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Autor: [s.n.]
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Swiss watchmaking at the cutting edge of time

For centuries, Switzerland has been world-renowned for its watches. This was not always the case: When mechanical timekeeping started back in the 14th century, Switzerland lagged far behind the times.

Alternative to jewellery

In the beginning, watchmaking innovation and production were mainly concentrated in Geneva. At the time, one of the main driving forces behind the city's economic prosperity were the city's goldsmiths. Under the strict rule of Calvin who rejected any display of wealth, the wearing of jewellery was banned. This forced these craftsmen to find new outlets for their creative talents – and so they discovered watchmaking. This created a new skill, and watches were even then exported to the Orient and the American colonies.

Spread throughout Switzerland

This new skill soon spread over the Jura mountains to other regions. In the 17th century, entire families in the canton of Neuchâtel were employed in the watchmaking industry, chiefly making pocket watches and scientific instruments. In the 1800s, Neuchâtel began producing pendulum clocks, which would rival those made in Paris for many decades. By the mid-19th century, watchmaking had spread to the cantons of Solothurn and Bern. In 1890, around half of the watches and movements which Switzerland exported were produced in Saint-Imier (Bernese Jura), the Franches-Montagnes, Ajoie and Biel. By 1900, the reach of the Swiss watchmaking industry extended to Basel and Schaffhausen.

Switzerland becomes a watchmaking nation

The Swiss watch industry continued to flourish during the 1800s.

By the middle of the century, the Swiss had overtaken the English to become the world's **most** important watch manufacturers. The first true competitor emerged in the second half of the 19th century, when the American watch manufacturing industry started to mass produce watch components. These were so accurate that they were used for a variety of models. The consequences for the Swiss watch industry was devastating: In 10 years, the export of Swiss watches to the U.S. fell by 75%. This was a hard blow for Swiss watch manufacturers, who responded to the changing market with the manufacture of industrial, precision mechanical components.

Innovations

In the early 20th century, Swiss watchmakers added additional features to their watches such as calendars and stop watch functions, with the aim of restoring the competitiveness of the Swiss products. In the 1920s, Rolex made its first waterproof watch, while in 1926 in Grenchen (Solothurn), the first automatic watch was made. These remarkable innovations in the field of mechanics and production gave a boost to Switzerland's domestic watch industry. The Swiss watchmakers were back and for the next few decades occupied the top spot in the world watch market.

Missed opportunity

The 20th century's greatest revolution in the watch industry passed Switzerland by. Although the first quartz watch was developed at the Centre Electronique Horloger (CEH – Centre for Electronic Watches) in Neuchâtel in 1967, the Swiss companies missed this opportunity to make money out of this innovation. The ongoing developments were left to others to do, and the Japanese and Americans made great strides forward while the

Swiss limited their efforts to the development and improvement of mechanical watches. The development of quartz watches led to a drop in demand for traditional watches and, by the mid 1970's, it seemed as if the bell was tolling for the Swiss watch industry.

Swatch and the recovery

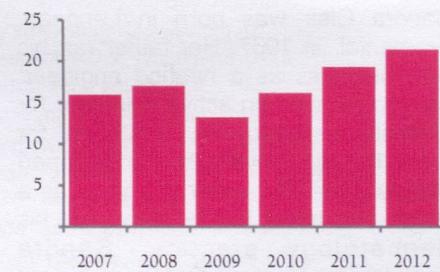
The Swiss watch industry did make a return to the leading position in the global watch market. This was by an unlikely source: An economic adviser re-invented the watch, leading to its re-birth as a fashion accessory. The Swatch, the analogue quartz watch which combines high quality with a low price, was first presented to the public in 1983 and since then it has been copied a million times. Without a doubt, the Swatch saved the Swiss watch market and helped boost the Swiss watch industry. 30 years after the crisis, the conversion of Swiss watch production has been a success and the watchmaking industry is once again one of the most prosperous economic sectors in the country.

Source: <http://www.myswitzerland.com>

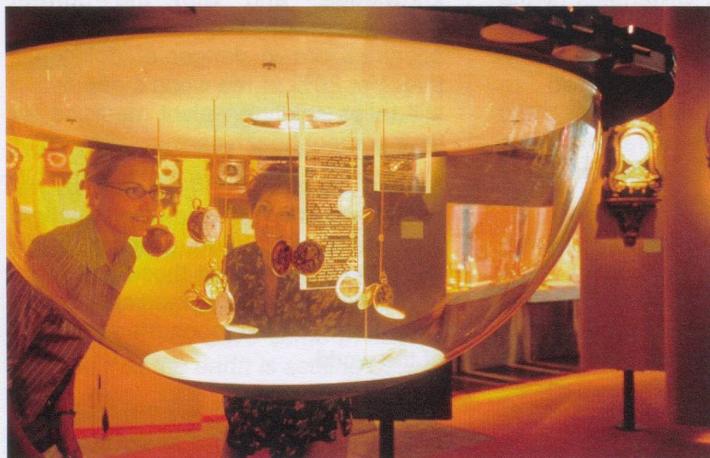
Swiss watch export statistics

Source: Federation of the Swiss Watchmaking Industry

Total value (in CHF billion)



www.fhs.ch/statistics/watchmaking_2012.pdf



International Clock-Making Museum - la Chaux-de-Fonds
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