

Thorvaldsen's Watches

The celebrated Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844) had three watches – these are now in the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen.

From a horological point of view, the most interesting is a self-winding gold watch (Th. M. N 192, Fig. 1, 2 and 3), unfortunately unsigned. The reverse side of the case bears the inscription: A. Thorvaldsen. It therefore apparently came into the sculptor's possession during his sojourn in Rome (1797-1838), when instead of the Danish christian name Bertel, he adopted the Italian form Alberto. The smooth simple case is stamped with the initials DFM, presumably those of the casemaker, as well as the Neuchâtel hallmark, an 18 carat mark, and the number: 598C. On the back of the white enamel dial with Arabic numbers are scratched the initials HF, and the figure 5. A faint stamp: F^B is visible on the actual fore plate of the

movement, in all likelihood the signature of the watchmaker, or the firm that provided the *ébauche*.

The self-winding mechanism is based on the so-called pedometer principle: a sickle-shaped metal weight of about 30 g. is fixed to a lever that is attached in its fulcrum to the back plate of the movement. When the watch rests with 12 o'clock uppermost, as it would normally in a waistcoat pocket, a spring with a recoil corresponding to the metal weight keeps the lever in balance, so that the slightest movement of the watch (for example when its bearer walks) sets the weight bobbing up and down in relation to the lever's fulcrum. This movement is transferred to the mainspring by means of a click mechanism and gear. A fifteen minute walk daily is enough to keep the watch wound for thirty hours. On the mainspring barrel is a stopwork with a bevelled edge which, when the spring is fully wound, presses up a flat steel spring (on the back plate of the movement) from the plate enabling it to hit the lever, thus stopping its movement and preventing the mainspring from breaking. The stopspring returns to its position against the back plate after the watch has gone awhile, enabling the selfwinding mechanism to resume its function.

The watch has a cylinder escapement. Contrary to custom, the brass balance is placed on the fore plate just under the dial.

The movement is presumably of Swiss origin, and so is the case with the Neuchâtel stamp. The structure of the movement, however, closely approximates examples of Cabrier's workmanship, as well as one of Breguet's earliest self-winding watches from the period after 1775 (cf. the major reference book on self-winding watches: Chapuis and Jaquet, *The History of the Self-winding Watch*, London, 1956, p. 180ff. and p. 75ff.).

Nothing is known as to how or when the watch came into Thorvaldsen's possession. It was made in about 1800, and all evidence indicates "modern" methods of fabrication were adopted; i. e. the anonymous watchmaker assembled and finished the watch from parts provided by sub-suppliers. For example, the entire movement appears to have been supplied as an *ébauche* by the watchmaker with the signature *F^B*.

Thorvaldsen's repeating watch (Th. M. N 43, Fig. 4, 5 and 6) is in a gold case with a grooved edge and guilloché back, the inside of which bears the stamp: AH 6179 KIB and 4541. The first series of letters and digits is undoubtedly the case manufacturer's signature and production number. The final number is repeated on the works. On the back of the

cover is the inscription: Dubois & Frères, N 24541, and on the hinge of the cover the number 41. The signature is repeated faintly on the white enamel dial with Arabic figures just under the figure 6.

It has proved impossible to identify the signature more accurately. On the fore plate of the movement is a stamp: IAPY, and this can be identified with certainty. Frederic Japy (1749-1813) was the first watchmaker in Switzerland to specialise in the production of ébauches made with machine tools designed by himself. The movement is therefore made by Japy and adjusted and finished in Dubois & Frères' establishment, as well as provided with a case, dial and glass from other suppliers.

The watch has a verge escapement. The repeater mechanism is set in motion by pressure on the pendant, it strikes the last full hour and the number of quarters that have since past. The strokes hit the round Breguet striking springs. The repeater has a "surprise" under the quarter-snail and "tout-ou-rien". The winding of the striking work is effected by means of a chain over a pulley. This type of repeater work was widespread on the Continent at the beginning of the 19th century. How or when Thorvaldsen acquired the watch is not known, but is it on record that he frequently used it.

The simplest of the three watches is a verge watch (Th. M. N 162, Fig. 7) in a smooth silver case signed "De Roche" on the back plate of the movement; this signature has not been identified more closely. The watch is of good quality and a usual Swiss type from the end of the 18th century. The dial is not covered by glass.

Of particular interest, however, is the inscription on the back of the case: "B. Thorvaldsen 29 August 1796". This date marks the last day to be spent by the great sculptor in Copenhagen, before sailing on the 30th August to Italy where international recognition awaited him. It is not known whether he acquired the watch himself, or whether it was given him by one of his wellwishers before his departure. But we do know that he was deeply attached to it, and that he treasured it as though it were a talisman.

Hans Stiesdal
Translation by Jean Olsen