

QP Bookshelf

Van Cleef & Arpels: The Poetry of Time

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**VAN CLEEF & ARPELS:
THE POETRY OF TIME**
by Michael Serres

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and Jean-Claude Sabrier.
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Until very recently, the terms 'jewellery watch' and 'fashion watch' were, at best, back-handed compliments and, at worst, indictments. Such categorisation suggested timepieces for which the movements were of secondary importance, with the external gem count being the paramount concern. One needn't look far to find examples of this practice, which reached its apotheosis (or should that be nadir?) with the grotesquery of Jacob & Co's quartz-driven hip-hopper accoutrements. But even that firm has seen the light and is now courting *haute horlogerie* credibility. Van Cleef & Arpels, on the other hand, had it from the beginning.

In keeping with great houses known primarily for jewellery rather than watches, Van Cleef & Arpels avoided the disdain of watch aficionados by insisting that their lavish, often gem-encrusted cases and dials protected movements worthy of such lofty and glamorous attire. Like Tiffany and Cartier, and inspiring the next-generation jewellers, Harry Winston and Graff, and now the venerable diamond firm of Backes & Strauss, Van Cleef & Arpels



Pendule aux Singes, with cercle tournant and triangular diamond-set index. It is surmounted by a sculpted amethyst block depicting a mother monkey and her baby. The clock was created for Van Cleef & Arpels by Verger. 1926.



knew that its clients would expect nothing less than serious watches, beneath the style and artistry, which was - and is - impeccable.

It's important to place this situation in context, where what remain fundamentally watches that are sold as jewellery, are worthy of comparison with timepieces from the best known *manufactures*: prejudice remains amongst watch aficionados, who simply cannot believe that a watch from a jeweller could possibly warrant the same esteem as one emanating from a revered Genevoise atelier. One needs only to examine the antithesis of this formula, the Gucci/DKNY approach, to see how watches have not represented the quality associated with the names they wear.

Worthy of the name

Van Cleef & Arpels, more than most, had and still has a reputation to protect, one that places it, according to my colleagues (who are more *au fait* than I am with the pecking order of jewellers), at the very pinnacle of the art and the craft. It is a name, like Hermes, Lalique or Huntsman, engendering respect rather than doubt.

It was founded at the tail end of the 19th century in Paris, following Alfred Van Cleef's marriage to Estelle Arpels in 1896. The name was created in 1898 and the opening of the first boutique - in the Place Vendôme - occurred in 1906, in collaboration with Estelle's brothers Charles and Julien. Thus, by one set of standards highly prized by the watch community, Van Cleef & Arpels already possesses a basis for the gravity needed to sell watches at this level, in the 21st century: longevity.

A companion volume to a book about the brand's non-ticking products - Marc Petit's *Van Cleef & Arpels: Reflets d'éternité - The Poetry of Time* grabs you by its ninth page, which features an in-your-face, blown-up image the size of a vintage 78rpm record. It is of a watch with a pavé dial, filled with a girl's best friends. But there, at its 6 o'clock position, almost incongruously thanks to its array of exposed wheels and gears and near-Meccano geekishness is a tourbillon. The effect is not unlike opening the bonnet of a stately Mercedes-Benz and finding the engine of a Zonda.

While the focus of this book, one learns by the last page, is tilted heavily toward the more recent creations, care enough was taken to assure the reader that Van Cleef & Arpels is not an *arriviste*. Even more impressive is learning that it is not merely purchasing great movements from others: its horological résumé includes a number of innovations. In this respect, the watches have more in common with Harry Winston's Opus models, while Cartier is powering full steam ahead to achieve similar status.

There's a litany of watches in these pages that would have the experts at Antiquorum, Patrizzi & Co or Christie's rubbing their hands with glee, many from the company's own collection. The parade through Van Cleef & Arpels' catalogue begins with a 1927 pocket watch, featuring a Chinese mandarin whose arms serve as retrograde hands



Above: An unusual bras-en-l'air or Chinese Mandarin pocket watch in white and yellow gold, osmium and black and green enamel. When the push-piece is pressed, the figure indicates the hours and minutes on two sectors placed on either side of the dial. The design was inspired by timepieces popular around 1800, made fashionable by art deco designer Verger Frères. 1927.

Right: Lady Arpels Jour et Nuit watch with white gold case set with diamonds weighing 5.5 carats. The nearly imperceptible rotation of the dial makes a yellow sapphire sun (0.26 carat) and a diamond moon appear in turn over a period of 24 hours, on an aventurine background. 2008.



Left: A rock crystal and onyx domino disguises a timepiece on its under side. 1930.

for showing the hours and the minutes. You're torn between marvelling at the double-retrograde feature or the exquisite craftsmanship that includes his necklace made of rubies and the two-colour gold robes accented by black and green enamelling.

Past and present

Too soon, though, we are bombarded with the recent, and therefore most familiar watches, all of which have been covered in great detail in recent publications. But one has to get past the Lady Arpels Jour et Nuit or Une Journée A Paris to savour the innovative Ruban gent's watch of 1920, which would cause a sensation today if made available in a slightly scaled-up version. Its rectangular case and dial are sized like one of the bracelet links, creating a continuous chain. The fabulous period photo of Louis Arpels wearing said piece makes you want one all the more. Then again, he was able to accent it with a jaunty *chapeau* and a cigarette, looking like an extra from *Rif f*.

As with Movado's timeless Museum watch, Van Cleef & Arpels has its own stylish icon, which celebrated its 60th birthday in 2009 and remains a prominent part of the family. The PA49 arrived in 1949, yet it looks as current and daring as any lean, clean watch with only central stalks holding the straps - a style emulated by countless others in the intervening years.

Prior to that, the equally iconic, chunky Cadenas of 1936 appeared, in which the watch case seems more like a bracelet link than the heart of the object, as well as a parade of desk- or table-top objects that housed 'secret' watches, complex pocket watches, discreetly unadorned chronographs, a selection of clocks reminiscent of Cartier's Art Deco masterpieces, and - inevitably - the modern pieces which marry elegance and charm in equal measure. While a rotating disc bearing the sights of Paris will not enrapture a collector of triple calendars, it does show wit and inventiveness.

Everything about this book, as a physical entity, exudes the spirit of Van Cleef & Arpels, from the first impression you'll get when turning the unbelievably thick, luxurious pages. As a photo study of the company's watches, it is impeccable, the production standards are as good as any I've seen, and every illustration is annotated in detail at the back. The



Left: Louis Arpels, who joined the family firm in 1911, was the brother of Estelle Arpels. He and his wife H el ene were one of the most elegant couples of post-war Paris and New York. He is pictured wearing a Ruban wristwatch.



Left: Gentleman's Ruban watch with an articulated bracelet made up of yellow and white gold links. This model, created in the 1920s and produced throughout the 1930s, was also made in yellow gold and snakewood. Philippe Seibert Collection/ tude Boisgirard/A. Cukierman.

Below: Gentleman's extra-flat skeletonised PA49 wristwatch in yellow gold and mother-of-pearl. Automatic movement, black leather strap. 1977.



Right: The original PA49 first created for his own personal use by Pierre Arpels. Today, this ultra flat model is made in several different shapes and with various dials, but conserves its characteristic delicate central lugs. 1949.



overview is one of a company that never lost sight of its *raison d'être* – that of producing exquisite jewellery – while presenting its highest skills, including the extensive use of enamelling and of mounting gems with ‘invisible’ claws, even on wristwatches.

No book, however, is perfect, and you’ll find that this is not a volume to impress horological academics. The purple prose, trying

too hard to live up to the book’s title, may even have you reaching for the Emetrol. Actually, that’s a bit harsh: more likely, it will have you laughing uncontrollably, as you decide which is the best line to send to *Private Eye* for *Pseud’s Corner*. And, if you can also forgive its blatantly advertorial nature, you’ll find one perfectly descriptive word keeps popping into your head, capturing both the book and the subject matter: sumptuous. 🕒

Further information: www.vancleef-arpels.com

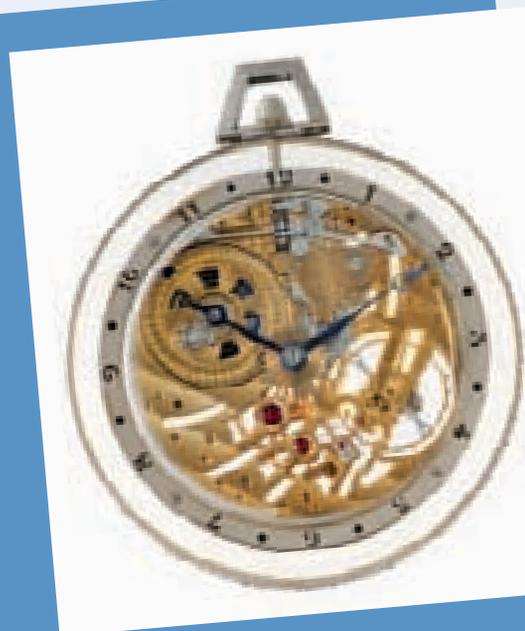
Right: In the Une Journée à Paris, the diamonds represent stars, while the delicate circular motifs depict the Parisian landscape. The three-dimensional figures, stand out against the black lacquer background and recount the adventures of a young woman on the streets of Paris, showcasing the skills of Van Cleef & Arpels’s artisans. 2009.

Below: Cadenas S watch, white gold set with diamonds weighing 4.34 carats. The Cadenas watch, created in the mid-1930s, has become a classic among Van Cleef & Arpels wristwatches. It is said to have been inspired by the Duchess of Windsor. 2003.



Below: This elegant pocket watch epitomises the art deco period when crystal was often used along with skeletonised horological movements to accentuate the effects of light and transparency. Circa 1925.

Below: Art deco chatelaine watch with Chinese landscape decor in yellow gold, platinum, black and red enamel and rose-cut diamonds. A black silk cord with a sliding bead, reminiscent of the ojime of Japanese inros, links the watch to the clip brooch. 1924.



Right: Yellow gold Feuilles watch with bracelet made up of two serpent chains linked by four round diamonds, with two leaves made up of light-coloured faceted sapphires and round diamond flowerets. The secret watch, with movement signed Vacheron Constantin, is concealed underneath a leaf. 1950.