



TIME TRAVELLER

His grin falls somewhere between cheeky and amused when asked how he “got into watches”. Marcus Margulies has a two-word reply: “By birth.” No great secret there, for the watch trade at least, given that Margulies inherited his father’s business.

“That was easy,” admits the 60-something doyen of the Bond Street watches trade. “My father came to England from Poland, and didn’t speak a word of English. He sold clock movements for a friend, but moved into watches—and he became very successful. His dream was that I would follow him. I never wanted anything else; there was nothing I liked more than to visit him when he worked. It was a no-brainer.”

Although Margulies swears that the industry has changed, not necessarily for the better, and the “r” word (retirement), crosses his lips occasionally, he is incapable of hiding his enthusiasm for the business. Margulies has embraced and

Marcus Margulies’s empire stretches from an exceptional emporium on Bond Street to selling one of the UK’s biggest mass-market watch brands in Argos. But what makes him tick? Ken Kessler find out

promoted grand complications including minute repeaters, perpetual calendars with date and moon phases, and—his favourite—tourbillons. In these watches, the heart of the movement rotates, the design originally conceived to counter the effects of gravity; in a wristwatch, it’s something of an intellectual challenge. Tourbillons are difficult to manufacture and therefore expensive. Marcus stocks 40 or more.

While taste matters to Margulies as much as anything, he’s not averse to a bit of bling. Among the treasures in his store are Franck Muller watches, covered entirely in diamonds, along with Piagets, Vogards and others with one thing in common: none are ordinary.

When Margulies speaks, everyone listens. Over the years, he and his companies have handled the best timepieces, from classic Vacheron Constantin and Audemars Piguet models to post-1980 new-wave arrivistes. His store is one of the most elegant (and well stocked) on New Bond Street, complete with home theatre, fine dining and a fabulous wine cellar.

But that does not mean it is purely “cost-no-object” selling. Margulies addresses the mass-market through his ownership of Sekonda—one of the largest entry-level watch producers in the world. It adds to his credibility and respect.

His legend is based on two key qualities. First, Margulies was among those who survived the purge of the quality watch industry, when quartz arrived in the 1970s, decimating brands that couldn’t adapt from mechanical movements. When the backlash hit, and quartz was seen as downmarket, Margulies and a handful of others were there to re-introduce mechanical movements to a newly enlightened clientele.

Second, Margulies has championed fascinating new brands. He likes to trawl the annual Basel watch fair looking for exciting newcomers even though he has trusted personnel who could do this for him. Among the latest to earn his benediction are Urwerk, Jorg Hysek and Greubel-Forsey.

Margulies joined his father’s company after working in Swiss watch factories—a hands-on apprenticeship. “One of his managing directors left, so he threw me in at the deep end. He probably also had an over-exaggerated idea of my ability.

“This happened when I was about 22. My father gave me the chairmanship in 1977, on his 75th birthday. We had huge trouble in 1982 when our Hong Kong operation



totally over-expanded, so major changes were made and we took on a professional chairman.”

Margulies felt this was long overdue. “We were running a public company as a family business until then,” he says. The company returned to private status six years ago but Margulies claims that the disciplines acquired as a public company still prevail in the way the business is run today.

Margulies doesn't allow his passion for watches to overtake his need for a commercial and dispassionate eye. He does not consider himself a collector, despite his appreciation for complications and for hand-craftsmanship. “I've got watches that I've acquired over the years, but the focus changes. When I was young and more impressionable, I bought what I thought were 'pretty' watches. Today, I prefer more interesting pieces.”

In Margulies-speak, “interesting” means a product with a refreshing take on styling, a novel movement, or something made from exotic materials. During our interview, he is wearing one of his leisure-time favourites, having just come

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back from Italy: a Hublot Big Bang, one of the hottest watches around. Only his is different: it has a white bezel and white rubber strap—the watch industry's idea of “irony” in a timepiece costing more than £5,000.

“There's got to be an aesthetic quality to them, but there's more to a watch than just looking nice. It's got to have a soul. If you've got a dumb blonde, it's not bad for the short term. But you want somebody with brains,” he laughs.

He long ago stopped looking at watches as pieces of jewellery that tell the time and, because the high-end watch market has never enjoyed a more sophisticated customer base, there's something of the evangelist about Margulies. This touches on a contradictory aspect of his business: while Marcus rates London among the five or six most important “watch capitals” of the world—up there with New York and

Geneva—he bemoans the fact that almost 70 per cent of upscale purchases go to foreign customers, not Brits.

“If you consider watches at the top level, quality-wise rather than by price, I would say there's a lack of appreciation in England, compared to any other market. If people [in the UK] buy a big-brand watch, they generally buy low-end models, because they think they should be wearing that brand; the advertising works. High-end watches are tremendous today—there are a lot of small watchmaking brands turning out amazing pieces, but we don't sell (them) to English people—apart from a handful of very knowledgeable and passionate collectors.”

This surfeit of foreign customers is skewed to emerging millionaire and billionaire territories such as China, Russia and India, along with traditionally wealthy clients from Japan, the Middle East and the US.

As for the City-bonus brigade, Margulies does not court their attentions. With resignation rather than contempt, he says: “City people are too busy working to spend their money.” Margulies regrets that the newly wealthy still opt for watches such as Rolex or Cartier which announce that one has “arrived”. And the spend is lower. Margulies believes the average price of a UK watch is one of the lowest in Europe.

Is it changing? “Slowly. But the gap [between the UK and Europe] will never narrow. The men buy a good watch they believe will last for a lifetime; they take pride in wearing their father's watch. The women are the poor relations. Go to Glynedebourne, and see the way the corporate wives are dressed—a French woman will spend more on a pair of shoes than the English corporate wife will on her whole outfit.

“For UK executives, the wristwatch does not have the status or cachet it has abroad,” argues Margulies. “And in England, the main watch stores are multiples. There are very few really good, privately-owned outlets. In France, Germany and Italy, it's all individual stores—it's a different culture of independence, background and knowledge.”

But Margulies isn't wholly pessimistic. “As people travel, and they're exposed to more and more, their taste improves.” And there's still a privately-run store on Bond Street that will happily address that growing band of sophisticates' demands for some quality time.



Tracking down a great watch

“The way to find anything good in any field is to ask an unbiased expert, listen, and then make up your own mind. But follow your instincts. Or sit down and really read about watches, follow auction results, go and see what the major jewellers stock, and what people wear—within reason. Brand X may put its watches on the wrist of Wayne Rooney, but he might not be an arbiter of taste for the sort of person looking for a great watch.”

Marcus Margulies
chairman of Time
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