

Timepieces that push the limits



Montres Journe



Jaeger-LeCoultre



WHAT MAKES A TRULY
INGENIOUS TIMEPIECE?
A DEBATE IS RAGING
ABOUT WHAT SHOULD
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COMPLICATION.

Jaeger-LeCoultre's 2006 Reverso Grande Complication à Triptyque, above (opened and closed), featured no fewer than 18 complications. Chapter One, far right (dismantled), the first watch from the new brand Maitres du Temps, incorporates among its six complications a novel system of rolling bars that it uses to display the phase of the moon and the days of the week.



Montres Journe

Romain Jerome's Day&Night, left, takes the cult of complications to an extreme. It has two tourbillons, one for daytime and one for the night; but it has no hands to tell the time. François-Paul Journe's Sonnerie Souveraine, above, is a wristwatch adaptation of a grand strike clock watch, considered by many as the most complex of watchmaking creations. It includes three different chiming mechanisms — a "grand sonnerie," a "petite sonnerie" and a minute repeater.

Romain Jerome

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This year, the Geneva watchmaking house Romain Jerome presented a watch at the Baselworld international watch fair which, among its several wonderful complications, lacked one notable function: it did not tell the time. Named "Day&Night," the watch, one of a limited edition of nine costing \$300,000 a piece, had two tourbillons working in sequence, one during the 12-hour-day, and the other during the 12-hour-night.

Lacking hands, the watch indicates only whether it is day or night. "This was a very extreme statement," said Wei Koh, Editor in Chief of Revolution, a watch magazine now published in 13 countries. "I guess you can either view it as an act of emperor's new clothes or a declaration that a watch today has no longer a function of time telling, but is a means of emotional expression.

"You'll never be as accurate as the cheapest quartz watch, so watches are now a means of kinetic sculptural expression," Koh said.

"I think for many collectors they would want a watch that is time-telling, has some horological functions; but at the same time there is something wonderfully daring about this watch."

A complication is any feature that goes beyond the basic recording of the hour, minute and seconds. Most mechanical watches now incorporate up to three complications showing, for example, the phase of the moon, the date, and how much power remains wound into the watch spring.

But with many brands now offering more complex features like perpetual calendars, repeaters that chime the hours, and split-second chronographs, watchmakers are trying increasingly hard to differentiate themselves by laying claim to the title of most complicated watchmaker.

There is a fierce debate now raging among watch aficionados about what should qualify for that title: the number of complications crammed into a single watch, or the creation of the most ingenious, never-before-seen complication.

"Owning the most complicated watch is difficult to assess. Every year you've got people arguing about it," said Ng Tjeng Jaw, a well-known watch collector in Singapore and the chief moderator of horomundi.com, a Web site forum owned by Revolution.

"But what does it mean?" Ng asked: "Is it the number of complications that have been combined together? Or are you more excited because of a new complication that has not been done before?"

"Even a novel way to show time can also now be considered a 'best complication.'"

Patek Philippe's Calibre 89, created in 1989 to celebrate the company's 150th anniversary, still holds the title of most complicated pocket watch, with 33 horological functions.

Among wristwatches, Vacheron Constantin's Tour de L'Île, intro-

Continued on Page VII

Pushing the limits of watchmaking

From Page 1

duced in 2005, has 16 complications, including a sky chart and two different moon phase displays — one a smiling moon, the other melancholic.

Frank Muller's 2006 Aeternitas had 16 complications, including an eternal calendar that follows a 1,000-year cycle without correction and takes into account the rules governing the Gregorian calendar.

Jaeger-LeCoultre's 2006 Reverso Grande Complication à Triptyque features 18 complications, including a zodiac calendar.

Now, Jerome Lambert, chief executive of Jaeger-LeCoultre, has a new trick up his sleeve — call it a modestly complicated watch.

"Next year, we're presenting at the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie a new watch that took us three and a half years to develop," Lambert said. "It will have the highest number of parts and the highest number of complications, over 20; but it is also the purest and most classical looking and when you see the dial you cannot image how complicated the watch really is."

An interesting idea, but not one that necessarily attracts aficionados like Ng, who says there can be too many complications on a timepiece. "Dumping existing complications together doesn't cut it any more with serious collectors," Ng said.

"I think most of them would welcome something new, something innovative, even if it's a minor complication," he said, adding that many brands were moving away from piling complications on a watch in favor of offering collectors complications that no one has seen before.

Amongst some of these recent complications is François-Paul Journe's La Sonnerie Souveraine, retailing for 650,000 Swiss francs, or \$544,000, which is a wristwatch adaptation of a grand strike clock watch — considered by many as the most complex of horological creations.

The watch has a grand sonnerie, or full strike, which sounds the hours and quarters at each quarter, and a petite sonnerie which sounds only the hour at the hour and the quarters at the quarters. It also has an extremely complicated minute repeater.

Jaeger-LeCoultre's Gyrotourbillon 1, introduced in 2004 and followed this year by a Reverso Gyrotourbillon 2, also created a thrill amongst collectors.



Maitres du Temps

The dial and back of Chapter One, by Maitres du Temps, reveal its complexity.

"Gyrotourbillon 1 was the first multi-axis tourbillon conceived and constructed to improve the inherent accuracy of the wristwatch. It was also the first tourbillon with an aluminum cage, which is now widely copied," Ng said. Single and multi-axis tourbillons aim to counter the distorting effect of gravity on a watch by rotating its escapement mechanism — on one plane in a single tourbillon or three-dimensionally in a multi-axis complication. The function of the tourbillon is to make the watch run more consistently; but it does not improve the inherent time-keeping accuracy of the watch.

In fact, as energy is required to rotate the tourbillon cage, most tourbillon mechanisms incorporate small balance wheels to compensate for the energy loss, which is actually detrimental to the precision of the watch, Ng said.

Even though it may attract many collectors, "making a simple movement more complicated can frequently lead to a less precise watch," he said.

Still, the use of an unusually large balance wheel in the Gyrotourbillon, combined with an unusually rapid rotation, helps to make it more accurate than most, Ng said.

A new watch brand, Maitres du Temps, debuted at Geneva this April with Chapter One, a watch showcasing six complications, including two unique novelties — a moon phase indicator and a days of the week display using a distinctive system of rolling bars.

Developing an entirely new complication can be much more expensive for a watchmaker than piling up complications in a single watch, Lambert said. Still, there is a place for both in the market.

"The market has developed so quickly in the last few years that there are now different collectors with very different tastes," he said. "There is still a strong interest for a watch with many, nice complications that fully integrate with everything. But there is also demand for new complications, which is why we worked for several years on the Gyrotourbillon."