

Wristwatches

by Bruce Shawkey (WI)

Ernest Borel: More Than Just a Cocktail

Chances are if I mention the brand name “Ernest Borel,” one model comes to mind: the so-called “Cocktail Watch.” Introduced by the company in 1953, the watch with the kaleidoscope dial defines this company in much the same way that the “Cricket” alarm watch defines Vulcain, or the “Pointer Calendar Watch” defines Oris.

But the fact is that Ernest Borel has made many other interesting and innovative wristwatch models over the years—up until the 1970s when the quartz revolution nearly killed the mechanical watchmaking industry. The company is now undergoing a renaissance; its current owners are attempting to reintroduce the brand worldwide. Current ads in consumer watch magazines such as *WatchTalk*, *iW Magazine*, and *Chronos* play up the company’s heritage, back to its founding more than 150 years ago in Neuchatel, Switzerland (the company is currently headquartered in Le Noirmont, Switzerland). The ads feature very stately looking watches that are polar opposites of the vintage Cocktail watches derided by many collectors as quintessential examples of 1960s kitsch.

Despite the company’s long history, the “story” of Ernest Borel (at least for purposes of this article) begins in the late 1940s. That’s because up until this time the company was almost exclusively invested in the Asian market, most notably China. (This was not an uncommon practice by Swiss manufacturers. Rado, for example, did the same thing.) China’s civil war from 1946 to 1949, leading to the Communist takeover in 1949, effectively booted Ernest Borel from that country, and it is no small coincidence that the brand began to appear in the United States around that



Figure 1, left. An Ernest Borel triple-date moonphase watch with A. Schild movement. **Figure 2, right.** A manual-wind rectangular model using the “Incastar” balance system. The roller on the movement (an ETA Caliber 1191) is shown closeup on the upper-right portion of the image.

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time. In fact, the company trademarked its name in the United States as early as 1945, possibly sensing the outcome in China. So this is where we will begin our discussion of Ernest Borel, because there really isn’t much to discuss before then. I have yet to find any surviving examples of its work prior to that time.

One of the earliest Ernest Borel watches I have seen is a triple-calendar moonphase model from the late 1940s (Figure 1). It used an ebauche (unfinished movement) from A. Schild that was supplied to many other watch companies at the time. This brings up an important point: Ernest Borel used movements from other suppliers and did not manufacture its own, at least for wristwatches. The company did manufacture a few pocket watch movement calibers in its very early days, and even won a few awards for technical performance. But like many companies, Borel eventually obtained its movements elsewhere. During its run of wristwatch production in the United States, Borel also used movements from Fontainemelon and ETA, mak-

ing it easy to find replacement parts for most Ernest Borel wristwatches.

Always on the lookout for new angles and novelty features, Ernest Borel experimented with many innovative novelty watches and experimental movements. The company wholeheartedly embraced the new automatic movements from Switzerland after World War II, and thus many examples you see are self-winding models, though there are certainly plenty of manual winding watches to be found.

Worthy of note are those models (both automatic and manual wind) that use a unique balance hairspring system called “Incastar.” Incastar was supposed to enable the watch to be more easily and accurately regulated. Ernest Borel embraced the idea to the point of putting the name on some of its watch dials (Figure 2). In this system, the hairspring is free-floating (versus mounted between two regulator pins). One end of the hairspring is fixed between a roller, and when a watchmaker turns the roller, the hairspring is essentially made longer and shorter, thereby adjusting its rate



Figure 3. An example of the Rendez-Vous, Ernest Borel's alarm watch, using the A. Schild Caliber 1930.

of oscillation. The system was placed into the ETA Caliber 1191, which Ernest Borel used in several manual winding models. A few automatic calibers also used the system. (Mido also experimented with Incastar in several models.)

Incastar ultimately failed. Adjusting the roller-regulator not only alters the beat of the watch but has the unintended effect of changing the centering of the hairspring (critical for proper positional performance and isochronism). It also physically deforms/distorts/fatigues the spring where it is pinched by the roller-regulator. As one watchmaker puts it, "Possibly good on paper, but a real mess in real life." Models using Incastar are probably one exception where replacement parts are hard to find, since the device was dropped from production by the mid-1950s. If you buy one of these, make sure it is complete and at least running!

Another early Ernest Borel watch was the Rendezvous (usually seen on dials as Rendez-Vous), which the company trademarked in the United States in 1946 (Figure 3). It used the A. Schild caliber 1930 (which also used the Incastar regulation system), and the model appeared on the market around the same time other manufacturers released their alarm models, including the Vulcain Cricket. We also see the introduction around this time of an innovative watch called the "Dateoptic" (Figure 4). At first glance, it looks like any

ordinary date watch with magnified date window positioned at the 3:00 position. But upon closer examination, you see that the magnifying lens is actually affixed to the dial and is not part of the optics contained in the crystal, as it is with most other date watches where the numerals are magnified. This is the only watch, as far as I know, to use such a mechanism. In my 28 years of dealing in vintage watches, I have only come across one of these. And I fear I sold it too cheaply on a popular online auction after trying, unsuccessfully, to promote its rarity at watch shows and my own website! The watch featured an automatic movement as well.

Another recognized model is called the "Sea Gem," which makes

Figure 6. This Ernest Borel automatic watch uses a case with a screwed-on back design (used by other watch companies as well) to make the watch water resistant. COURTESY MARIO MARDONES.



Figure 4, left. The magnifying lens over the date window on the "Dateoptic" is mounted on the dial rather than built into the optics of the crystal.

Figure 5, right. The Sea Gem was marketed as a robust water-resistant watch for sport use.



an occasional appearance on vintage watch dealers' lists and on eBay (Figure 5). Figures 6 and 7 show some additional interesting models.

Though not wristwatches, per se, miniature travel clocks by Ernest Borel are also worthy of note, because many wristwatch enthusiasts also collect miniature travel and hermetic watches. Borel's most unique model resembles a miniature book, complete with leather cover (Figure 8). The entire encased clock measures about 4" high by 3" wide, by about 5/8" thick. The title imprinted on its spine was, appropriately enough, *The Book of Time*, in French. Dials are of-

Figure 7. What makes this Ernest Borel unusual (in addition to the hidden lugs) is that it is chronometer certified. Swiss watch companies had to pay a hefty import duty for chronometer-rated watches brought into the United States during the 1950s and '60s, which raised the retail price of the watch considerably. Most watch companies imported watches with "unadjusted" movements to avoid import charges. COURTESY MARIO MARDONES.





Figure 8, left.

A travel clock by Ernest Borel, made to look like a miniature book.

Figure 9, right.

A group of vintage cocktail watches. Top: men's model with clear outer chapter. Lower left: ladies' model with classic starburst pattern. Center right: men's model with flower pattern. Lower right: men's automatic model with date.



ten found signed "ERBO" which of course is short for Ernest Borel. Examples of the travel clock occasionally come up on eBay, and they are eagerly sought by collectors of clocks, watches, book, and novelty items.

Dial signatures on early Ernest Borel watches (late 1940s, early 1950s) can be found in a variety of ways, including "ERNEST BOREL" in block letters, the initials "EB" in a stylized script, and also the so-called "Dancing Couple" logo (see Figures 10, 11, and 12). If you are interested in the details of how this logo came about, I would refer you to the company's website at www.ernestborel.ch. While it is an interesting and cute little story, it does not bear on the main focus of this article. Suffice to say it is a distinctive logo, and Ernest Borel fully exploits it in its current line of watches.

The Cocktail Watch

The Cocktail Watch, which defines Ernest Borel more than any other, was patented in 1952 and introduced in 1953. It was introduced as a ladies' watch only. A 1955 advertisement proclaimed it as a watch "to enhance your femininity without losing the notion of time." As far as I can tell, it was initially pitched as a watch women could wear to cocktail parties as a novelty item and/or conversation starter. The constantly moving kaleidoscope dial can be quite mesmerizing, though its secret is quite simple. Two clear plastic discs

with the same geometric pattern are mounted underneath the crystal. One is fixed. The other is mounted on a center pinion that normally functions to turn the movement's sweep second hand. When the free-mounted disc turns and its pattern juxtaposes itself against the stationary disc, it creates a moving kaleidoscope effect. The original pattern on the wheels was marquis-shaped, creating a continuous "sunburst" pattern. Other shapes were introduced over the years and include flower, arrows, and stars. Each pattern creates a different kaleidoscope effect.

The cocktail watch occupied a relatively small market niche for Ernest Borel for the first few years. Then came the 1960s, and the Cocktail Watch became a favorite of hippies and flower children. Suddenly, it was no longer a "kaleidoscope" dial, but a "psychedelic" watch, man! Men wanted their own version, and the company was only too happy to oblige. Soon the "Cocktail Watch" became Borel's best seller, eclipsing every other model the company made. True to its heritage, Ernest Borel offers an updated version of the Cocktail Watch, and they are (at least in my opinion) considerably more classy than the more kitschy originals, although the vintage specimens certainly do have their own charm (and command good prices). A group of vintage cocktail watches is shown in Figure 9.

Company History

The company was founded in 1859 by Jules Borel (1832-1898) and a brother-in-law, Paul Courvoisier (?-1894) as Borel & Courvoisier. Some historians peg the company's founding to 1856, but that is the year Borel began his career as a watchmaker. The same year of Courvoisier's death, Jules' son, Ernest (1869-1951), joined the firm, and the company name was changed slightly to Borel-Courvoisier, replacing the ampersand "and" with a hyphen between the names to denote one company versus a collaboration between two entities. Four years later, upon the death of Jules, Ernest and Adamir Debrot (the technical director for the company) took control of the firm. A year later, in 1899, they changed the name to Ernest Borel & Cie. (The name Ernest Borel & Fils is also seen.)

Ernest Borel led the company up to 1936, when his son, Jean-Louis Borel, succeeded as the manager of the company. Jean-Louis Borel managed Ernest Borel up to 1975, when it was bought by the firm of Aubry Frère S. A. Adamir Debrot, meanwhile, climbed the ranks and was eventually respon-

sible for Ernest Borel production from 1923 to 1975. He is credited with the bulk of the company's innovation in wristwatches during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s.

The purchase in 1975 by the firm Aubry Frère S. A. brought Ernest Borel under the umbrella of the Synchron S. A. group of brands, which included Cyma and Doxa at the time. In 1997 Ernest Borel was purchased by a group of investors from China, bringing the company full circle back to its roots in the Asian market. The investors appointed Raphaël Boillat as CEO, who in 2009 named his daughter, Nathalie, as successor. This year, the company opened a flagship store (the largest in the company's history) in Singapore, cementing its relationship once again with the Asian market. In 2009 (the last year for which figures are available) the company produced approximately 60,000 timepieces, compared with 3,000 produced in 1997 when Mr. Boillat took over as CEO.

The company's current product lines include quartz watches and a more upscale group of models featuring certified chronometers and watches with complications, including chronographs. It's considered within the industry to be a "second-tier" brand, on a par with the likes of Enicar, Oris, and Sandoz. While its chief markets are the Far East, Europe, and the Middle East, the company is making inroads to the U.S. market, as previously mentioned. As this article goes to press, Ernest Borel watches are available at jewelry stores in 14 states.

Dials on most of the modern models feature the "Dancing Couple" logo (Figure 12). In what must certainly be one of the industry's more unusual corporate sponsorships, Ernest Borel in 2012 became an official sponsor of USA Dance, the country's largest and most recognized governing organization for ballroom dance



Figure 10, left. This current model features an automatic movement with dual-time zone feature and large figure date window. **Figure 11, right.** An example of the new and updated cocktail watch features an automatic movement, and the kaleidoscope portion of the dial has been downsized.

competitions. The sponsorship continues this year. If you think this is "small potatoes" in terms of brand exposure, consider that USA Dance-member dance schools across the United States are attended by 220,000 ballroom dancers, ranging from preschoolers to seniors. Regional and national ballroom dance competitions attract thousands of spectators, not only attending live events but watching on television.

In another rather bizarre promotion (in my opinion), the company in 2010 came out with a "Rocky" series of watches, in partnership with the movie franchise starring Sylvester



Figure 12. The Ernest Borel Dancing Couple logo.

Stallone. One model features an "in your face" yellow dial (which was probably the company's intention). Purely quartz, the manly size watches feature the dancing company logos on the dials, providing an interesting juxtaposition to the meat-pounding boxer for which the watches are named. The line continues to this day, even though the last "Rocky" movie was made in 2006. I can't quite comprehend the logic of this co-branding venture, but it seems to work, for the "Rocky" series draws a loyal following.

Figures 10 and 11 show a couple of my favorites in the company's current lineup of "upscale" watches, which contain mechanical movements. (Borel also has more entry-level type watches with quartz movements). The first (Figure 10) is from the "Retro" collection and is a dual-time zone model (Internet retail about \$2,800) that shows the date in dual numerical windows at the top of the watch. The other (Figure 11) is one from the "Cocktail" collection. Currently, it is designated as a women's watch, though with a case diameter of 31 mm, a man could certainly wear it. As you can see, the kaleidoscope portion of the dial has been downsized, making the watch look a little more "dignified" for lack of a better word. Featuring an automatic Swiss-made ETA movement, these are offered in several dial colors (with matching bands), and each has an Internet retail price of \$1,565.

Ernest Borel and Jules Borel & Co.

I am sometimes asked if there is any connection between Ernest Borel (the watch company) and Jules Borel and Co., the watch and jewelry makers supply company based in Kansas City, MO. As far as I can determine, there is no connection, beyond perhaps a distant connection somewhere in the genealogy of the Borel family name. Jules Borel and Co. was founded in 1920 by Jules Borel and his wife Juliette, who immigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1918.