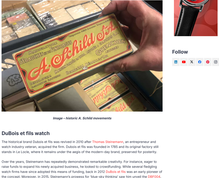


BY ANGUS DAVIES

## Thomas Gronenthal - Dubois et fils in-depth feature

*In July 2024, Dubois et fils opened a new workshop in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, close to its Boudevilliers HQ. The Swiss marque appointed Thomas Gronenthal, a self-confessed 'watch enthusiast', to oversee the new workshop. Now, the watch industry veteran is eager to discuss more about his professional journey and his fondness for historical watch movements. Moreover, he said about the new workshop at Mulleret and the work undertaken at the site.*



*Image – Antoine A. Schild movements*

### Dubois et fils watch

The historical brand Dubois et fils was revived in 2015 after Thomas Gronenthal, an entrepreneur and watch industry veteran, acquired the firm. Dubois et fils was founded in 1785 and its original factory still stands in La Locle, where it remains under the aegis of the modern day brand, preserved for posterity.

Over the years, Gronenthal has repeatedly demonstrated remarkable creativity. For instance, eager to raise funds to expand the newly acquired business, he turned to crowdfunding. While several fledgling companies had tried and failed to successfully crowdfund watches, Dubois et fils was the first company to pioneer the concept. Moreover, in 2015, Gronenthal's prowess for flair was lifelong was him and the DBF054, a contemporary watch filled with a historic flavour. Moreover, released to mark the company's 230th anniversary, the DBF054 combined Swiss tradition and NFT digitals and further endorsed of Gronenthal- following his own, unique path to success.

While Gronenthal has demonstrated a willingness to embrace groundbreaking ways of growing Dubois et fils, he has also shown a profound respect for Swiss watchmaking tradition. He has strived to procure components from his home nation rather than merely meeting the criteria of 'Swiss Made' Ominous 60% of Swiss values. But most notable of all, no doubt inspired by the popularity of the DBF054, he has continued to use historic movements, uniting them within modern day haldings.

In July 2024, the company opened a new workshop in Mulleret on the outskirts of Basel. It is here where the company now assembles, services and repairs CMF models under the watchful eye of Thomas Gronenthal, a self-confessed watch enthusiast.

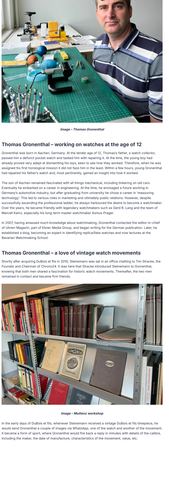

*Image – Thomas Gronenthal*

### Thomas Gronenthal - working on watches at the age of 12

Gronenthal was born in Aachen, Germany. At the tender age of 12, Thomas's father, a watch collector, passed him a defunct pocket watch and tasked him with repairing it. At the time, the young boy had no knowledge of watches, but he was keen to learn. Moreover, he was also keen to please his father, who assigned his first horological mission a bit too high him to the task. Within a few hours, young Gronenthal had repaired his father's watch and, most pertinently, gained an insight into how it worked.

The sort of Aachen renowned fascinated with all things horological, including tinkering on old cars. Eventually he embarked on a career in engineering. At the time, he envisaged a future working in Germany's automotive industry, but after graduating from university he chose a career in 'measuring technology'. This led to various roles in marketing and university public relations. Moreover, despite being a watch enthusiast, Gronenthal was not yet ready to pursue a career in the watch industry. Nevertheless, Over the years, he became friendly with legendary watchmakers such as Gerald R. Lang and the team of Marcel Kahn, especially his long term master watchmaker Aurelus Prager.

In 2002, having amassed much knowledge about watchmaking, Gronenthal contacted the editor in chief of Uhren Magazin, part of Einer Media Group, and began writing for the German publication. Later, he joined the team at Uhren Magazin, support in identifying replica/fake watches and now lectures at the Bavarian Watchmaking School.

### Thomas Gronenthal - a love of vintage watch movements

Shortly after acquiring Dubois et fils in 2015, Gronenthal was sat in an office chatting to Tim Stracke, the Founder and Chairman of Chronofil. It was here that Stracke introduced Gronenthal to Gronenthal, knowing that both men shared a fascination for historic watch movements. Thereafter, the two men remained in contact and became firm friends.

*Image – Mulleret workshop*

In the early days of Dubois et fils, whenever Gronenthal received a vintage Dubois et fils timepiece, he would dismantle the movement and photograph it. Moreover, he would then upload the photographs to Facebook a form of point, where Gronenthal would flick back a reply in minutes with details of the calibre, including the maker, the date of manufacture, characteristics of the movement, value, etc.

*Image – Mulleret workshop*

With both men in regular contact, it was perhaps inevitable that Gronenthal would join Dubois et fils where he is now responsible for managing the new Mulleret facility. Recently, I was offered the opportunity to chat with Gronenthal and I readily accepted.

### Thomas Gronenthal - Angus Davies (AD), asks a series of questions

**Angus Davies (AD): *I've heard some watchmakers remark that the quality of steel used in the past was superior to that typically used today. Do you share this opinion?***

Thomas Gronenthal (TG): Yes, I do. But also, with older movements you can see that the design was made by a watchmaker for a watchmaker and the movements were developed to run for long periods in between services. They were also designed to be easily serviced.

If you consider a broken mainspring, which can happen from time to time, on an old Aerof Schild or Felsa movement, you can loosen two screws, remove the barrel bridge, remove the barrel, replace the mainspring and then reassemble everything. Within 30 minutes, assuming the watch does not require a service, you've completed the repair. However, on a modern movement, you must fully dismantle everything.

Modern movements are designed for automated production which is not something I particularly like and is the reason why I prefer historic movements.

**(AD): *Are there any other reasons you prefer vintage movements?***

(TG): Yes. The dimensions of the gear train wheels are bigger, meaning the transmission of energy from the barrel to the escapement more efficient. The wheels are typically stronger. For example, with an old Felsa calibre, you could throw the movement against a wall and it will probably be fine. However, on some new movements, such treatment is likely to bend a gear train wheel because they are much thinner to reduce such height.

On older movements, there is also more torque in the geartrain – those calibres are near workhorses, made to last instead of acquiring an award.

*Image – customised CMF 2004 belonging to Thomas Gronenthal*

The best combination is a vintage movement paired with modern indicators. I recently built my own CMF 004. I had a Calibre 60-1900 at home and Thomas Gronenthal gave me a prototype dial and case. I did a lot of work on the movement and even found all the screws. Now, the watch runs superbly and would easily pass the criteria for chronometer certification.

*Image – customised CMF 2004 belonging to Thomas Gronenthal*

**(AD): *Can you tell me about your new workshop?***

(TG): Four months ago (July 2024) there was nothing here. It was just 240m² of space, featuring blue carpet and white walls. Moreover, I had to create a clean surface, repaint the walls, and installed new shelving, purchased new equipment, etc. I also relocated my workshop from Zermatt, including all of my equipment and hundreds of tools.

Recently, we acquired 18,000 historic movements and millions of spare parts. This is in addition to the existing stock we already possessed. Moreover, we have 3,000 cases, 10,000 movements, 10,000 dials, 10,000 crystals for NFC watches and also parts for Jaeger-LeCoultre, Omega and Rolex Bubblebacks. We even have blued steel hands for Longines pocket watches from the 1950s and wooden storage boxes made in the Jaeger-LeCoultre factory. As noted by the first company being advised by Swiss officials to independently locate watch parts.

*Image – Mulleret workshop*

In terms of the workshop, I have great views from my bench, ,, I can see the trains travelling to Basel (whilst) and the large windows provide an abundance of natural light, perfect conditions for working on watches (smiles again).

*Image – Gilbeth Ipsomatic*

After four months, we now do all the aftermarkets service on site. We also assemble and regulate all of our watches in the new workshop. Recently, I've been working on the Gilbeth watches (Gilbeth Ipsomatic) which is equipped with a Felsa calibre 1900.

*Image – Felsa calibre 1900 for use in the Gilbeth Ipsomatic*

This watch was made for the 170th anniversary of Gilbeth. The case measures 38 mm and is formed of platinum. We oversaw the project, liaising with the crane and dial suppliers. I'm responsible for restoring the movements as well as assembling and regulating the watches.

***Image – Gübelin Ipsomatic***

It was very important to Gübelin that we use the Felsa calibre 1560. Back in 1954, the company released a 100th anniversary watch fitted with the same movement, featuring a rotor engraved with the dates 1854-1954. The rotor on the new Ipsomatic is engraved with the dates 1854-2024.

***Image – Gübelin Ipsomatic***

## Thomas Gronenthal – conclusion

Thomas is a rare individual whose career path has encompassed engineering, marketing, journalism and watchmaking. While his professional journey has embraced a variety of disciplines, he possesses an innate passion for watchmaking history, especially vintage movements. It is this passion which he embraces in his current role at DuBois et fils.

As we near the end of our interview, we engage in a spot of small talk and return to Gronenthal's original intention of becoming an automotive engineer. I suggest that watches and cars are very similar, citing the notable robustness and dependability of the Audi 100 and the Mercedes W123, produced back in the 80s. He readily agrees, nodding profusely with my comments. While I would not consider myself a 'laggard' and recognise the benefits of some modern-day technologies, I still appreciate the engineering integrity found in these historic cars, the same qualities that are manifest with the A. Schild, Felsa, Peseux, Valjoux movements of yesteryear.

Sadly, despite widespread talk of 'environmental concerns', modern-day society still has a propensity for discarding objects to make way for new and shiny goods. With this in mind, the rationale for restoring historic movements makes a lot of sense and shows a forward-thinking approach to watchmaking; an approach taken by DuBois et fils.

## Further reading

https://duboisfils.ch

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