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With American watchmaking having all but disappeared, it's pleasing to see that the biggest names are returning to the market, albeit with Swiss-made timepieces. Hamilton is on a near-vertical growth spurt thanks to its incredible value-for-money sporting watches, Bulova is going upmarket with the revived Accutron line, Waltham is returning with quality timepieces and Swiss-trained watchmaker Roland G. Murphy's RGM brand is the first in a half-century to create an all-new, made-in-the-USA movement. Probably the highest profile amongst the revivals is that of Ball, which has returned with a series of rugged watches harking back to the day when Ball timekeepers kept the trains running on time.

Buyers Seek The Unique

More watch brands introduce timepieces made-to-order

In its heyday, watchmaking was a made-to-order service enjoyed almost exclusively by the aristocracy. Before the Industrial Revolution, a client would visit the reigning watchmaker of the day, most likely in Paris or London, to order a timepiece, content in the knowledge that within a year or so, the one-of-a-kind device would be his.

Among prestige watchmakers, the tradition persisted into the middle of the 20th century, creating a canon of iconic watches that have stood at the crossroads of horological history. In 1904, for example, Louis Cartier produced a wristwatch for a Brazilian aviator, Alberto Santos-Dumont, to use when both hands were occupied. It later inspired one of Cartier's enduring models, the Santos.

Spurred by a watchmaking renaissance, a number of high-end Swiss brands are attempting to recreate the intimate relationship that once existed between watchmaker and client by introducing customizable timepieces into their repertoires.

"A global economy means standardization and a convergence towards the same type of product, design and concepts, and we end up with things sometimes perceived as common by the elite," says Thierry Oulevay, president of World Première Watchmaking, a five-year-old Swiss company behind Jean Dunand, an ultra-exclusive brand that produces an extremely limited range of one-off timepieces, starting at \$370,000.

"People are increasingly looking for the ultimate, the unique, the different," Oulevay says.

One pioneering introduction in that vein comes from Vacheron Constantin, a haute Swiss brand that earlier this year introduced the Quai de l'Île collection of customizable watches, named for the Geneva street on which the company has done business for most of its 253 years. An inter-

active touch-screen allows customers to hand-pick the basic aesthetic choices of the watch — three metals, two dials and two different finishes on the movement.

While the models are not strictly one-of-a-kind (the collection allows up to 400 variations), nor are they entry-level: The basic titanium watch, available for purchase in stores, costs \$29,900; an additional 20 percent is added for customized versions. The most expensive model, in palladium, tops out at around \$60,000.

Despite the Swiss watch industry's notorious reputation for past-due deliveries, an increasing number of brands are seeing the value in allowing clients to make cosmetic changes to their models.

The Mulliner Tourbillon by Breitling for Bentley, introduced in 2005, gives clients the choice of dial color, case metal and exact shade of crocodile leather strap.

At Jaquet Droz, a Swiss brand founded in 1738 and brought under the Swatch Group's ownership in 2000, clients are invited to customize any of the watches in the collection with a dial made from an offbeat mineral such as lapis lazuli, petrified algae, spectrolite or snowflake obsidian. For one-of-a-kind editions, Jaquet Droz adds an \$8,000 premium to the watch's base price.

A handful of brands are willing to personalize aspects of the movement, albeit in small yet meaningful ways. Tokyo- and Moscow-based customers of Maitres du Temps, a new brand that unveiled its \$400,000 Chapter One grand complication earlier this year, successfully lobbied to change the days of the week, which appear in English on a



*Maitres du Temps
Chapter One*

roller bar below the dial, to Japanese and Cyrillic characters, respectively.

"When a client buys a watch at this level, he's used to buying planes and yachts, and he's used to picking out materials, so he's already quite familiar with the language of bespoke," says Steven Holtzman, founder of Maitres du Temps. "Something basic like changing hands or a dial or a material — that's somewhat realizable. But customizing different movements — that gets trickier."

—V.G.