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Fashion & Style

‘Our watches don’t beep’

Nomos emphasizes style and functionality

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BERLIN

If there is an argument to support the notion of a renaissance in German design, it might be found in a loft office in the gritty but rapidly gentrifying Kreuzberg section of Berlin.

It is a neighborhood where dealers openly peddle hard drugs outside the nearest subway entrance and, a few blocks away, young creative types select from vegan menus at outdoor cafes. Here, Nomos designs watches that are manufactured in the traditional watchmaking village of Glashütte, a three-hour drive to the south.

The combination of Berlin cool and Glashütte craftsmanship seems to be one reason Nomos’s sales have been growing at annual rates of 25 percent or more. (The company, which is privately owned, does not publish detailed financial information.)

Its simple, functional designs are in the tradition of the Deutsche Werkbund, the movement founded in 1907 that spawned the Bauhaus, and seem to tap into a growing sense of technology fatigue among some younger buyers. The look is minimalist, but touches of strong color in the dials or numerals keep the watches from appearing too Spartan.

While some Nomos watches are self-winding, most must be wound by hand. All are purely mechanical, not connected to anything but the wearer’s wrist.

“Our watches don’t beep,” said Judith Borowski, the chief branding officer.

The wristbands are of fabric or leather, including some ordered from Horween Leather Co., a Chicago business known for supplying the leather used in baseball gloves and other sports equipment. But Nomos designers are working on a metal band, a development regarded within the company as a radical departure from the styles it has produced since its founding in 1990.

In the Berlin office, some of those designers recently stood around a table where some objects seemingly chosen at random were arrayed: colorful fishing lures, a brass hook from a sailboat, a ceramic figurine of a



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In Berlin Above, Designers at the Nomos studio spread out items, including a ceramic figurine of a woman in a bathing suit, to inspire their work on waterproof watches. Left, Judith Borowski, the office’s manager, and Uwe Ahrendt, the company’s chief executive. Right, inside the studio.

woman in a bathing suit. They were working on water-resistant watches and using the ideas inspired by the items to help answer the question “What does waterproof mean for Nomos?” said Thomas Höhnel, a product designer.

And even though the watches have no electronics, there is a high-tech element to their production.

The basic mechanism that drives a mechanical watch has not changed much since the 19th century. But Nomos makes judi-

cious use of computer-controlled machinery to miniaturize the mechanism, producing watches that are exceptionally thin and lightweight, like the Minimatik, which has a mechanism that is 3.2 millimeters deep, or only slightly more than 1/10th of an inch.

In 2014, Nomos unveiled watches containing escapements — the precision components at the heart of the timekeeping mechanism — that it produced in house. The development of what it called the Swing System, the product of years of investment,



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In neon, the Nomos design studio in Berlin acknowledges the traditional watchmaking village of Glashütte, where its timepieces are made.



Prototypes of dials at the Nomos design studio in Berlin.

freed the company from dependence on Swatch, the industry's primary supplier of escapements.

The Nomos aesthetic also seems to have insulated it from the disruption of the Apple Watch and other smart or connected watches. "Our customers don't want to show they have a lot of money," Ms. Borowski said. "They want to show they are intellectuals."

(Prices start around \$1,500 for the Club Campus line, introduced early this year for under-25 buyers; the more sophisticated models can be as much as three times as much.)

Recently, Ms. Borowski and Uwe Ahrendt, the chief executive, spoke about Nomos's design philosophy and the watch business at the company's manufacturing headquarters in a renovated train station in Glashütte. The interview has been edited and condensed.

When did Nomos sales take off?

MR. AHRENDT: It happened bit by bit, but the strongest growth was really in the last three or four years. We invested a lot in technological independence. In 2014, we presented the Swing System to the public, although by then we had already built it into 10,000 watches. Nobody noticed, which was a good sign. We knew that what we had developed over many years also functioned well. We couldn't have grown if we hadn't done that. Now, we make about two-thirds of our own Swing Systems.

How would you describe Nomos's design?

We are very restrained. We are simple. We are sophisticated. We build watches for people who can read and write. For people who are more self-confident. We were always true to this design philosophy. We didn't follow every trend. We didn't overdo it with prices.

MS. BOROWSKI: We fight for the best result until we can't do it any better. We have a special ambition to do things right and perhaps not such an ambition to become rich. We have more fun. The customer picks that up, at least we hope so. We also have the good fortune that most of the watch industry is a bit more conservative, and perhaps not as contemporary. We are a bit younger and more affordable for people in their mid-30s who have a decent job.

Why would the smartphone generation buy mechanical watches?

MS. BOROWSKI: It's exactly because of the contrast with all these devices that are constantly beeping and sometimes getting on our nerves. People are longing today for something that they can understand and doesn't become outmoded so quickly. Even if it's complicated, it's something you can grasp, and also something you can repair and not trade in after three years. It's something that can accompany us throughout our lives, that can become part of us.

It's also sustainable. That's also important for our customers. I can produce the energy myself, with the movement of my finger.

The watch industry had suffered the last few years. Why did that happen?

MR. AHRENDT: You could say it's the anti-corruption campaign in China, or other factors, but I think the Apple Watch certainly has something to do with it.

MS. BOROWSKI: We can't know whether we would have grown more without the Apple Watch. In any case we couldn't have handled any more growth. But probably the market has suffered. People only have one wrist. The hope of the industry is that the Apple Watch will teach young people to

wear something on their wrists and at some point in their 30s it will be embarrassing to wear a gadget, and they'll prefer a grown-up watch. But that's speculation.

Where does Nomos go next?

MS. BOROWSKI: We still have a few ideas up our sleeves. Next year, there will be something technologically new. We are just trying to do what we do best and hope that it continues to find new followers around the world. We're not Rolex or Apple. Our unit sales are, on a global basis, still small.

MR. AHRENDT: We can become more international. Germany still accounts for two-thirds of our sales. How do we transport this success in Germany to international markets?

You have said that Nomos is part of a renaissance in German design. What do you mean?

MS. BOROWSKI: Many years ago, Germany was known for design, beginning with the Deutsche Werkbund and Bauhaus. But after World War II, nobody wanted to talk about Germany. When I was a child, we always spoke of the Federal Republic, never Germany. Then with reunification, a positive transition started to take place. Germany had a more peaceful connotation. In 2006, the soccer World Cup in Berlin showed that Germany is not just Nazis and the Stasi; there is wildness and creativity in Germany, which is very important for art and design.

Since then, Germany is again a sign of quality among people who know design. Earlier, it was Milan or Scandinavia; Germany played no role. That has changed. German product design, combined with engineering and craftsmanship, have formed a kind of triumvirate. Especially for a company like Nomos, that's terrific.