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1

Slyde Rules?

Why has a high-end digital watch been one of the most anticipated launches of the year? Can the HD3 Slyde really make its mark in the overcrowded luxury watch market?

The anticipation around the launch of the HD3 Slyde was one of the biggest surprises to emerge from this year's watch and jewellery trade shows. Like many other contemporary timepieces, it harnesses extravagant materials, complex manufacturing techniques and commands a serious price tag. Although it meets many of the criteria required to be considered as a true piece of haute horology, one cardinal sin holds it back. The Slyde is a digital watch.

The Slyde represents a new breed of digital watches, ones specifically designed to appeal to luxury-timepiece enthusiasts. By combining the latest technology with the last word in fine fabrication, these new digital desires are intended to make a bold statement about the future of watchmaking.

Purists have long looked upon digital watches scornfully. Among collectors they're regarded as cheap and inferior to mechanical timepieces, harnessing electronic circuitry as a short cut to accuracy. No amount of gold plating or diamond encrusting can change the fact that they're just not the collectable clockwork marvels that inevitably adorn the wrists of serious watch fans.

Digital timepieces do, however, have their place. In the field of sports, for instance, an extremely high level of accuracy is a key factor in watch selection. The digital watch's ability to display an output true to a thousandth of a second can often be the deciding factor in a close race. It is also in this arena that cheap, yet robust, construction is desirable. Even the hardest of mechanical movements can be unsettled by a severe shock. A simple, chunky, plastic case will protect a digital watch from almost anything and, even if does break, it isn't going to cost a month's wages to replace it.

All things considered, however, there are few adventurers who would risk travelling to the deepest, darkest depths of the ocean without a Rolex Submariner. You'll also find the only watch officially certified by NASA is a mechanically powered Omega. Perhaps, at a primal level, there is something extremely comforting about being able to hear a watch "tick"—reassurance that it is a device built for purpose. Indeed, mechanical accuracy has never been greater. Constant strides are being made in harnessing new high-performance alloys that improve every facet of timepiece design. A number of compounds, such as

- 1 The HD3 Slyde is constructed from the highest possible grade of suitable materials available
- 2 Dials are changed by swiping the touchscreen and new designs will be available for a fee



2

“Purists have long looked upon digital watches scornfully. Among collectors, they’re regarded as cheap and inferior”

liquid metal, tungsten carbide and specially designed ceramics, are all being utilised in the latest timepieces, making each generation more robust than the last.

Meanwhile, digital development has pretty much ground to a halt, mainly because it can't really get any better. Unlike mechanical watchmaking, digital accuracy has, more or less, reached a stage where it cannot be improved upon. The only area for the digital watch to make improvements is in aesthetics, and here too the mechanical timepiece has the advantage.

The exposed case back or skeletonised movement of a luxury timepiece is a thing of beauty. It is a mechanised sculpture that is a testament to the thousands of hours spent polishing and perfecting the engine at the heart of the watch. By contrast, there are few things as off-putting as looking at the dull green hue of a silicon circuit board powering a digital display.

With the Slyde, electronic digital watches may at last have a riposte to the beauty of mechanical movement. It may have taken 40 years, but it's hard to argue that the Slyde's high-definition experience isn't impressive.

At first glance it looks like many other high-concept masculine wristwatches. It has an “exposed movement” that gives the wearer—and his associates—a chance to bear witness to the fruits of the watchmaker's highly skilled labour. The overblown gears and cogs of this particular timepiece, though, are all rendered by some computer whizz and displayed on the Slyde's glorious high-definition touch screen.

Some commentators say it's a symbol of watchmaking's evolution and the perfect timepiece to lure “Generation Y” to the world of high-end timekeeping. Whichever way you look at it, it's a far cry from the image so fiercely protected by many of the

high-end watchmakers—inevitably that of an artisan craftsman, delicately fashioning a clockwork marvel in the Swiss mountains.

That's not to say that the Slyde doesn't come with some impressive credentials. The watch was designed by Jorg Hysek Snr, a man rightly rated as one of the greatest living watch designers. Hysek is behind many iconic timepieces. These include Tiffany & Co's Streamerica collection, Patek Philippe's Nautilus range and the Breguet Marine series, as well as countless other iconic collections for the world's great watchmakers.

In the '90s Hysek set up his own watchmaking atelier, allowing him free range to express his unashamedly masculine style. Oversized crowns, squared dials and exposed mechanisms are all trademarks of the Hysek style. It is a style which has had a clear influence on the current vogue for the oversized industrial aesthetic.

In 2002 Hysek left the firm which carried his name and established HD3 Complication. This entirely new project had the singular aim of creating the “next generation” of watches. Since its launch, the firm has produced numerous collections that,



3

although striking, are very much in keeping with Hysek's familiar design DNA.

The Slyde, however, is the first piece that has really caused this level to rise. Taking two years to develop, it will finally be available in September.

Its titanium case houses a high-definition touch screen protected by a sapphire crystal, something which has never been achieved before. This screen displays the watch dial and the intention is to release other dials, many of which will be created by world-famous designers. These designs can be downloaded but these downloads won't be cheap. The price per dial is currently predicted to be around US\$200 (HK\$1,560).

Hysek says: "I've been designing watches for over 30 years and I really felt it was time to try something completely different. When we first came up with idea, the technology guys said it couldn't be done. No one had ever managed to make a touch screen from a sapphire crystal before. It took us two years, but we've managed it."

"It's been amazing how many of the watch brands have expressed their enthusiasm about the Slyde. Many people want to get involved

in designing virtual movements for the display because it allows you to create things that wouldn't be possible in the real world.

"For watchmakers, that is extremely exciting because it means you've always got a platform to express new ideas and creative visions. I truly believe that we've created a new image of seeing and reading the time."

Naturally, Hysek's belief in Slyde is unshakable. Although it is finely crafted and has clear luxury intent, at the end of the day, the Slyde is still a digital watch. Critics of the concept have also pointed out that other high-end digital watches are already available.

In fact some commentators have drawn comparisons with Apple's iPod nano which, at a fraction of the price, can be placed in an after-market wristband to perform an almost identical task. While the iPod nano is hardly a luxury item, there are a number of other products that clearly are.

The Celsius X VI II LeDIX, for example, marries a mobile phone with the beauty of a clockwork tourbillon on its outer lid. Although it may be easy to be sceptical about such creations, if nothing else it proves there is a market for them.

3 The Celsius X VI II LeDIX mobile phone has a working tourbillon mounted on its case

4 Omega's Timecomputer range was the height of taste and sophistication during the 1970s

5 Hamilton's Pulsomatic appeals to fans of retro styling and design

Of course it's not the first time that the world of horology has travelled this route. In the 1970s the rise of the digital watch apparently threatened the Swiss industry to such an extent that the period was even given the lofty title of "The Quartz Crisis". Back then, the use of quartz was seen by many as heralding a new age in watchmaking. Many believed its high levels of accuracy were expected to render mechanised timepieces obsolete.

Quartz works as a replacement for the oscillator in a mechanical watch. When an electric current is applied to the quartz crystal, it vibrates at a constant, stable frequency. This can be harnessed and used to provide a fixed time base. Virtually impervious to atmospheric changes, temperature and shock, quartz is much more robust than any mechanical movement—at least in theory.

Major watchmakers, including Rolex and Omega, were heavily involved in the emerging technology. In a rare show of unity, 16 manufactures came together to create the first quartz-powered movement: Beta21. The movement was first made available to consumers in 1970, when a number of the members of the consortium began to release their first quartz-driven timepieces.

This new technology allowed for the creation of digital electronic watches. The very first was made by Pulsar, an offshoot of the famous American watchmakers, Hamilton.