

TIMEX UNVEILS ECO-FRIENDLY BRAND

The Vincent Bérard brand will relaunch as a green label in September, while other watchmakers are leading the sustainable conversation. BY MARTINO CARRERA

MILAN – Luxury might have been on a sustainable journey for quite some time but watchmakers are believed to often lack in terms of eco-friendly and consciously transparent approaches to the business – including raw material sourcing, environmental footprints, sustainable strategies and due diligence.

According to a study conducted by nonprofit organization WWF's Switzerland bureau in partnership with Swiss consulting firm BHP Brugger & Partners, the 15 biggest Swiss watch companies' supply chains are "severely lacking transparency and comprehension of the origin of the raw materials and the processes and people involved."

Among the evaluated companies, Compagnie Financière Richemont SA-owned brands, particularly IWC, are the only ones that secured a score in the "ambitious" and "upper midfield" rankings of the survey, while others including Rolex, Swatch and Tissot lagged behind. As a predominantly aspirational industry, the WWF report pinpoints that "compliance-driven and risk-minimizing approaches alone are no longer sufficient to meet the expectations of various stakeholder groups like the public, consumers, investors and employees."

Switzerland-based Timex Luxury Division, part of U.S. Timex Group, is gearing up to unveil in September the first collection billed "with a green soul" under the Vincent Bérard luxury brand, one that it had acquired in 2005, shuttered in 2010 and it is now resurrecting with a green ethos.

"As our attention to sustainability and green economy has always been there, in our DNA, we thought that entering the traditional Swiss watchmaking [industry] required an asset, which Vincent Bérard was. It's the perfect fit: a [sustainable] watch brand keeping the heritage of the label as it had always been," Paolo Marai, chief executive officer of the Timex Luxury Division, told WWD. The founder of the company, who eased out of the brand, had been inspired by nature in his watchmaking process since the beginning and Marai noted the new course would continue that mandate.

"It's clearly a peculiar project and despite partner retailers wouldn't need a new label – we must be honest – the [Vincent Bérard] label boasts particular features, a different story to tell, which are assets for our retailers," Marai noted. "Every other part of the item has this green ethos...we believe it's a new way to present ourselves [as a company] although the product is quite classic in terms of design content. This is our spirit, doing something different and bring it on a bigger scale."

The collection comprises Swiss-made mechanical, self-winding watches, which avoids batteries and quartz crystals, "a reprehensible choice if you're doing a sustainable product," Marai explained. The company also incorporated upcycled materials including recycled steel for the watch's cases and a range of eco-friendly solutions for the interchangeable watchbands. They include straps crafted from recycled PET bottles, vegetable-tanned leather and the patented Neo

material made of thin layers of laser-etched wood sheets.

Emphasizing the label's eco-friendly commitment, each timepiece features a green rotor visible from the back of the see-through case, as well as a green hand, while Marai said packaging will be sustainable, too. In addition, Timex Luxury Division has partnered with the nonprofit organization Treedom pledging to support agroforestry projects around the world and to plant a tree for each sold item.

Priced at between 1,000 euros and 3,000 euros, Marai noted the Vincent Bérard label will leverage a "very commercial and competitive" positioning within the Swiss-made mechanical watches segment. The latter "has been suffering a lot in the past few years...so we think this is the best segment in which to play the game with a distinctive product." To wit, the first collection previewed with the company's distributors in January obtained positive feedbacks.

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The label will be available through Timex Luxury Division's network of retailers covering 65 countries, as well as online on the brand's e-commerce and through a number of digital marketplaces. Marai stressed the importance of the "online driven strategy [which] will help establish a customer-centric communication," noting consumers in the U.S. and China are particularly into online purchases for the watch category.

Although other pure luxury players have embarked on a green journey, contemporary and premium contemporary watchmakers were the first to notice consumers' craving for an eco-friendly and ethical approach. Founded in Florence in 2009, the Italian WeWood is one such example, as it crafts its designs from natural wood free of toxic compounds, while also pledging to plant a tree in partnership with nonprofit associations such as American Forests and Trees for the Future for each sold item.

As upcycling has become the norm for many companies setting the green example, Stockholm-based Triwa has taken the practice a step further by crowdfunding through the Kickstarter platform a project in partnership with the nonprofit organization IM Swedish Development Partner. The latter retrieves illegal firearms from war-torn regions and melds them to obtain the usable Humanium Metal, which the watchmaker employs to craft a range of 34mm and 39mm watches. Part of the proceeds from the sale circles back to the regions where the firearms were originally collected in an effort to fulfill the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16: promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

Also, Danish watch brand Rec – established in 2014 by entrepreneurs Christian Felix Mygh and Jonathan Kamstrup – has been experimenting with repurposed metal components sourced from salvaged vehicles, including Mini Coopers, Porsche



A timepiece from the Vincent Bérard eco-friendly brand.

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911s and Ford Mustangs, as well as Spitfire aircrafts, to not only channel the recycling mandate into their watch collections – which retail at different price points under \$2,000 – but also as an aspirational storytelling.

Established in 2005, Timex Luxury Division is also the watch licensing partner for fashion brands including Salvatore Ferragamo, Versace and Versus Versace and Marai underscored its licensing business model compels the company to commit to transparency. "We're already a very transparent, traceable company...because with important brands such as Ferragamo and Versace we must avoid being accused of nonethical processes, and also we're subject to constant audit of our suppliers," he explained, noting they are ready to disclose the division's sustainable efforts. (Timex Luxury Division was not assessed by the Swiss WWF study.) Triggered by Vincent Bérard's green ethos, the executive also observed that a more overtly eco-friendly approach could apply to and be channeled into licensed brands, too.

The division also recently signed licensing agreements for the design, development and distribution of the Teslar LLC and CT Scuderie brands, last October and last January, respectively. Along with Vincent Bérard – the only owned label within the division's portfolio – the new licenses are building up the company's range of non-fashion brands. "These three new projects will allow us to take a breather from the fashion world and go beyond just that with a second pillar – particularly with a company-owned brand," Marai explained. "We wanted to overcome this double dependency on nonproprietary brands, which are subject to fluctuations, and also design-wise to loosen our grip on fashion-driven labels," he added.

In 2018 the Timex Luxury Division represented 15 percent of Timex Group sales and Marai expects that to increase to 20 percent by 2020. Timex Group does not disclose sales figures. "We start to be significant for the group and we are also the profitable division as the name 'luxury' might suggest," he said.



The dial of each timepiece features a green hand.