole means of expression*". His mother was "*a gentle-natured, cultured woman, who loved opera and loathed vulgarity, and who worked from morning to night at her sewing machine to provide a better future for her children*."

At the age of 13, he left school, moving from one minor job to another, ranging from chemist's assistant to delivery boy

for a bookshop before securing a post as apprentice to a local watchmaker. Here, he learned all kinds of skills, such as “combining radios with alarm clocks, or making metal chairs and covering them in plastic”. But his wage was only enough to cover the cost of a packet of cigarettes a week, so he gave it up and when he was barely 14, he set himself up in business at home as a “watchmaker/repairer”.

Already fiercely independent, he more or less made a living at his job, saved a bit of money, growing up in the rebellious mood of post-war Naples, until it was time for him to enter military service. “In order to escape the nightmare of spending two years in the Marines,” he wrote, “the only solution was to emigrate.” His uncle had settled in Switzerland, so why not join him? He managed to convince his mother, brother and sister that it was a good idea and so all four of them left the father behind in Naples and headed for Le Locle. It was then the winter of 1961, and one could only guess at the shock of the young Neapolitan wanderer suddenly finding himself foot-deep in snow in the middle of nowhere.

“I’m a watchmaker! No, you’re an Italian.”

One week later, he was hired at Tissot! Admittedly, it was an era of full-time employment. But in the workshop, whenever he announced that he was a watchmaker, the reply was: “No, you’re an Italian!”. No matter. He tempered down and was happy to be in Switzerland. At Tissot, he worked on a production line. “I sang while I worked, cracked jokes, and took far too much interest in my female workmates. I was reprimanded by my boss for my exuberant behaviour.” Eventually tired of the atmosphere and the repetitive work, he left Tissot and joined Cyma...

In the coming years, he would become a man of integrity, proud, hard-working and obstinate, moving from one company to the next: in 1964, he joined Zenith, in 1965 he worked for Richard, in Morges, then he took a job at Hebdomas, in La Chaux-de-Fonds, finally becoming workshop foreman at Teriam... Every time, it was more or less the same story. He was a good, fast worker, he learned a great deal, improving the workshops or departments in his charge, but his various employers always failed to keep their promises. So he regularly handed in his notice until 1971 when he found the job of his dreams. He was appointed manager of Diamant Bleu, a watchmaking workshop in the terribly chic Crans-Montana ski resort! It was a sudden move up the social ladder and, now in contact with a rich clientele to whom he began selling prestigious brands, the self-made Neapolitan man suddenly saw his future.

The moment of truth

One day, a client brought him a splendid 19th century pendant watch made by Breguet. It had been run over by a car, the case has suffered greatly, but the movement was still repara-

ble. “The client was asking me to repair the case alone. He didn’t care that the watch no longer worked. He was only interested in appearances... I remember I was boiling with rage!”

The feeling of rage, once again, would remain with him for some time and that single incident would lead, a few years later, to one of the finest creations in contemporary watchmaking: the Golden Bridge. “That day, I decided that, as soon as I could, I would design a watch that would be bought for the beauty of its movement alone”. Fine words, but quite a challenge. It would be some years before Vincent Calabrese succeeded in designing and creating the object of his “spatial” watchmaking dreams, in which the entire movement was left open to view. Still without any qualifications whatsoever, he went on to fine-tune his knowledge by taking courses at Patek Philippe, then Rolex (two completely different atmospheres, by all accounts) and, one fine morning, he woke up after dreaming about his watch. “Trance-like, I began to draw the system that would enable me to invent the principle of spatial watchmaking. I could already see the solution in my head.” Corum were quick to purchase his prototype, which scooped the Gold Medal at the Geneva International Inventions Exhibition in 1977. It would become known as the *Golden Bridge*. From that moment on, Vincent Calabrese would not stop innovating.

The philosophical wanderer

In the course of his book, Calabrese details his successive inventions in turn. This one-by-one discovery helps us to fully understand the meaning and consistency of the whole. As is often said of a painter in the process of becoming, Calabrese builds his oeuvre. And the common thread connecting his creations appears as an underlying philosophy. Yes, he dares to use the term. An emotional philosophy is at the root of his language. A philosophy, which is incarnated in watchmaking. “The only language I can express myself with is watchmaking”, he often likes to say. It is a conscious language, at which he became increasingly adept. And, throughout the book, Vincent Calabrese regularly proclaims that everything he does is undertaken in full knowledge of the facts, knowing precisely where he wants to end up.

As one discovers further, the watches do indeed begin to make sense. They form a long, coherent sentence, beginning with his *Spatial* creations, explorations based on the *Golden Bridge* linear movement. But unlike the baguette-shaped movement on the *Golden Bridge*, the *Spatial* movements came in all shapes possible: the letters of the alphabet, characters, symbols, even the boot of Italy.

As a result, Blancpain commissioned him to make a tourbillon. He came up with a rarity for the time, a flying tourbillon, for which he executed a prototype. But Blancpain delayed its release. Tired of waiting, two years later, he brought it out himself and the watchmaking world beheld the spatial *Flying Tourbillon* magically suspended between two crystals, bereft of any attachments.

Moreover, Corum appeared no longer in a hurry to produce his *Golden Bridge*. Calabrese, who had by then set up business on his own and was running a small watchmaking workshop in Morges, did not receive the anticipated royalties and struggled to stay afloat. And although in the meantime he had founded the AHCI, gathering around him the most talented independent watchmakers in Switzerland and elsewhere, he still felt like abandoning everything.

The Baladin

One watch would get him out of the situation in which he found himself: the *Baladin*. A watch created “in the image of the *cantastorie*, the Italian storyteller who wandered the streets of town spreading news”. This meant a watch comprising a hand-free display on which time-telling was by means of an aperture digitally indicating the hours. The aperture wandered around the dial indicating the minutes as it went. Simple and ingenious. He sold his concept to the Italian Pinko and “I went overnight from CHF 30,000.- a year to several years’ worth of sales”. The watch sold by the thousands.

He got back up on his feet (as he always does) and invented an extraordinary travel clock. Two Hands is a tourbillon travel clock with counterweights, composed solely of two hands suspended in the void at the end of a stem. One extraordinary feature was that the entire movement was housed in the minutes hand, including the tourbillon. A true feat of achievement.

But he was keen to continue along the path opened by the Baladin and from then on designed “extraordinary watches with ordinary movements”. And presumably his Neapolitan origins were not without significance. For his obsession never faded. He felt that the big brand names had become far too omnipotent. He realised that “the public were no longer buying a product but an image”. He felt that he was clearing the ground for the big makes to start exploiting the territory.

Commedia

Everything, in his eyes, is a vast *Commedia*. And *Commedia* was precisely the name of his next piece: an aperture displaying the jumping hours could be glimpsed through partly open theatre curtains. In the ultimate provocative gesture, he inserted a quartz movement. To emphasise his message, he borrowed from Dante and his *Divina Commedia*. This time, eleven words are made visible: *Perdete Ogni Speranza, Voi Che Create, l’Arte Pagante E Solo Alle ...!* In English: “Abandon all hope, ye who create. Only fashionable art pays off.”

But once again the wind turned. It was then 1992 and two more new chapters opened in the life of Vincent Calabrese, entitled “*Sur orbite*” and “*Les Années ludiques*”. More creative than ever, he finally followed up with his “*extraordinary watches with an ordinary movement*” for his own brand. He fine-

tuned the performance capabilities of the power reserve indicators for automatics and on dual time zones adjustable to the nearest minute. He devised the ingenious AM/PM, Night & Day watch, he invented the Horus, with its satellite subdial with minutes indication. He also started receiving new commissions, achieved recognition in Japan, and was awarded the Gaïa prize, known as the Nobel prize of watchmaking. With the support of his daughter, who took care of the rest of the business, he produced up to 800 watches a year, “*made by my own hand*”.

The carousel

A blow of fate, a drama, the sudden death of a loved one were events that would successively conspire to stop him dead in his tracks. A subsequent attempt to kickstart his activity again failed due to a partner’s indiscretions. Would the rebel finally have to fall in line? “*2006 to 2008 were years of survival*”, he confessed. But he went on to grant Cartier a licence, and clocked up commissions for Sellita, Vuitton and Blancpain.

Blancpain wanted to be the first and only brand to bring out a carousel, a mechanism with rotating escapement and an unfairly scorned rival of the tourbillon, invented by Bahne Bonnicksen in 1892. A *carrosello* was music to the ears of a Neapolitan. Excellent news. He was picked up by Blancpain and could at last devote himself entirely to his research and not have to worry about a thing. He was up for it. The brand presented a promising and noteworthy prototype at the Basel watch fair 2007. Then... absolutely nothing.

What had happened? It was a mystery for Vincent Calabrese who had always had a very good relationship with Marc Hayek. He never received an explanation, but maybe the answer lay elsewhere. Setting the “proletarian” carousel against the “noble” tourbillon wasn’t going to do anyone any favours. The tourbillon had become the industry’s sacred cow. More tourbillons were now being produced in one year than had ever been produced since its invention by Breguet in 1801 and until the early 90s. *Commedia* was the operative word.

Vincent Calabrese became a little paranoid. And for good reason, it wouldn’t be the first time that one of his innovations had been pre-empted only to end up on the back burner. Maybe someone bought it to conveniently spirit away? Once again, he handed in his notice. But he popped up again as an independent operator at the end of 2011.

Independent? He will no doubt remain so until the end of his days. An independent struggler, fighter and designer. For him and others like him, such as his friend, Jean Kazès, the ingenious Carouge-based clockmaker, whose works he goes to great lengths to promote. And rebellious? Always. One of the final chapters in his book is entitled *Obsession*, in which he tells a few home truths about the watchmaking industry and its journalism. And he doesn’t mince his words. But why should he? He’s a lone wolf, is Vincent. ♦