

TOYS ARE US

Roland Iten's accessories have one basic premise: rich men never need to grow up. Nitin Nair talks to the Swiss designer of mechanical luxury accessories.

A belt buckle is a belt buckle is a belt buckle. It holds your pants up, costs about Dhs200 (when it comes with the belt) and unless you are in Her Majesty's Secret Service, you probably don't wear the one with an inbuilt camera.

And then there's Roland Iten, the Swiss creator of mechanical objects of luxury. The belt buckle he created is made of 110 custom-made mechanical pieces, uses gold or titanium or premium stainless steel, has a multi-axe mechanism that, with the flip of a lever, can move 35mm, the two thumb measurement that tailors traditionally factor into bespoke suits for comfort. And it costs as much as a mid-range saloon car.

Iten is a quirky inventor; he works with everyday items, transforming them into precision mechanical objects, the accessories he creates – belts and cufflinks – sport extraordinary character. Among his creations is a credit card dispenser with a trigger-dispensing mechanism that cascades up to four credit cards when needed and collapses them back inside the case with the same trigger action. And then there are the cufflinks – with a dual function rotation lever and an intricate concealed gearbox. You can alternate between looking bling and business-like with the flick of a lever.

So, if you can pretend for a while that there's no such thing as a recession and you are the sort whose idea of a good weekend is some quality time in faraway Monte Carlo...

You have a mechanical belt buckle that sells for \$25,000. How do you explain that kind of cost to a customer? Why should anyone spend so much for a belt buckle?

True luxury is and will continue to be those things that are distinguished by their inherent value and longevity. Stanley Marcus, the founder of Neiman Marcus and probably one of the world's best-known retailers, used to call it "the impact of the hand" (the best the mind can imagine and the hand can create). Clients who buy my products do not question the price. They realise the value of longevity.

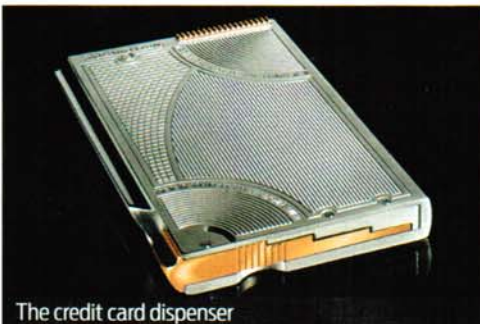
What inspired the engineering of the credit card dispenser?



Roland Iten



The belt buckle that costs as much as a car



The credit card dispenser

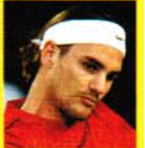
My favourite pastime is watching people. I watch people in certain situations, how they move, how they act, and that's how I spot new opportunities for product creation. Most men of a certain calibre, and when in certain situations – like at an important business lunch or a dinner date – don't like to carry coins or lots of credit cards. So, starting with the basic billfold, which is used to carry just a few cards and bills,

If you had to design an accessory for these four men, what would it be...

Steve McQueen: One of my favourite icons, he needs a timeless, iconic product. In fact I'm already working on a product McQueen would have loved – mechanical sunglasses.



Roger Federer: Federer already owns a limited edition belt buckle from my R8 collection, customised just for him.



Bob Dylan: His first band was called The Golden Chord. So for Dylan, I would use gold guitar strings as a mechanical extension device in the belt buckle I created for him.



Barack Obama: His style is so discreet. I suppose it would be a mechanical fountain pen with a tachometer, which measures and records the number of times he uses it to sign an important bill or treaty.



I added precious materials for longevity and a mechanical cascading device to improve the functioning of how one normally retrieves a credit card from a billfold.

No more fiddling around or pulling on the cards – with a flick of one finger the cards appear in perfect alignment. Again, it's a playful as well as useful tool. The result is a case that you can be proud to put on the table from the very beginning of the evening.

Your products are clearly inclined towards men who still have a wide-eyed fascination for toys and gadgets. Is that a conscious design philosophy?

I love the whimsical, playful aspect of mechanical objects. That's why I take everyday useful items like belt buckles, cufflinks and card holders, and make them more playful and improve function by adding mechanical devices and using precious materials. In doing so, I turn them into products that are can be left behind as heirlooms. ☺

FYI: Roland Iten accessories are now available at the Rivoli Prestige Boutique at the Burj Al Arab, call 050-4516992.