A Season at Time Hill

The Last American Moment in Gruen Design

By Gregory Glenn Gersch (MD)

In the spring of 2017, while sorting through boxes in the attic of my family's Grosse Pointe, MI, home, I made an unexpected discovery: a portfolio of pencil sketches, watercolor renderings (Figure 1), blueprints, photostats, company correspondence, and pay stubs, along with watch components and casing tools. These had been carefully preserved by my father, Richard G. Gersch (1926–85), from his 11-month stint as Staff Stylist at the Gruen Watch Co. from August 1953 to July 1954. The find might easily have been dismissed simply as a designer's personal keepsakes, until I showed them to a Gruen expert.

TIME HILL AT THE CROSSROADS

Richard Gersch arrived at Gruen's Cincinnati, OH, headquarters—officially named Time Hill, a wry rebranding of the site's original name, Goat Hill—at a moment of quiet crisis (Figure 2). The Gruen family had sold their interest in the company in 1953, the same year Gersch graduated with honors from the University of Illinois (Figure 3), where he had studied industrial design under Henry B. Covington. It was Covington himself—later known for designs such as the Gruen Time Master and the Elgin Black Knight—who brought his former student to Time Hill (Figure 4).[1] By 1958, the firm would be broken up entirely, its American manufacturing operations dissolved. The Swiss movement manufacturing arm, based in Biel/Bienne, was later acquired by Jean Aegler SA (now known as Rolex SA) in 1977.[2]

The crisis had been building for years. Fred Gruen, chairman of the board, retired in 1940 and died in 1945; his brother, George Gruen, died in 1952, and the family sold its remaining interest in the company the following year. That same year, company president Benjamin Katz—who had led Gruen through a financial turnaround roughly two decades earlier—was forced into retirement amid a still-undocumented scandal; the company bought out his shares for $2 million in 1954. Renamed Gruen Industries, the firm compounded its troubles with a brief, money-losing detour into pen manufacturing, the cancellation of an $8 million military contract and federal antitrust litigation, even as boardroom infighting made headlines. By 1958, the company was broken up and sold off in pieces.[3]

The timing proved historically significant. The postwar American watch industry was entering its terminal decline, squeezed by Swiss competition and internal mismanagement. What Gersch witnessed and contributed to during his brief tenure at Gruen was, in a sense, one of the last sustained bursts of American watch design creativity before the industry's collapse.

WHAT SURVIVED AND WHAT DID NOT

The fragility of the industry cannot be overstated. The systematic acquisition and dismantling of American watch companies by Swiss firms left almost no internal design records behind. Work products, including concept sketches, case blueprints, presentation reports, and

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.





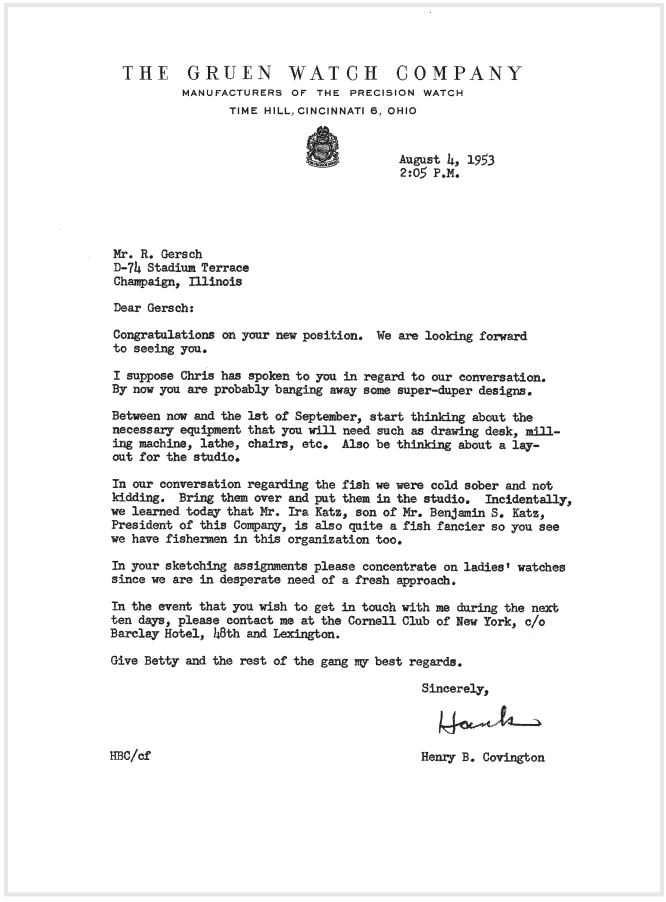
Figure 1A. Exploratory watercolor renderings toward the Gruen Precision Autowind (Caliber 362) Bar Harbor (Style No. 912, per Mike Barnett), released in 1955. ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, 1954. **B.** A design proud enough to build twice—two slight variations of this same watch turn up among the case mockups in Figure 13A. ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, 1954.



Figure 2. A 1936 postcard showing Time Hill, published by Curt Teich & Co. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.



Figure 3. Gersch (seated, far right) with University of Illinois Industrial Design BFA colleagues in 1953, seven years after he was discharged from a life-changing tour of central Europe. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.



THE GRUEN WATCH COMPANY
MANUFACTURERS OF THE PRECISION WATCH
TIME HILL, CINCINNATI 6, OHIO

August 4, 1953
2:05 P.M.

Mr. R. Gersch
D-74 Stadium Terrace
Champaign, Illinois

Dear Gersch:

Congratulations on your new position. We are looking forward to seeing you.

I suppose Chris has spoken to you in regard to our conversation. By now you are probably banging away some super-duper designs.

Between now and the 1st of September, start thinking about the necessary equipment that you will need such as drawing desk, milling machine, lathe, chairs, etc. Also be thinking about a layout for the studio.

In our conversation regarding the fish we were cold sober and not kidding. Bring them over and put them in the studio. Incidentally, we learned today that Mr. Ira Katz, son of Mr. Benjamin S. Katz, President of this Company, is also quite a fish fancier so you see we have fishermen in this organization too.

In your sketching assignments please concentrate on ladies' watches since we are in desperate need of a fresh approach.

In the event that you wish to get in touch with me during the next ten days, please contact me at the Cornell Club of New York, c/o Barclay Hotel, 48th and Lexington.

Give Betty and the rest of the gang my best regards.

Sincerely,

Henry B. Covington

HBC/cf

Figure 4. A job offer, an equipment list, an assignment to design ladies' watches (see Figure 12)—and, delivered with total sincerity, an invitation to bring the fish. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.

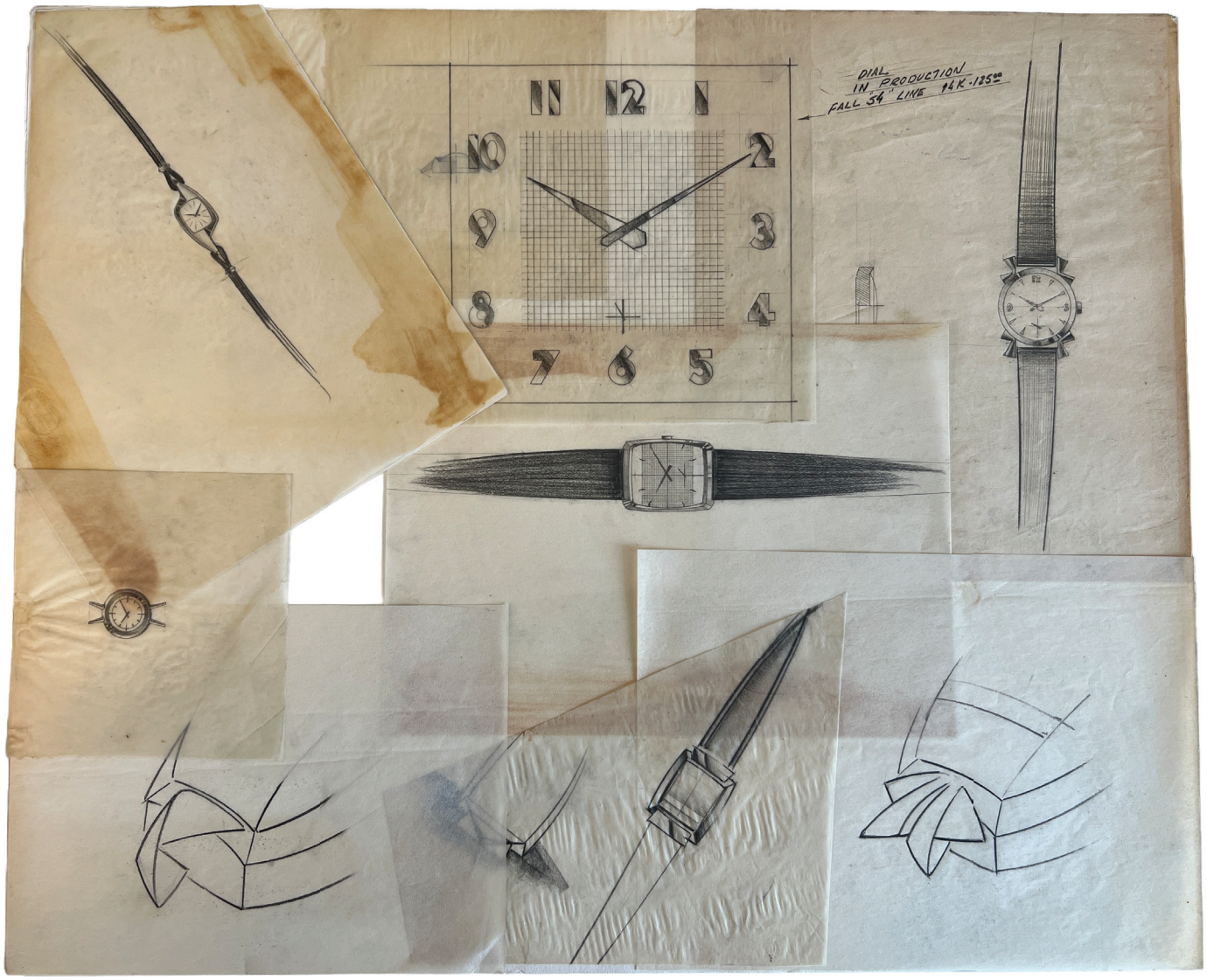


Figure 5. Notably absent from this early collage (ca. 1954) is any trace of the Bar Harbor or picture-window watches—the designs that would become Gersch's best-known work. Also missing are the Morocco-anticipating studies found elsewhere in this same portfolio (Figures 6–11). Upper left: A small, winged case fitted with a coiled-wire, spring-loaded band mount—an experimental attachment built to hold under tension. Whether it ever left the sketchbook is unknown. ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD G. GERSCH.

material guides, were considered proprietary overhead, not archival material. They were discarded—quite literally, according to Gruen expert Mike Barnett, in dumpster fires.[4]

This is precisely what makes the Gersch collection extraordinary.

Barnett, who has spent more than a decade reconstructing the company's serial number sequences, movement catalog, and design chronology, examined the Gersch materials in 2017. His assessment was unequivocal. "The Gruen collector community has never seen any of these kinds of materials," he wrote. "These work products, mockups, blueprints—part of a larger process of getting a watch from idea to product—have been nonexistent for Gruen."[5] Barnett presented a copy of his book *The Gruen Watch Catalog* to the Gersch family and inscribed it: "You have given the Gruen community a rare glimpse into how these amazing works of art came to be."[6]

The collection encompasses approximately 50 pencil sketches (Figures 5–11) and watercolor renderings (Figure 12); a Swiss Gruen counter catalog; the complete design presentation report for the watch that would become the Bar Harbor; full-size physical mockups of a case,

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.

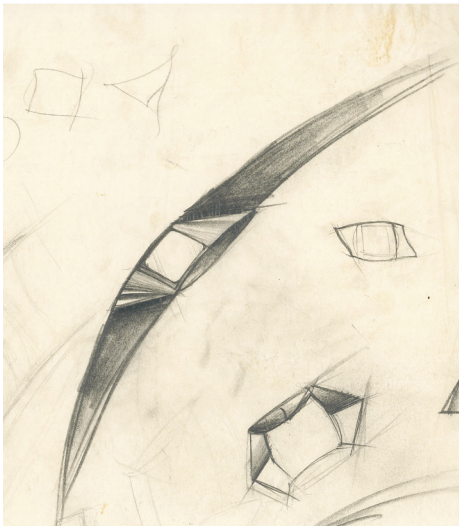


Figure 6. Visceral, exploratory work in graphite—Gersch fleshing out an idea before it had a name. The integrated band almost anticipates the wearables and fitness trackers of decades later. ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953–54.

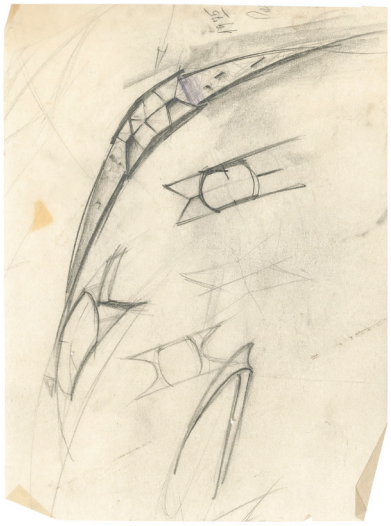


Figure 7. A compact, inline-bracelet take on the Morocco idea—faceted on both lugs and face, deeply beveled into something closer to sculpture than a wristwatch. Nothing this savage seems to have reached a Gruen ad. ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953–54.

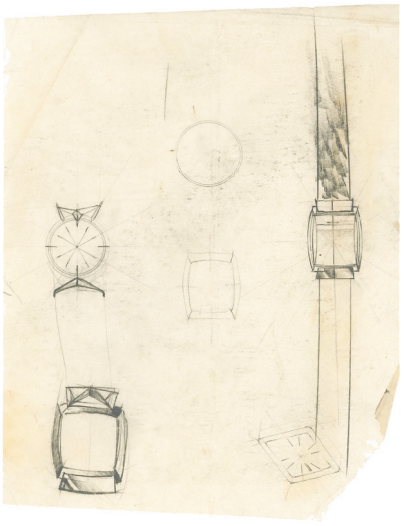


Figure 8. Two tonneaus and a half-imagined, mid-1950s flight of fantasy. ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953–54.

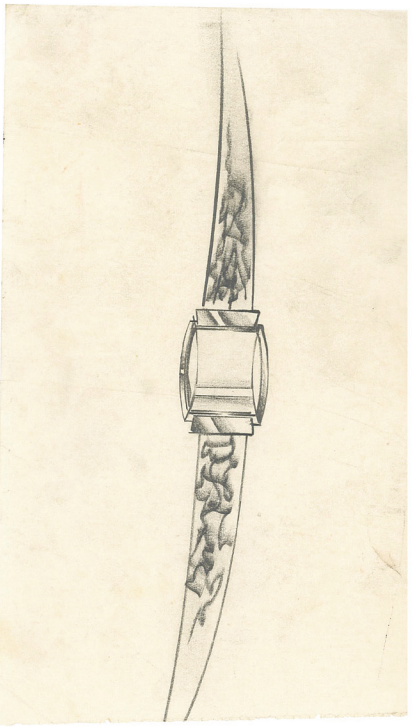


Figure 9. Another tonneau study, this one topped with a strikingly high-domed crystal—a quieter variation among the group. ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953–54.

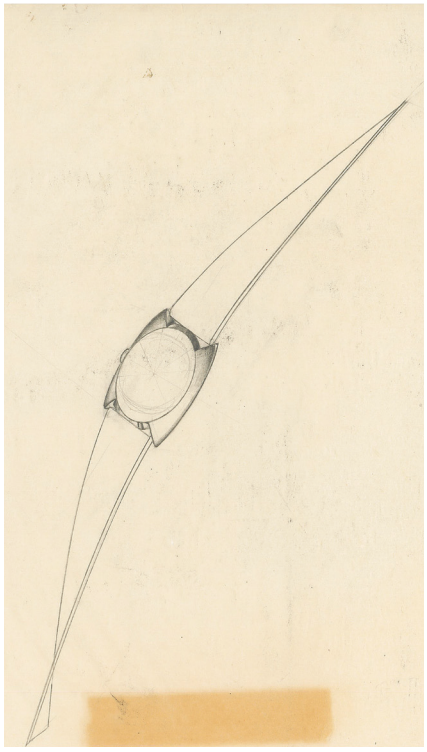


Figure 10. Possibly a more tentative pass at the Morocco. Where that design would settle on dramatic, fang-like lugs, these read as smaller, underdeveloped baby fangs by comparison. "Boldly adventurous with clean-hewn, massive V lugs" is how Gruen's own ad copy would later describe the Morocco; here, Gersch may still be working his way toward that scale. ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953–54.

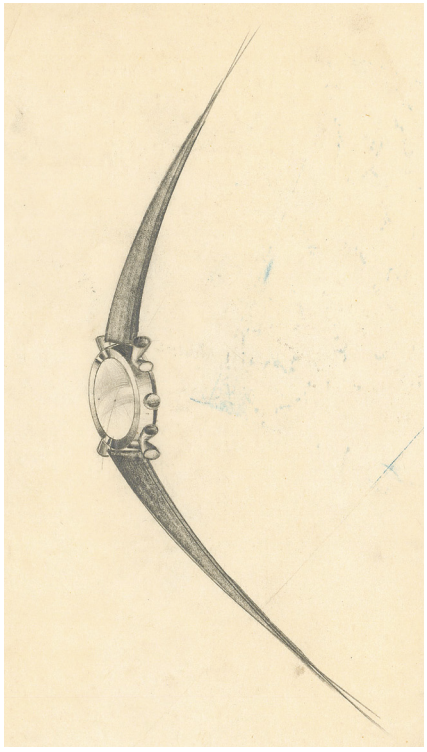


Figure 11. Dramatic, arguably impractical, definitely a statement—Gersch's own hourglass-lug design, also seen (smaller, head-on) in the upper right of Figure 5. He milled and hand-bent a set of the lugs himself trying to work out how it might actually be built (Figure 13C); whether the watch itself was ever finished is unknown. ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953–54.

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.



Figure 12. As Gersch's job offer letter from Gruen directed, "Concentrate on ladies' watches since we are in desperate need of a fresh approach." Here are his six variations on a cord-strap idea, each its own design with its own fittings, all clearly of one family. One of them—drawn with a green strap—made it all the way to a milled case (Figure 13A). The rest may have grown into the Hedy or into cord watches Gruen never got around to naming. ILLUSTRATIONS BY RICHARD G. GERSCH, CA. 1953.



Figure 14. A 1953 Gruen Design Studio Christmas card, so labeled in the upper left corner. Gersch is depicted beneath the mistletoe. Is this the studio he was asked to help lay out himself, weeks before he ever set foot in it? AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

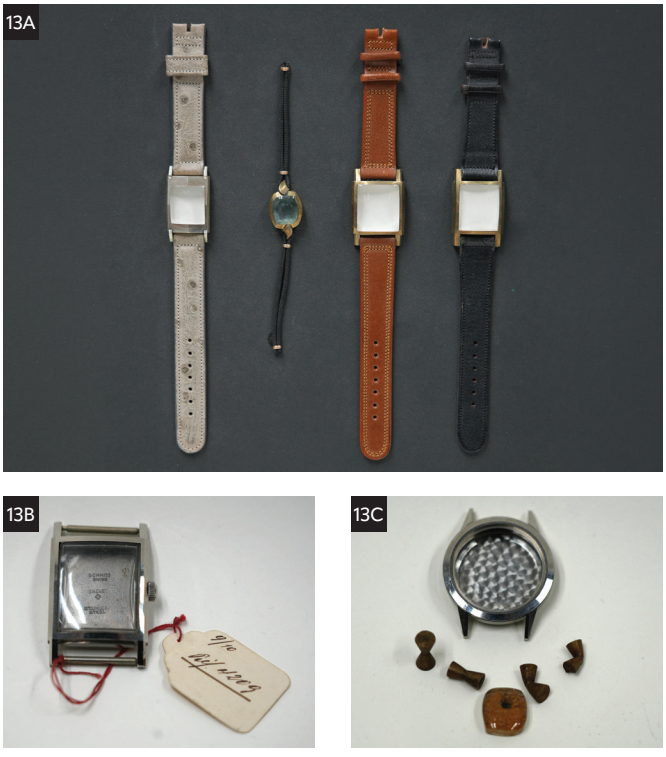


Figure 13A. Four cases, four finishes, no movements, and no serial numbers—not a design study so much as a traveling sample, ca. 1953–54. Gersch knew he was leaving Gruen; this is what he chose to carry out the door to show the next employer what his hands could do. **B.** This ca. 1953–54 case was meant to be his own and lived wrapped in a chamois, inside a period A. W. Faber-Castell pencil tin. **C.** Three unrelated, ca. 1953–54 objects in one photo, worth untangling: an empty case, likely sized for the 415 movement (Figure 15); four loose lugs, hand-milled and bent by Gersch, prototyping the dramatic design seen in Figures 5 and 11; and a small crystal matching the ladies' watches in Figure 12. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

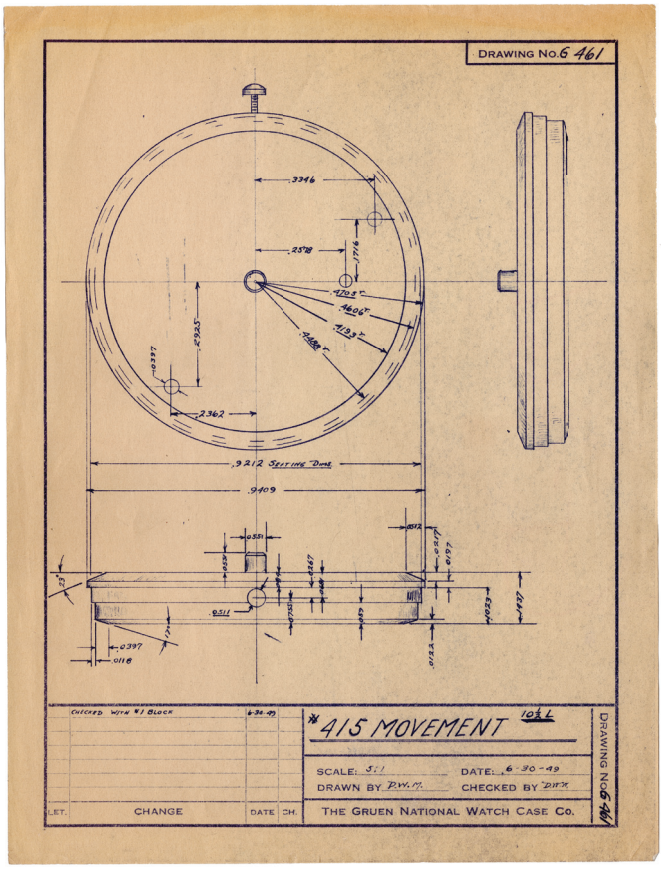


Figure 15. Gersch kept this schematic, dated June 30, 1949, though it predates his hire by four years. It would later help researchers date the Caliber 415 itself, one of Gruen's last round-movement designs. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.

crystal, and strap (Figure 13); holiday cards (Figure 14); and a receipt documenting Gersch's purchase of parts for a custom personal timepiece, with the case engraved "Gersch 6-2-54." The blueprints include a rare schematic for the Gruen Caliber 415 movement—one of the company's final round-movement designs, the dating of which had previously eluded researchers (Figure 15).

THE BAR HARBOR: A MID-CENTURY MODERN FAREWELL

The centerpiece of the Gersch collection—in artistic and historical terms—is the design work leading to the Gruen Precision Autowind (caliber 362) Bar Harbor (Style No. 912, per Mike Barnett), released in 1955 (Figure 16).

The Bar Harbor was unusual by any standard of its era. Its numerals were set on the bezel rather than the dial—a clean, architectural solution that gave the face an almost empty, meditative quality. Both the front crystal and the case back were transparent, allowing the movement to be seen from either side. Its standout feature was the case itself: stainless steel combined with a Lucite surround, marketed in a 1955 Gruen advertisement as "one of the new stainless steel and Lucite watches everyone is talking about."[7] The Lucite gave a see-through, almost bubble-like effect around the dial, a genuinely radical look for 1955, when most watches were still gold and conventionally cased. The dial color Gersch chose, a "midnight blue" in Gruen's own period phrasing, became one of the watch's most celebrated selling features, and remains so among collectors today.

These were not incidental choices. They reflect a designer trained in the modernist tradition applying the same rational elegance to a wristwatch that contemporaries were bringing to furniture, automobiles, and appliances. Collectors today compare its space-age, "flying saucer" aesthetic to the later Ernest Borel kaleidoscope cocktail watches, though the Gruen predates those by roughly a decade.

The brand's broader cultural reach is unmistakable: James Bond, as played by Sean Connery, wore a Gruen Precision 510 in *Dr. No* (1962)—a measure of the cachet the marque carried even after its American operations had closed.[8] In this light, the Bar Harbor reads as a small but genuine artifact of American mid-century design thinking—a pill-shaped case with a floating, transparent face, executed at the very moment the industry capable of producing it was beginning to disappear.

Barnett confirmed the connection between the surviving sketches and the finished watch. "Your dad pretty much designed the Bar Harbor and possibly the other see-through models," he wrote, adding that the watercolor studies, with their careful rendering of case profiles and dial configurations, constituted something no one in the Gruen collector community had previously seen: the design process itself, visible in sequence.[9]

Subsequent research points to the Bar Harbor as one of at least three siblings built on the same transparent-case concept. The Gruen Autowind Marseille (Figures 17 and 18), advertised as offering a "dramatic 'see-through' case" at $100, appears to be the same essential design in a gold-filled rather than stainless-steel case.[10] The two bands are visually distinct at a glance—coarsely pierced leather on the Bar Harbor, finer stitching on the Marseille—a distinction legible even without reading the case finish. A third watch, the Autowind Preview, was sold with a "midnight blue center dial" and a "'picture window' back to see how it winds itself," in at least three dial colors.[11]

A review of the surviving sketches and watercolors—54 graphite drawings and six watercolor studies, several depicting more than one watch per sheet—includes



Figure 16. Gruen Precision Autowind (caliber 362) Bar Harbor (Style No. 912). COURTESY OF OMEGAFORUMS.NET MEMBER X350 XJR.

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.



Figure 17. Gruen Autowind Marseille (caliber 362), the gold-toned cousin to the Bar Harbor (Style No. 912); the metal bracelet is not original. COURTESY OF PETER SCHILL, GRUEN.WATCH.

one watercolor exploring a four-point suspended dial, its small round face seated on four discrete gold pins in a jewel-like setting. The Preview (Figure 19) as manufactured used a simpler version of the same basic idea—four broad tabs continuous with the face—apparently a concession to ease of manufacture. Whether the Preview's cruder, produced form directly derives from Gersch's more refined pin-set concept, or reflects an independently formed idea, is not confirmed; Gersch's own documented design work can be said with confidence to cover the Bar Harbor and Marseille, while his relationship to the Preview specifically is, for now, an open and genuinely intriguing question. All three carry, on at least some examples, the word "Continental" in Gruen's marketing—a label the company applied loosely across several unrelated watches, consistent with a broader mid-1950s convention of using "Continental" to signal European-inspired sophistication rather than to name a specific case design.[12] A period wholesale catalog page lists what appears to be the Bar Harbor's wholesale order number, WG932-E4565—likely a different numbering convention from the shorter style number (912) identified by Barnett, rather than a conflicting identification.[13] Firm identification of the Marseille's and Preview's own style numbers, and confirmation of the family's full range, remains a subject of ongoing research.

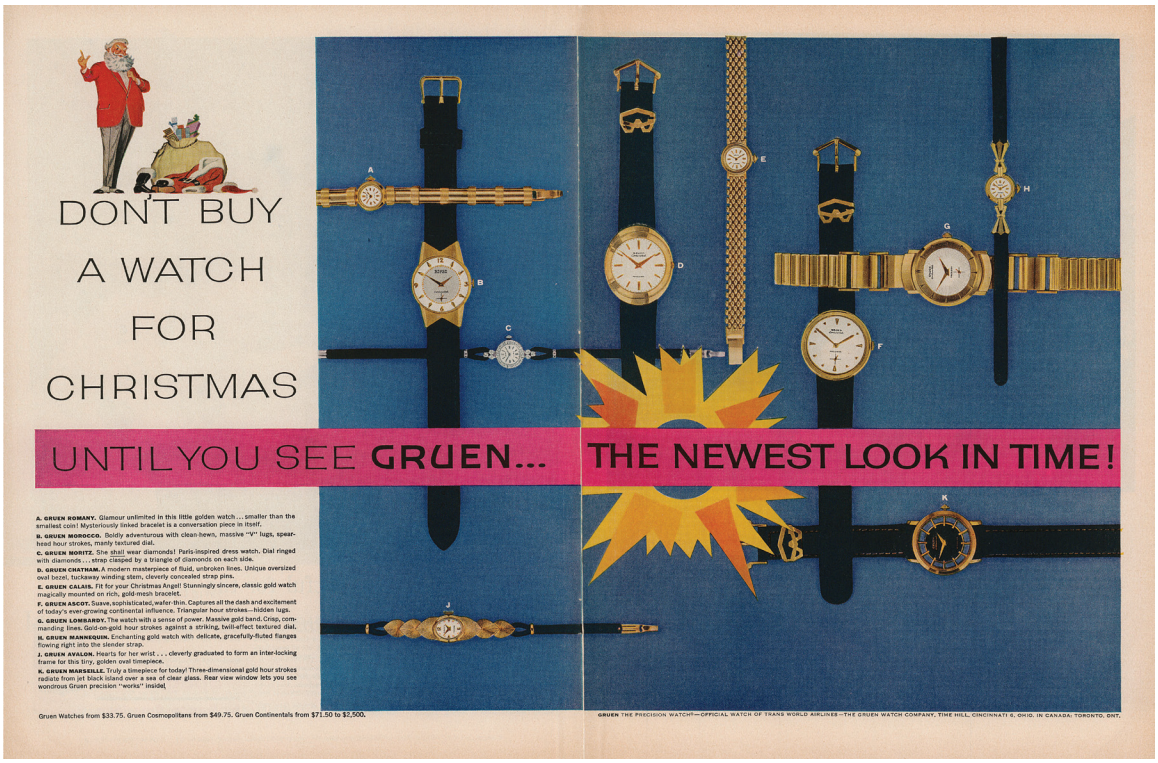


Figure 18. A two-page Gruen advertisement, ca. 1955. The Morocco—"boldly adventurous with clean-hewn, massive V lugs"—bears an unmistakable resemblance to the loose, exploratory lug studies surrounding the central sketch in Figure 7. The Marseille, arguably Gersch's chief creation, was the Bar Harbor rendered in gold tone. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.

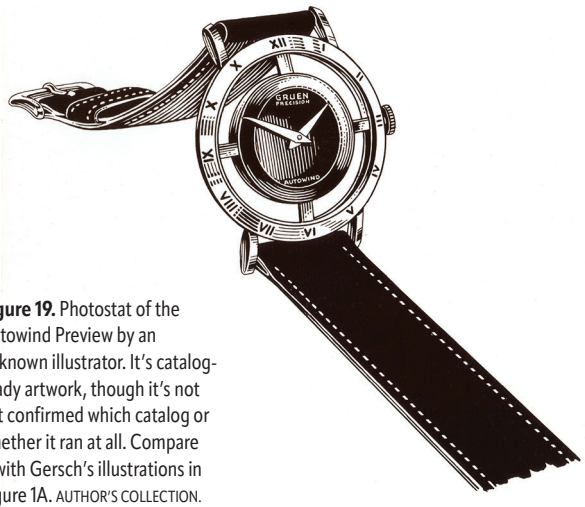


Figure 19. Photostat of the Autowind Preview by an unknown illustrator. It's catalog-ready artwork, though it's not yet confirmed which catalog or whether it ran at all. Compare it with Gersch's illustrations in Figure 1A. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION.

A PORTFOLIO WORTH PRESERVING

I'm proud to say that my father was a talented and hardworking designer—unbelievably humble and reserved, though a deep thinker—who was often in the right place at the right time. He did not set out to document history. He simply saved what he had made for his own portfolio. That the broader Gruen archive did not survive made his habit of preservation, unremarkable in 1954, invaluable to collectors and historians 70 years later. An archive of his life's work was formally established in 2019 to catalog and preserve the collection, which extends well beyond Gruen to include concept work for Kollman Show Case, Chrysler Corporation, Telex, McGraw-Edison, and Northern Telecom. The Time Hill materials—sketches, blueprints, watercolors of watches that were, and watches that might have been—offer a rare window into the design process itself.

Acknowledgment

I thank Mike Barnett for his generous review of an earlier draft of this article. Readers interested in learning more about Gruen watches can visit his site, gruenwristwatches.com.

Notes and References

1. "Henry B. Covington, 38, Designer of Watches," *New York Times*, May 8, 1962.
2. "Gruen Watch Company," Wikipedia, accessed August 2026, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gruen_Watch_Company.
3. Paul Schliesser, "The Gruen Watch Company 1940–1958," Pixel Panache, accessed August 2026, pixelp.com/gruen/1945.html.
4. Mike Barnett, conversation with author, July 10, 2017. See also Schliesser, "The Gruen Watch Company 1940–1958": "All of the pre-1958 factory records, of no interest to the new owners, were destroyed."
5. Mike Barnett, email message to author, 2017.
6. Mike Barnett, *The Gruen Watch Catalog* (Second Hand Press, 2015).
7. A scan of the advertisement appears in "Gruen Bar Harbor—Ultra Cool See Through Case," Omega Watch Forums, June 7, 2020, omegaforums.net/threads/gruen-bar-harbor-ultra-cool-see-through-case.114988/.
8. The identification of the Gruen Precision as the timepiece worn by Connery in *Dr. No* is attributed to Dell Deaton; see Matt Spaiser, "Sean Connery's Dress Watch in the Bond Films," Bond Suits, April 20, 2014, bondsuits.com/sean-connerys-dress-watch/; and Ryan Lynds, "The First James Bond Watch: Gruen's Forgotten Place in 007 History," *Little King Watches*, April 2, 2025, littlekingwatches.com/vintage-watch-blog/the-first-james-bond-watch-gruens-forgotten-place-in-007-history. Note that the specific model has not been definitively confirmed from surviving film materials.
9. Mike Barnett, email message to author, 2017.
10. Rusk Drugs & Jewelry advertisement, *Kossuth County Advance* (Algona, Iowa), November 5, 1957, accessed August 2026, algona.advantage-preservation.com/viewer/?t=29224,29231&i=t&by=1957&bdd=1950&bm=11&bd=5&d=11051957-11051957&m=between&fn=kossuth_county_advance_usa_iowa_algona_19571105_english_6&df=1&dt=10.
11. Gruen Watch Co. advertisement, "First See Gruen Autowind . . . First in Self-Winding Watches," *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 16, 1955, 121.
12. Gruen registered "Continental" as a US trademark as early as 1920, suggesting the term functioned as a recurring marketing label rather than a name for one distinct case design; see "1953–1958, Gruen Continental," Gruen.Watch, accessed August 2026, gruen.watch/?product_cat=gruen-continental. Mid-1950s American marketing used "Continental" to signal European-inspired sophistication, as with the Lincoln Continental (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lincoln_Continental). "Continental" was used for at least three other Gruen models (Havana, Le Havre, Lawson) in addition to the Bar Harbor (Gruen Watch Co. wholesale trade advertisement for Models WG923-WG934, p. 29, possibly published in 1957 according to the dealer).
13. Gruen Watch Co. wholesale trade advertisement for Models WG923–WG934; the original publication venue (trade catalog, *Jewelers' Circular*, or company price sheet) has not yet been independently confirmed. The sheet's Bar Harbor copy—"One of the new stainless steel and lucite watches everyone is talking about"—closely parallels the 1955 advertisement cited in note 7, suggesting shared marketing text across printings.

About the Author

Greg Gersch, son of Richard G. Gersch, maintains an archive of his father's work and can be reached at greg@greggersch.com.

© 2026 National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc. Reproduction prohibited without written permission.



FROM THE NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2026 ISSUE

Get the *Bulletin* six times a year

You just read one article from the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, the peer-reviewed journal of the NAWCC. Members get a new full-color issue every other month, with horological history, research, technical articles, and human-interest stories.

"It's a high-quality publication from top to bottom, and I'm learning something new in every issue." –Robert S.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP ALSO INCLUDES

The complete *Bulletin* archive

This issue is No. 484. Go back to issues from the 1940s online.

Free museum admission

At the National Watch & Clock Museum, plus free or reduced entry at 250+ museums and science centers.

Research help

Ask our library experts about your clock or watch, and borrow books and videos by mail.

Chapters and marts

Meet collectors near you, and buy, sell, and trade at member events.

Print

$112 a year

In your mailbox. $132 outside the US.

Digital

$98 a year

Online, wherever you read.

Join the NAWCC and get all six issues

It only takes a few minutes at nawcc.org/join, or call 717-684-8261.
Not ready yet? Browse the NAWCC Forums for free at mb.nawcc.org.

National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, Inc.
514 Poplar Street, Columbia, PA 17512