Kristof Devos on how he designed this summer's must-have watch

Sold out in hours, an ingeniously designed watch embodies the illustrator's 'perfectly useless' meaning of life.

If I had a time machine, I'd go back to July 4th 2019, when a watch that's the perfect epitome of summertime laziness went up on sale via boutique timepiece site Mr Jones Watches – and sold out instantly.

Well, not instantly, more like half a day, but either way the watch is gone, and the nearest I can get to owning one is by looking at the photos of the timepiece which Belgium-based illustrator Kristof Devos sent over. Showing a bird's-eye view of a pool, rubber ducky and a contented figure floating within a swim ring, his timepiece is an ingeniously simple one. The duck is the hour hand, the figure's extended foot stands for the minutes, and the centre of the clock is the figure's swimcap, as seen from above.

As it turns out, I neither need a time machine to get one nor wait too long for another run on top of that initial 100. Find out more in our feature as Kristof explains all about his 'perfectly useless', perfectly wonderful creation.

Telling the story – and telling the time

"I knew Mr Jones as a brand of extraordinary cult watches and started dreaming of designing my own last May. The idea of wearing my own watch was spellbinding.

"After winning three major illustration prizes in a row

(Commarts Award of Excellence, 3×3 Magazine Merit and the BookILL Fest special prize) earlier this year, I felt confident enough to contact Mr Jones and propose a collaboration. I saw an opportunity to tell a story, and designing a watch did not seem so different to writing and illustration a children's book. It's just another way of telling a story.

"Before I started sketching, Mr Jones wanted to send me the technical details that I needed to take in account when designing the watch. I asked him not to do this, because I was afraid that this technical stuff would somehow put limitations on my creative process.

"An analog watch has numbers on it, indicating time; it has a

minute and an hour hand and it doesn’t matter how many watches you come across in your life, they all have these things in common. Keeping this in mind, I feel that it works as a limitation of creativity. You need to forget the existing conventions so that you can design with an open mind, from a blank sheet, and go tabula rasa.

“That sounds easier than it is. I am, by heart, a children’s book illustrator and I looked at the watch from that very same perspective. I asked myself one simple question: how can I use a timepiece to tell a story?

“I studied other watches from Mr Jones: not the designs, but the technical challenges. This way I could look at limitations as opportunities. In the end, we only had to change one small detail to make it technically work. The bathing suit of the figure in the water has stripes on it and initially the cap had one too.

“We had to remove this stripe from the cap because this is actually printed on the inside of the glass to hide the dial underneath it. Because of this, the cap cannot turn with the body. So with a stripe on it, it would look as if the head of the figure doesn’t rotate together with its body.”

Passage of time and process

“The process went extremely fast. There was only a month and a half between when my first sketch hit the paper and the finished watch arrived in the store. In the words of Mr Jones: ‘It’s really not normal for us to work so quickly and with no problems, but really it’s been a magical production somehow’.

“I began by looking for a starting point and quickly thought of this quote by Lín Yǔtáng that I first came across while studying my MA in Graphic Design, back in 2005: ‘If you can spend a perfectly useless afternoon in a perfectly useless manner, you have learned how to live.’

“Wasting time seemed to me like a great starting point to design a timepiece. I made up some rules for the concept: it needed to be a watch that tells time, but that also tells a story.

“I wanted it to be something that reminds you of how you spend your time. I did not want any clock hands, the illustration needed to show the time and change while time passes. I made it quite a challenge for myself, but that’s how I like to work.

“With this starting point and my own set of rules all done I began sketching. I admit that I became a little obsessed with the watch and used every minute of spare time to try out this or that idea.

“I had planned a small trip to Sofia (Bulgaria) and used the flight time to draw. It is there, in mid-air, that the concept sketch for the final watch was born. I took a picture from my sketchbook with my iPad Pro in the airplane and started trying out different colour palettes in Procreate (which I love).

“I showed this design together with some others to Mr Jones and they decided the pool image was strongest. He and his team then started prototyping. In one week we talked about colour, the straps, the small illustrated engraving on the back (below) and they also took promotional photographs.

“Mixing inks and printing the watch all goes by hand, colour by colour and is a pretty time consuming process. But the Mr Jones team was like a perfect watch: they didn’t stop for one minute.

Little details, little hand

“Since the watch had no clock hands or numbers, I really wanted to push the legibility of the timepiece to the max. That’s why I chose a round pool, with tiles around it. The seams between the tiles actually mark the hours. The wavy lines underneath the water guide your eyes to the seams so you can read time as quickly as on any watch, once you get used to it.

“Another detail is that one foot of the figure is below the water. That gives the little plastic duck a natural way to pass over it. The story is never interrupted. The entire illustration is seen from above, something I decided in the very beginning of the design process. This gives the owner of the watch the feeling that he or she can really ‘dive’ into the design.’

Kristof’s perfectly useless afternoons

“I spend mine lying around in the grass, looking at the figures in the clouds or floating around in the water. With my wife, son and daughter as nearby as possible.

“By the way, I have some nice news to share. Because of the fast selling out of the watch, there will be a reissue. I’m working on an updated version which will become part of the permanent Mr Jones collection later this summer.”

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/graphic-design/kristof-devos-on-how-he-designed-this-summers-must-have-watch/