

Designer Cuckoo Clocks

By Juan F. Déniz



Designer cuckoo clocks are a trend that took off successfully in the twenty-first century. From the scientific or mechanical aspect of horology their value may be limited (these timepieces are fitted with quartz movements, sometimes digital, or mass-produced mechanical movements). However, from an artistic point of view their importance is unquestionable.

The concise but meaningful motto “less is more,” adopted by the genius architect Mies van der Rohe as a precept for minimalism, perfectly defines the designer cuckoo clock. In the context of our postindustrial society it seems to have found its place, because it matches the basic, elegant, and functional decor of many homes.

The sources of inspiration are multiple and unprecedented. Some clocks have been devised as if they were true mobile sculptures; examples include TuTu by Mattia Cimadoro and Coco by Enrico Azzimont; others borrow motifs from nature (e.g., Bricchetto by Raffaele Darra); others, starting from everyday articles, reach unsuspected limits, as illustrated in Free Time by Alessandro Busana or Koo Koo by Studio Kuadra. The variety of models is wide, and the imaginations of the different designers seem to fly freely, with boldness, and with no strings attached to the past.

Several models with a functional and modern aesthetic were already produced in the twentieth century. A predecessor of the 2005-2013 time period discussed in this article is the design shown above. The image depicts Kuckuck,¹ by the Germans Reinhard Zetsche and Markus Heckhausen (1997, discontinued in 2002); its case was made of polypropylene. Another example is Picchio (1997), conceived by Barbero Design for Progetti. Both featured a mechanical one-day movement

Another Italian firm, Diamantini & Domeniconi, introduced its first two designer models in 2005. Other brand names followed in Germany, Italy, Japan, and the Netherlands. Foremost international creators began to use geometric shapes, volumes, materials, technology, and a palette of colors never seen before in cuckoo clock manufacturing.

Some designer cuckoos have been and are regularly exhibited in the most celebrated interior design fairs, such as Ambiente in Frankfurt, Maison&Objet in Paris, and Salone Internazionale del Mobile in Milan. They are also seen in two renowned horological collections, the Cuckoo-land Museum in the United Kingdom and the Deutsches Uhrenmuseum in Germany.

Some will never consider these ultramodern and provocative designs cuckoo clocks in the strict sense of the word, finding them lacking in charm, and preferring the carved ones and/or the chalet style. As some Black Foresters would say: *Desch is doch kei Kuckucksuhr meh!* [But this is not a cuckoo clock anymore!]. By contrast, other people are more attracted to contemporary creations, and they see the traditional clocks as old-fashioned, opting for the minimalist, but stylish, current cuckoos.

In my humble opinion, it was necessary for modern designers to take on the challenge of breaking away from the stagnant patterns that have been continuously repeated and imitated, in the specific case of the *Bahnhäusle* derivatives,² since the 1860s.³ This stylistic “rebellion” has revitalized an old icon. As a full revolution happened with the invention of the *Bahnhäusle* style by

Friedrich Eisenlohr in 1850/51,⁴ we are witnessing another one. Let’s hope this generation is only the beginning, and artists continue to surprise us with fresh proposals in the future.

The following pages present a small but representative sample of cuckoo clocks built from 2005 to 2013. The selection has been drawn up as objectively as possible, without personal interest in a brand or country in particular, but according to the most groundbreaking, audacious, and avant-garde designs, and for the novelty of materials used in the fabrication of the cases or because of the unique reinterpretation.

I have included only a brief description, to let the pieces speak for themselves. The year shown for each product indicates when it was initially marketed.



Cueù

Designer: Pascal Tarabay

Year: 2005

Manufacturer: Diamantini & Domeniconi (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Metal and wood

Description/features: This creation is based on the historic *Jagdstück* [hunt piece], a pattern devised in Furtwangen, Germany, in 1861.⁵ The front is a laser-cut metal sheet that represents the silhouette of the well-known model with deer head, but without any sort of three-dimensional woodwork, just a flat and smooth surface with a gap from which the automaton pops out as usual.



Half Time

Designer: Christie Bassil

Year: 2005

Manufacturer: Diamantini & Domeniconi (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: In the unconventional *Half Time*, the classic form is broken in half and as a novelty the “resident” comes out of the side of the case, not the front. The basic dial, with its black numbers and plain hands, is located on what would normally be the side but is now the front, and the bird emerges on what would be the front but is now the side.



Designers:

Tobias

Reischle and

Ingolf Haas

Manufacturer:

Rombach und

Haas

(Germany)

Year: 2006

Movement type: Mechanical

Material: Wood

Description/features: Designed for the German company Artificial, the typical house-shaped case of the old cuckoo clock is stripped of any superfluous ornamentation or carving and refined and transformed here to a simplified version, showing only its essential lines. This was sold in the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) store from 2007 until 2010 and is now part of its permanent collection.⁶



Digital Cuckoo

Designer: Chris Koens

Year: 2006

Manufacturer: Invotis
(The Netherlands)

Movement type: Digital

Material: Plastic

Description/features: In the digital era, for the first time in the history of cuckoo clocks, the bird is not a 3D figurine made of wood, plastic, or other material but a virtual one appearing in a liquid crystal display. The outline of the popular Black Forest cuckoo clock with a bird motif is revised and transmuted in a versatile, electronic item that is also an alarm clock.



Wildermann

Designer: Georgios Maridakis

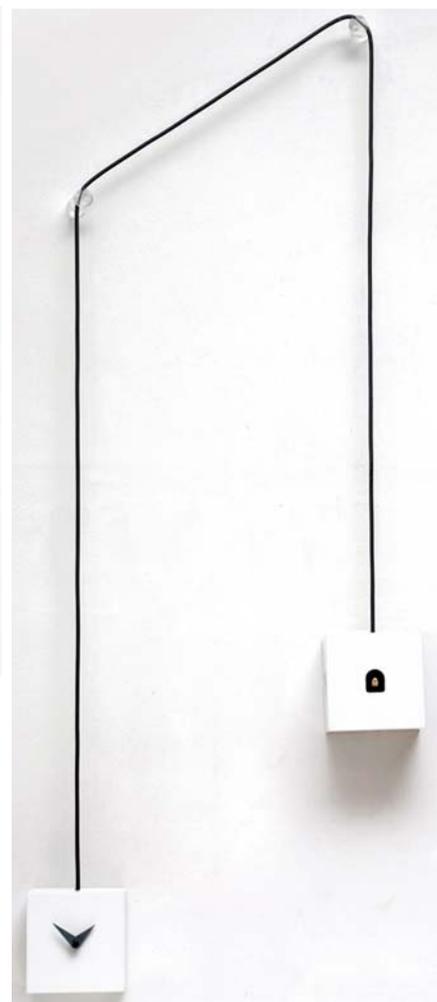
Year: 2007

Manufacturer: Spell (The Netherlands)

Movement type: Digital

Material: Wood and semi-acrylic

Description/features: Wildermann is a limited edition⁷ piece that has been sculpted by using state-of-the-art woodcutting techniques resulting in multiple superimposed layers. Like pop-up books for children, a “page” is opened and we discover a corner of the Black Forest, with creatures that seem to come to life.



TuTu

Designer: Mattia Cimadoro

Year: 2007

Manufacturer: Progetti (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: This opus presents two cubes: one houses the clock and the other one the avis. *Tutu* in Italian is associated with the dial tone of the telephone, and both modules are connected by a wire, as if they were communicating with each other. It can be hung from the ceiling, too, turning into a mobile sculpture. As an innovation, the clockwork and the cuckoo are placed separately, not forming a whole within the same receptacle. This clock was selected to be part of “Collezione Farnesina Design,” a collection set up in 2009 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote Italian industrial design.



Bricchetto

Designer: Raffaele Darra

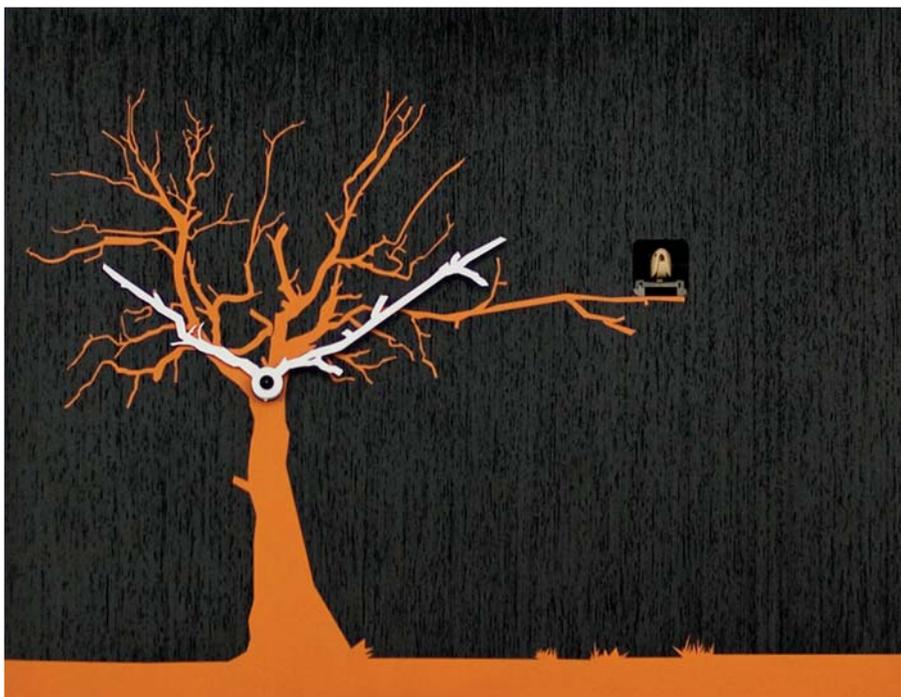
Year: 2008

Manufacturer: Diamantini & Domeniconi (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Glass

Description/features: The Italian word *Bricchetto* (briquette in English) alludes to the compact and elongated body of this piece. Nature was the muse chosen for this peculiar design portraying a tree trunk, with its intertwined rough bark, where our “tenant” found a shelter to announce the hours. It is the first cuckoo clock whose casing is made out of glass.



CùCùRùKù

Designers: Riccardo Paolino

and Matteo Fusi

Year: 2008

Manufacturer: Progetti (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: Here is another vivid example of a minimalist work inspired by wild life. To one side of the rectangular wooden case is a painted leafless tree from whose center protrudes two white branches doing the unusual task of functioning as hands, giving a sense of motion to the composition. On one of the painted tree branches our winged protagonist is "perched." This clock was selected to be part of "Collezione Farnesina Design," a collection set up in 2009 by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote Italian industrial design.

Vogelfrei

Designer: Conny Haas and

Ingolf Haas

Year: 2010

Manufacturer: Rombach und Haas (Germany)

Movement type: Mechanical

Material: Wood

Description/features: On top of a bamboo polyhedron, two free birds [vogelfrei] are not "incarcerated" inside their "workplace" anymore, and each sings one of the two notes of the cuckoo's call. Modernity and tradition are blended with the fir cone weights. A cross cut in the center of



Double q

Designer: Alberto Sala

Year: 2009

Manufacturer: Progetti (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: In this unusual model everything comes in double: the movement, the set of hands, the pendulum, and of course the "performer," all combined and united in one single case. Like an old embassy clock, it offers the possibility of showing the hour of two different time zones, so the newness is that two independent dials join together in only one cuckoo clock.

the face allows us to watch the mechanism in action, making of it a sort of kinetic sculpture.



Free Time

Designer: Alessandro Busana

Year: 2010

Manufacturer: Progetti (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: This surrealistic horologium is held by a hanger, as if it were an item of clothing. Below the entrance orifice there is a tiny cylindrical perching stick, same as a genuine birdhouse. "Time Flies" for the occupant who seems to enjoy free time in his designer dwelling, while waiting to cheer us up with his sonorous chirping.



Plex Led

Designer: Studio Interno

Year: 2011

Manufacturer: Diamantini & Domeniconi (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood, methacrylate, and plexiglass

Description/features: An unexpected fusion exists between two devices apparently unconnected, until now. This multifunctional apparatus with a futuristic appearance—just like that in a space-themed movie—includes LED technology for the first time in a cuckoo clock, which always allows the observer to know what time it is by means of an incorporated switch.

Cucubo

Designer: Lorenzo Damiani

Year: 2011

Manufacturer: Diamantini & Domeniconi (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: You can experience, feel, and see from different perspectives this hexahedron. Similar to a colorful coffer that complements the decoration of a table, shelf, etc., this little timepiece of cubic construction displays the hands on the upper part and the birdie "comes on stage" from another of the box's sides—adding the element of fun and surprise.





Koo Koo

Designer: Studio Kuadra

Year: 2012

Manufacturer: Progetti (Italy)

Movement type:

Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features:

Taking inspiration from a simple bird feeder, in this enigmatic and oneiric creation the automaton, almost hidden, is placed below the dial, not above, as usual.⁸ The design itself and the combination of black and orange colors provoke a sensation of unfathomable mystery, making us wonder if this is conceptual art, a clock, or both.

Coco

Designer: Enrico Azzimonti

Year: 2011

Manufacturer: Diamantini & Domeniconi (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood and metal

Description/features: Suspended from a small pulley, this clock is counterweighted and can be lifted up and down at will or turned in the air, like a cloud floating in the sky, an impression reinforced by the swing of the odd pendulum. It acts as an interactive mobile rather than a mere timekeeper.

Kandinsky

Designer: Barbero Design

Year: 2013

Manufacturer: Progetti (Italy)

Movement type: Quartz

Material: Wood

Description/features: The name of this clock is evocative enough—a tribute to the painter and art theorist Wassily Kandinsky. The plastic and pictorial values are evident, with shape and color in relevant roles. For the influential Russian artist the circle held a special meaning, hence the three intersecting circles of different sizes and shades complement each other to form a symbolic abstract “canvas.”



Conclusion

If we studied in-depth the artistic evolution of this iconic form since the mid-eighteenth century, we would be amazed by the diversity of styles produced; whether they were successful or not is another story. Hence this trend currently in vogue should not be disconcerting to us. It is only the expression of human creativity and the mentality, fashion, and feeling of this age, something that has always happened.

Probably there will always be a place for the traditional motifs to coexist harmoniously around one concept, where all tastes and preferences seem to coincide beyond all debate, namely, the happy song of a cuckoo bird as the hours strike.

A few of these innovative, experimental timepieces may go down in the history of industrial design as the perfect paradigm—a mixture of function with minimalism and good taste, combined with a touch of fantasy, transgression, and sophistication to generate a timeless work of art.

References

1. Reinhard Zetsche, information forwarded via email: Clockwork, cuckoo, weight and whistles were original parts produced by different companies in the Black Forest. Finally, the assembly took place in East Germany (by Harzer Uhrenfabrik, est. 1948), where they produced cuckoo clocks by themselves in the former German Democratic Republic. The distributor was Brainbox (today Klein & More).
2. Bahnhäusle derivatives are all those coming from Friedrich Eisenlohr's original design; typical representatives are the hunter and the bird motif with vine leaves.
3. Johannes Graf, "The Black Forest Cuckoo Clock: A Success Story," *NAWCC Bulletin*, No. 365 (December 2006): 650. (Only ten years after its invention by Friedrich Eisenlohr, all variations of the house theme had reached maturity).
4. Helmut Kahlert, "The Anniversary of a Grand Design: 150 Years of Bahnhäusle Clocks," *NAWCC Bulletin*,

No. 334 (October 2001): 580-582. (Friedrich Eisenlohr (1805–1854), professor of architecture at Karlsruhe Polytechnic, designed a case for Black Forest clocks in 1850-1851 based on the gatekeeper lodges he had designed and built for the Badenian Rhine Valley Railroad. It proved to be an extremely successful design. Bahnhäusle clocks can still be found in many clock and souvenir shops all over the world.

5. Wilhelm Schneider, "Frühe Kuckucksuhren von Johann Baptist aus Eisenbach im Hochschwarzwald" (Early cuckoo clocks by Johann Baptist Beha of Eisenbach in the high Black Forest), *Alte Uhren und moderne Zeitmessung*, No. 3 (1987): 45-53, here p. 51. (Within a short time more orders for hunt pieces are recorded, specifically on October 30, November 7, and November 26, 1861.)

6. Confirmed by Ingolf Haas through email.

7. Georgios Maridakis, email communication. "The clock was designed in 2006 and was part of my graduation work at art school. It is made from birchwood, and the others were produced in 2007. The display and electronics are covered with a semi-acrylic cover. Five Wildermann clocks have been made in total; this is because they are hard to make, but we still produce them on request."

8. This layout does not constitute a novelty, because there is an antique cuckoo clock in the Dorf- und Uhrenmuseum Gütenbach (Germany) where the bird is situated under the dial.

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Juan Antonio F. Déniz (Gran Canaria, Canary Islands) holds a degree in community education. His main interests, besides art and nature, are clocks and watches. He has followed the progress of designer cuckoo clocks since 2008.

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