

Cabinet of calendars

OCHS UND JUNIOR | A new era has begun for this niche brand. The brand moved from Lucerne to La Chaux-de-Fonds and is now 100 percent family-owned. The program: back to the roots.

PIERRE-ANDRÉ SCHMITT

She is a professor of modern and contemporary art and architecture at the University of Lausanne, but Kornelia Imesch has always had a flair for watches as well - with a very unique approach: „Watches made the precise recording of time possible and thus also paved the way for capitalism,” she says. „That interests me in terms of cultural history, especially since capitalism has strongly shaped our world.“

Kornelia Imesch, meanwhile, is not only involved with watches on a theoretical basis. The ex-wife of the ingenious watchmaker Ludwig Oechslin - the two are separated but remain on friendly terms - was involved in shaping the ochs und junior brand from the very beginning (the brand itself, by the way, is spelled only with lowercase letters). Today, as a shareholder and Chairman of the Board of Directors, she is the driving force behind the writing of a new chapter in the history of the brand: ochs und junior is now a completely family-owned company.

IDIOSYNCRATIC NATURE

What would not necessarily be worth reporting elsewhere is watched with a wary eye in the case of ochs und junior: the brand has made a name for itself with watches that are quite different from anything else on the market. This has a lot to do with Ludwig Oechslin and his idiosyncratic way of thinking and building watches, and some might have wondered whether a new structure might trigger a change or lead to a dilution of the brand philosophy.

The ochs und junior adventure began in 2006, when Ludwig Oechslin, Beat Weinmann and Kurt König founded the brand. Kurt König was the owner of the watch and jewelry store, Embassy, in Lucerne, and Beat Weinmann was the Managing Director. At that time, Kornelia Imesch was a shareholder, but like Beat Weinmann, held only a minority stake.

Chapter 2 of the young brand began in 2012 - with a new shareholder joining the company: Ulysse Nardin, the brand for which Ludwig Oechslin had been working for some time. Ownership was shared equally among the new CEO, Beat Weinmann, Ulysse Nardin, and Ludwig Oechslin and Kornelia Imesch.

From the very beginning, the special thing about the brand's watches was the thoughtful and constructive approach. While the industry generally focuses on complications and flaunts material battles of strung together components, Ludwig Oechslin sought simple solutions with as few parts as



«PERPETUAL CALENDAR»

possible. The timepieces are puristically reduced to the essentials, both technically and in terms of design. For example, you may have to really search before finding a logo: an ochs und junior does not display any text on the dial (the logo is found on the leather strap).

November 2020: Kornelia Imesch is seated in the breath-taking ambience of the Villa Grieshaber at 143 rue Numa-Droz in La Chaux-de-Fonds. The salon is a masterful example of the Style Sapin, a form of Art Nouveau coined in the 1900s in La Chaux-de-Fonds by Charles L'Eplattenier (1874-1946) and his students. At one time, there was an attached factory, while today the first floor of the villa serves as the home of the ochs und junior ateliers, the machine rooms, and the management office

THE CHILDREN SAID YES

„We asked our children if they were interested in the company,” says Kornelia Imesch. As two out of the three were, this was the starting point for Chapter 3 of ochs und junior. Today, the company is 100 percent owned by Kornelia Imesch and Ludwig Oechslin. From the second generation, daughter-in-law Louise Krank has joined the company as Head of Communication Design.

The team now also includes Violaine Baudouin, the watchmaker Jost Schlatter and, on a part-time basis, watchmaker Masaki Kanazawa and designer Christian Gafner. In total, there are five people on the team.

At ochs und junior, the future trajectory is clear: „We will remain true to the philosophy of our beginnings,” says Kornelia Imesch. So, there will not be logos on the dial anytime soon, as the

company seeks to be and remain a niche brand. This is also made clear by the new products launched in December, clearly a nod to some of the first watches from ochs und junior. A new edition of the „settimana junior” is now simply called, „settimana”. And there is the perpetual calendar, „cent'anni, cca”. Both watches have been slightly retouched by designer Christian Gafner, but otherwise the original design has been retained. Two versions of the perpetual calendar will be available, in black and in white, both featuring a titanium case (a glass back is never used). As an interesting aside, Gafner is known as a watch designer for the Porsche Design Timepieces brand, and he designed the wristwatch for the watch museum, MIH in La Chaux-de-Fonds, conceived by Ludwig Oechslin and built by Paul Gerber (see WATCH AROUND N°34). The „settimana” is now also available in a limited edition: this trilogy of 11 watches in 3 colors marks the entrance of Louise Krank into the business.

It is worthwhile to spend some time with the „settimana”, because the piece is a typical Ludwig Oechslin watch - Minimalistic, quirky, fun: a dot on the dial indicates the day of the week. If the dot appears at 1 o'clock, it's Monday, at 2 o'clock it's Tuesday, at 3 o'clock Wednesday, and so on. From 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., there's a banana-shaped slot, and below this, the dot returns to the 1 position at midnight on Sunday. „That



» **Whoever has the most parts, wins.** «

LUDWIG OECHSLIN, FOUNDER OF OCHS & JUNIOR

was the joke behind the Junior designation,” Oechslin laughs, „the kids got to stay up and watch until midnight on Sunday.“

BRAIN POWER

The perpetual calendar represents the art of constructively finding new solutions rather than additively joining cogwheel to cogwheel. Where perpetual calendars that display the correct date until 2100 would otherwise need around 200 components, Oechslin's watch accomplishes this feat with just nine additional parts. The date can be turned forward and backward, and all functions can be set via the crown.

Ludwig Oechslin has just sat down at the table next to Kornelia Imesch at the Villa Grieshaber. „It's purely a marketing thing,” he says, „when brands advertise the number of components they install in a movement.“ This is an approach that is commonly framed as „whoever has the most parts wins.” He prefers to invest his work in the construction rather than in the execution of the watch - this

initially requires more brainpower but implies less work in the production of the watches.

Oechslin's craft is guided by five principles: usability, legibility, reliability, ease of production, and repairable.

Still, there are challenges which accompany this approach. Customers can personalize their own watches online at ochs und junior using a configurator, which has been very successful commercially. But from a technical point of view, this can also cause problems, for example if surface treatments are offered that then make it difficult for certain parts to function because of their thickness.

In addition, Ludwig Oechslin isn't pleased when color combinations are chosen that reduce the legibility of a

watch, for example, black hands on a black dial. The configurator remains available, but the process will be more carefully curated going forward.

In the spirit of Ludwig Oechslin, there will also be watches that bear his signature, so to speak. The concept with the working title, „My Choice” will offer watches that meet the master's approval.

To date, ochs und junior produces 100 to 130 watches a year, and Kornelia Imesch says that they will maintain this production level.

The suppliers will also be retained, but the company intends to connect with the rich network of workshops in the La Chaux-de-Fonds region. Contacts have already been established with TimeForge (see WATCH AROUND N°36) and Roman Winiger. As far as movements are concerned, the company is sticking with the tried and tested: ETA and the UN-118, and UN-320 calibers from Ulysse Nardin for the more exclusive products.

Looking to the future, Ludwig Oechslin still has quite a few ideas up his sleeve. The subject of calendars, certainly, will continue to occupy him. Currently available at ochs und junior are: three-hand watches with dates („mese”), an annual calendar („anno”), and the perpetual calendar („cent'anni”). One could also, Oechslin thinks, build other calendar variants. It won't take much brainpower - Oechslin has already designed another construction!

(English translation of an article in German language, copyright P. Schmitt, WATCH AROUND 2020)