

Baselworld: the rise of the watch and jewellery fair

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Watches were present at the Mustermesse from the beginning. In 1917 a section of the fair was devoted to the products of the Swiss watch industry, which was then concentrated in the Jura arc from Geneva to Schaffhausen and which had suffered severely from the war. Over the following decades, the watch section became one of the most important parts of the fair. After the watchmakers had obtained their own pavilion in 1931, the watch section developed into a separate fair held at the same time as the *Muba*. For the watch industry, the Basel fair was for a long time a purely Swiss affair, organised in cooperation with the industry associations and reserved for Swiss manufacturers.¹

In 1973, the fair opened to exhibitors from other European countries and became the European Watch, Clock and Jewellery Fair. In 1986, exhibitors from outside Europe were admitted, which turned the event into a global trade fair for the watch and jewellery industries. The name changed several times. From 2003 the fair was called BaselWorld, later written Baselworld, a brand that signalled its international ambitions. In its best years, around the turn of the 2010s, the fair attracted well over one thousand exhibitors and more than one hundred thousand visitors from around the world, among them retailers, distributors, journalists and, increasingly, private clients.²

The fair was the place where the industry presented its novelties for the year and where retailers placed their orders. The great brands, Rolex, Patek Philippe, Omega, TAG Heuer, Chopard and many others, built stands that resembled small palaces, with meeting rooms, bars and security staff. For journalists, the week in Basel was the moment when the annual cycle of the industry became visible. For the retailers from Asia, the Middle East and the Americas, it offered a chance to see the collections and negotiate allocations of scarce models. For the city, Baselworld ranked with Art Basel

among the most profitable weeks of the year. Measured in visitors and hotel nights, it was for some years the larger of the two events.³

The success of Baselworld was linked to the growth of the Swiss watch industry, which recovered from the quartz crisis of the 1970s and 1980s through the creation of the Swatch Group and the repositioning of mechanical watches as luxury goods. Swiss watch exports grew strongly from the 1990s to the mid-2010s, driven by demand from China, Hong Kong and other Asian markets. The fair grew with them. Its strength, however, was also its vulnerability. Baselworld depended on a small number of very large exhibitors, whose participation gave the event its prestige and attracted the other exhibitors and visitors. If these brands decided that they no longer needed the fair, its entire model would be at risk.⁴

1 Notes

1. On the watch section of the Mustermesse from 1917, the separate watch pavilion of the 1930s and the role of the Swiss watch industry associations, see the anniversary publications of MCH Group, the Fédération de l'industrie horlogère suisse (FH) and the HLS, article "Uhrenindustrie". Dates to be verified. ↩
2. On the opening of the Basel watch fair to European exhibitors in 1973 and to non-European exhibitors in 1986, the renaming as BaselWorld in 2003, and the numbers of exhibitors and visitors around 2008–2013, see the MCH Group annual reports and the official Baselworld press releases. Figures and dates to be verified. ↩
3. On the function of Baselworld as the main platform for product launches and order-taking in the watch industry and its economic importance for Basel, see the trade press (for example Europa Star, NZZ, Financial Times) and the MCH Group annual reports. To be verified. ↩
4. On the development of Swiss watch exports since the 1990s and the concentration of the industry in a few large groups (Swatch Group, Richemont, Rolex, LVMH, Patek Philippe), see the statistics of the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry FH and the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security. To be verified. ↩

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