



Panerai.  
sets  
sail

*“Our purpose was to establish a brand, not a trend, we continue to follow our own way. What is important in luxury is coherence. You cannot lose your identity”*

When Panerai CEO Angelo Bonati was exploring Antigua during his first visit to the island for the Classic Yachts Challenge, he came across something that made him stop and stare. The remnants of an old wooden boat, Eilean, were lingering in a boatyard, beautiful but destroyed. The story of the boat's rescue and rejuvenation is not unlike the feat he pulled off ten years earlier, taking the mere idea of a Panerai watch and transforming it into one of the most successful brands on the market today.

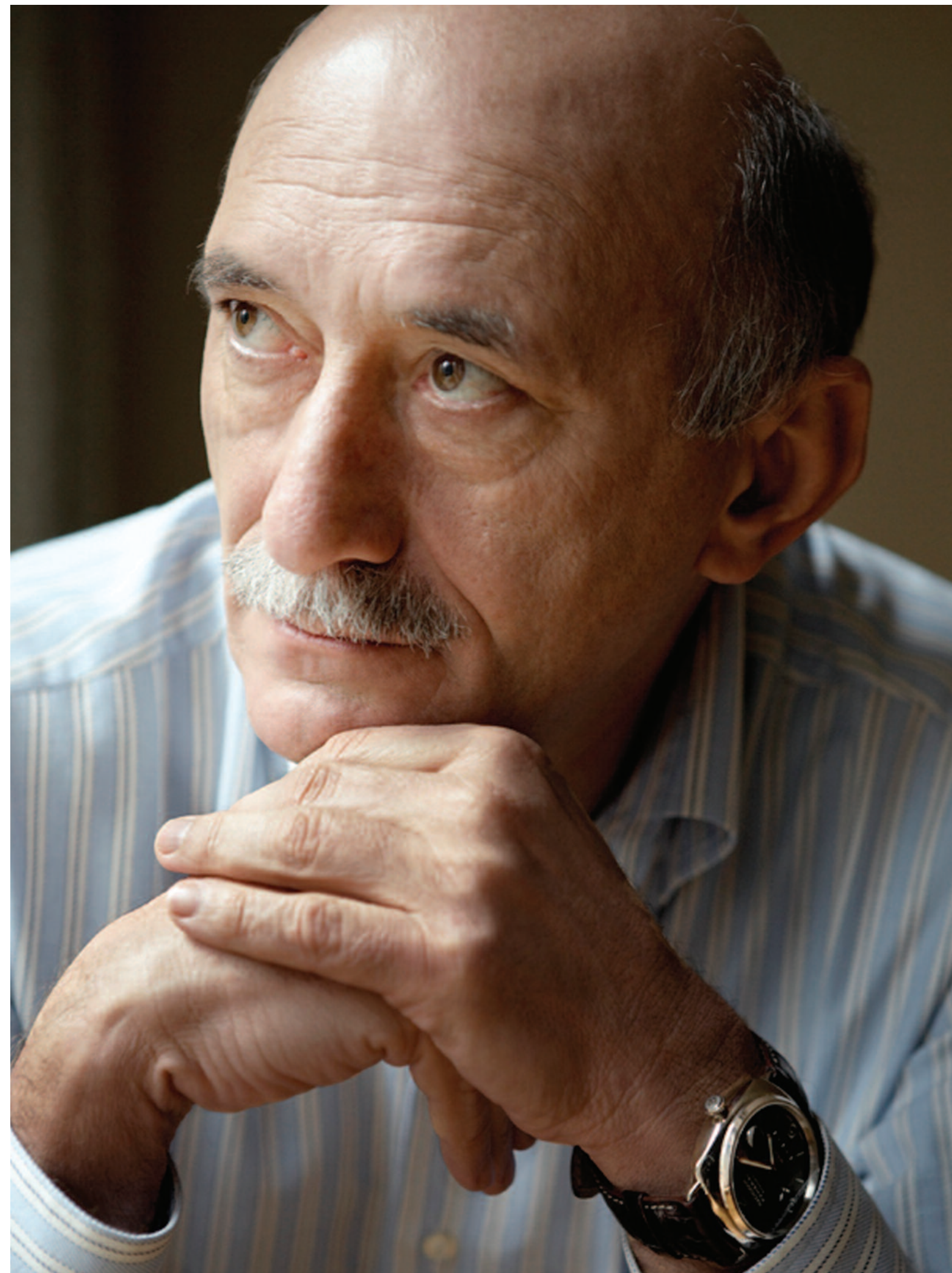
He's been with the Richemont Group for more than 28 years, in various positions including the Italian management of Cartier, but his biggest success story by far has been the creation of Panerai. In 1997, when Richemont approached him about becoming CEO, he saw an opportunity to create instead of manage that was an irresistible challenge. “The brand didn't exist then. We

bought...say, the name, Panerai, from the family, and the Luminor Marina. In the beginning we had the watch and a history full of value, but it was not linked to manufacturing. We had to understand how to build up the brand, to keep the DNA to fill that kind of box.”

Production began slowly; even Panerai in its previous iteration had produced only 300 watches in 60 years, for the Italian military. What had once been a military secret was ready to come out, once Richemont purchased the family shop in Florence to produce the cases (they began producing their own movements five years ago in Switzerland, discarding their previous Rolex-made movements) and their strong entrance into the market positioned them to be the leader they are now, famously in the world of extra-large watches.

“It was so fun at the beginning, in 1998 when I presented the first watches. In 1997 we had sold 1,000 watches at 30 points of sale in one week to test the market. Three or four months later at SIHH we presented the watch, and people said, “Are you proposing a war clock for the wrist?” And I said, “This is a train. You can get on it and take it to success, or you can stay here.” At the time 38mm was the max for men's, and only Rolex and Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak went that large. Women's watches were at 31mm. After a year they all started to follow; even Rolex now offers something bigger.” But Bonati rejects the notion that Panerai should ever be trendy; that was not the goal at the time, nor is it now. “Our purpose was to establish a brand, not a trend,” he says, “we continue to follow our own way. What is important in luxury is coherence. You cannot lose your identity.”

Clients love Panerai for their distinctive shape, signature size and heft, and practicality of design. Though the entry level price is higher than for some other sport watches (and on the high end, goes up to \$150,000USD), collectors can't get enough. “When you look at a Panerai Tourbillon it seems simple on the



face, you can only see the movement on the back. The back shows it – it's not our idea to show off at all." This subtle luxury is arguably the new byword for luxury spending since the recession, and Panerai's small production has kept them from losing significant sales, as their clients buy out of passion.

Bonati says he is always involved with the design of the watches, and it is his influence that keeps the direction of the company on track. "Our designers are young people, and it's difficult for them to create. We have to be on this railway, so they just work on small details, subtle changes to the case, and the case has to work around the movements. They don't take white paper and just start fresh, it can be a little frustrating for them. So I check them and make sure they're still Panerai," he says.





His biggest project lately, however, has been the rebuilding of Eilean, marking a significant step in the brand's evolution. Though it is of course a significant corporate investment, Bonati clearly has a personal connection with his passion project. "I didn't buy this boat for nothing!" he jokes, explaining. "We base our focus on classic yachts because it's something of value, of history. The tradition of the sea is linked. That's why we chose to sponsor the Classic Yachts Regatta. And on the other side, I noticed this boat, I asked to go inside, and the owner, the man, he was a bit desperate, an old hippie named John. I asked him why it was in such bad shape and he told me, "You know, this boat is linked to me and when I die, it will sink with me. I said 'Hey, you can survive a bit longer," and he agreed to sell it to me."

As they explored the idea a bit more, he discovered an exciting connection to Panerai. "The boat is William Fife, and the date it launched is the same year that Panerai made their first watch, 1936. It could be the right way to commemorate, I said, we can restore it, so we moved it to Martinique, got it on a ship and brought it to Italy to refurbish it. It took three years and we're ready to show it."

Of the actual project, he says "I spent every weekend of the last three years going up and down, 600 kilometers each way, to Viareggio to supervise. We saved a lot of parts but it had to be completely restored. I learned a lot about the boat during the process, I had expected it to be much easier. Every detail had to be discussed, there were 20 or 30 people who couldn't proceed without my decision—red? Black? Gray? I'm not a technician, but the yard doesn't want all the responsibility, they won't just go ahead. And it had to follow our plan." The finished boat is an expression of the drive that Bonati has put into all aspects of his career, to truly live out his aesthetic and philosophic desires. "You have to put your passion in it, whatever you do. I'm proud to have contributed to a piece of history of the sea."

“My overall belief is beauty has no limits”

The project currently is essentially completed, with just a few more preliminary steps to go. “We are finishing all the details and expect the registration soon – it’s still an object, you know, not yet a boat. I think we’ll test it in January, I want to be sure before we cross the Atlantic. That’s a long trip if we’re not sure.” A sailor himself for the past 20 years, he would love to make the trip himself, but isn’t sure he can spare the three weeks for delivery. Of the future plans for the boat, he sees it as a useful

communications tool. “We plan to race the boat with a crew and participate in the classic yacht regattas, and incorporate some social responsibility too, to educate, bring people on board and show them how it was rebuilt. We want to do something for people who can’t do this kind of project.”

Hardly the first watch company to get involved with the sailing world, he postulates that the appeal is in the purity, of the sport and of the sea. Brands can have a great deal of impact on their clientele without a huge impact on the planet, but even in that regard, Bonati tries to go above and beyond, personally attending as many of the sponsored regattas as he can schedule. “The owners of the boats [in the regattas they sponsor] appreciate my presence, I attend a lot of the events. In most events the sponsor is not present, they’re just a banner. They find us really different.”

Though those boat owners covet their Panerai prizes, the proud owner of Eilean doesn’t plan to commemorate her that way. “We thought about an instrument for Eilean, but I didn’t want to capitalize on the boat. I think it’s vulgar. We don’t want to compromise the boat or the brand – it’s part of our image, but it’s not used to sell.” He has similarly refused to compromise on anything regarding Panerai’s direction from his earliest days at the company, and sees a fundamental similarity between watchmaking and boat building. “From my point of view, it’s based on values. The watch is to have a long-lasting life. When you build it, you know it has to last for a long time, you don’t buy one and expect to throw it out two or three years later. When these classic boats were built, they intended them to keep sailing. There is knowledge; technique; craftsmanship, it’s real, it takes time to learn how to do. My overall belief is beauty has no limits.” ■

*Angelo Bonati*

