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SPECIAL REPORT: A CUT ABOVE: WATCHES

The Triumph of Unnecessary Beauty

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Published: March 23, 2011

SINGAPORE — Every year, watchmakers try to outdo one another, inventing new complications or tinkering with existing ones, even though in most cases experts agree that the innovations bring little in terms of time accuracy.

So it was that last year the Swiss watch brand Maurice Lacroix unveiled the Masterpiece Régulateur Roue Carrée, a watch with a square wheel mechanism. Activated by a toothed cloverleaf and making a complete revolution in 12 hours, the square wheel displays the hour and rotates so slowly and smoothly that it appears motionless.

At the Baselworld watch and jewelry show that opens this weekend, Maurice Lacroix plans to unveil the Masterpiece Roue Carrée Seconde, focusing on the seconds display, with the square wheel now turning 720 times faster, at one revolution a minute, bringing it to life.

In January, during the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie 2011 in Geneva, Montblanc released the innovative Tourbillon Bi-Cylindrique in the Collection Villeret 1858, the first wristwatch with a tourbillon escapement and a cylindrical double balance-spring, similar to that of ships' chronometers.

While most watch professionals agree that a tourbillon does little to improve a watch's accuracy, it remains the star complication.

Invented around 1795 by the French watchmaker Abraham-Louis Breguet to even out the effects of gravity on a pocket watch, the mechanism has been transformed over the years into double-tourbillons, multi-axis tourbillons, flying tourbillons and a bi-axial flying double-tourbillon, to name a few.

Whether these architectural marvels add significantly to precision is a matter of debate, though watch aficionados do not really mind.

"Quadruple, multitourbillons are engineering sculptures; in no way do they add efficiency or accuracy over a well-made watch sans tourbillon," said Dr. Bernard Cheong, a well-known Singaporean collector.

"Tourbillons are not tools, although they are marketed as such. They are as useful as a sundial! But that said, some can be as valuable as art!"

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“Retailers are mostly selling tourbillons to consumers as ‘better’ watches because it baits them as status symbols of either wealth or cleverness, as in ‘I can afford a better watch,’” Dr. Cheong continued. “But these multiple or even single tourbillons are really works of art, and as a collector I support the push to build more creative and even multiple tourbillons because they show three-dimensional beauty much more than a repeater or any other complication so far.”

For the independent watchmaker Roger W. Smith, the constant trend toward more complicated watches is a human trait, like the desire to scale mountains or own a luxury sports car.

“What number of Bugatti Veyron owners drive the road at 300 kilometers per hour?” he asked, referring to the luxury car that can reach 186 miles per hour. “Who today uses their basic chronograph to actually time an event?”

“Almost no one of course, but the fact that they could do so is what drives the watch companies and the buyers for such complicated products.”

Maximilian Büsser, founder of Maximilian Büsser & Friends, agreed.

“Nowadays, no one needs a mechanical timepiece, and especially not to indicate such mundane information as given by chronographs, perpetual calendars or minute repeaters,” he said. “Just use your phone and get along with your life!”

“So why are amateurs paying such incredibly high prices for them?” he continued. “Because they are the proof of human genius ... This is true art — albeit mechanical.”

“Unfortunately there are a lot of marketers in our industry who have understood that the media, and in many cases the clients, are hungry for the most extreme complications, so they will do anything in their power to outdo their competitors on a fiercely competitive market,” Mr. Büsser said.

Mr. Smith warned about a philosophy of “complication distraction.”

“Many complications produced today are useless as practical instruments: unreadable and delicate watches that probably never, or rarely, leave the vault they are put in after leaving the jeweler’s shop. They might be created just for the horological challenge itself, or to attract a certain type of high-level clientele,” he said.

“That said, not all complications are uninteresting or useless in their own right. Especially when it comes down to escapement mechanisms that yield better chronometric results, combined with longevity, tourbillons, split seconds chronographs, or perpetual calendars.

“However, when we get to such creations as triple and quadruple tourbillons, we are beginning to lose touch with the reality of timekeeping and we are entering the world of kinetic horological sculpture, with the only true function being ‘to do it to show that you can,’” Mr. Smith said.

Dr. Melvyn Teillol-Foo, an executive moderator on PuristSPro.com and guest moderator on ThePuristS.com, notes that not all complications introduced as must-have or exciting sustain the initial “wow” response from collectors.

“From the initial concept to the actual production watch, some fail to materialize or they plainly fail to change the industry,” he said. “Whatever happened to the Concord C1 Quantum Gravity tourbillon or the Harry Winston Opus 3? Why do we still find normal metal components as industry standard despite all the fuss about silicium escapement wheels?”



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“The ultimate useless horology complication for the 21st century must be the striking watch — functionally useless but exquisitely expressing exclusivity, wealth and luxury,” Dr. Teillol-Foo said. “For isn’t luxury defined as something that is beyond mere function?”

A version of this article appeared in print on March 24, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune.

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