



Prominente Crónografo is Cuervo Y Sobrinos' Art Deco chronograph for 2008. Available in rose gold or in the brand's colours cream, black and white.

Actively RETRO



It was amid a cloud of cigar smoke that Cuervo y Sobrinos, the horology of La Habana Vieja, rose again to inject some of their voluptuous Cuban style back into the watch business. QP gulps down its Mojito, dons its Panama and heads off in search of that Latin spark.

Rebecca Doulton

The modern office block overlooking Madrid's busy M30 ring road is a far cry from the gleaming jewellery shop that gave rise to the Cuervo y Sobrinos brand in cosmopolitan pre-Castro Havana. As headquarters for Marzio Villa's watch distribution business, it is time to find out from the brand's dapper Italian CEO how the company is faring these days, after it was awoken from a 40-year slumber in the late 1990's.

Elegantly dressed, Villa sits with his back to the traffic and smiles. "We have sent a clear signal to the world of high-end watchmaking: Cuervo y Sobrinos is not a shooting star phenomenon. Many skeptics had predicted we would fade and were surprised to see us at Baselworld this year."

Un serio contrincante

Limited production, a strong Cuban identity, vintage styling and prestigious Swiss craftsmanship are the eclectic ingredients behind this exotic cocktail designed to transport enthusiasts back to the leisurely pace of Havana's heyday, when sipping a mojito at La Bodeguita del Medio and drawing on a cigar were serious pastimes.

Having wrested the company from an unfortunate partnership and relocated the brand to Lugarno in 2003, Villa now runs a one-man show and describes the brand as "his life and soul" overseeing every phase in the creation of the watches, with an emphasis on product conception.



La Habana Vieja.

Cuervo y Sobrinos is not a shooting star phenomenon



Torpedo Pirata is available as chronograph or GMT, both with limited editions in steel, titanium and 18 ct. gold.

Cluttered with folders, invitations to car rallies and prototypes of the line of fountain and roller pens the brand is about to launch, Villa reaches into his pocket and extracts his “pride and joy, the jewel in my crown”.

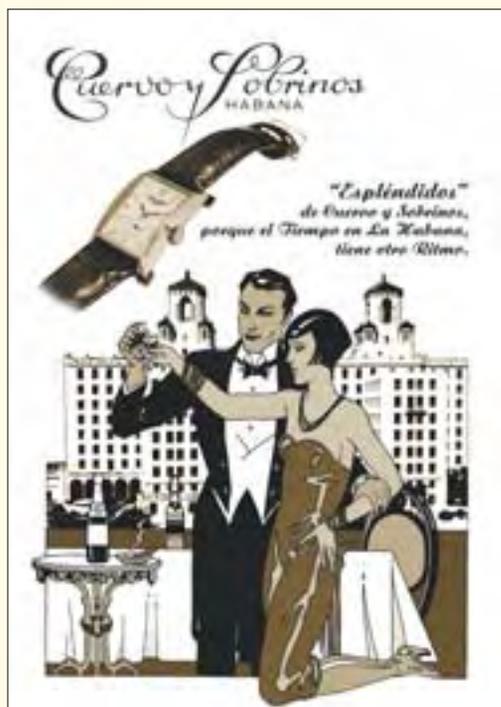
The surprising Torpedo Pirata, launched at Baselworld this year with its distinctive case and pushers reminiscent of a 17th century cannon, was Villa’s brainchild inspired by the romantic pirate novels of his youth and pirate films that he still watches today.

A phone call from reception informs Villa that the company’s insignia vehicle has been involved in a minor scrape. Inspecting the dent on the curvaceous vintage American Packard Caribbean convertible, Villa enthuses how the fully automatic two-tone tobacco and ivory convertible proves an exceptional brand ambassador as it swans around Madrid.

And for a company with such a colourful history, this American beauty is a nostalgic flashback. Just the kind of car one can imagine cruising Havana’s Malecon in the early 1950’s and clearly the direction the brand is driving towards in its constant evocation of the Cuban connection and all things relating to the halcyon days of the island, when international celebrity clients like Hemingway, Churchill, Caruso, Einstein and Neruda cavorted and shopped at the family run Cuervo y Sobrinos jewellery and watch shop.

El comienzo

Founded by Armando Rio y Cuervo and his brothers when they inherited their uncle’s watch shop in 1882, the business prospered selling prestigious imported timepieces. During the bleak inter-bellum period in Europe, the Swiss watch industry scrambled for new clients and spotted a receptive and prosperous market in Latin America. Brands such as Rolex, Patek Philippe, Longines and Roskopf were so seduced by the Cuban scene that they engraved the reputable Cuervo y Sobrinos brand name on their watches making these double branded watches highly coveted collector’s pieces today.



Catering to the Latin demand for more ostentatious styling, Cuervo y Sobrinos started to develop its own line of timepieces sending sketches to La Chaux-de-Fonds in Switzerland for manufacturing. Such was their appeal on the Continent that the Cuban brand opened three branches in Europe.

Fidel Castro's coup in 1958 sent Cuban business owners packing and Cuervo y Sobrinos faded into oblivion until an Italian antique watch specialist living on the island resuscitated the brand and called upon Villa's expert knowledge in distribution and product development. The fortuitous discovery of some original sketches and movements hidden in a safe in the original shop gave the brand a clear design reference for its renaissance.

In deference to the brand's heritage, Cuervo y Sobrinos has pursued a thematic connection to the island and cigars proved a natural vehicle. Representing Cuba's most prestigious export, all four watch families - from the flagship Esplendido and Prominente lines with their rectangular Art Deco inspired cases, to the classic round cases of the Robusto and Torpedo - bear the *vitola* of a cigar and are presented in specially designed cases that double up as a humidor.

Una nueva era

When questioned whether Cuervo y Sobrinos is going to exploit the cigar metaphor further, Villa shakes his head, "the cigar analogy is a nice idea, it has worked so far but I'm not going

Catering to the Latin demand for more ostentatious styling

*Un exponente
de
PERSONALIDAD*





Espléndidos Clásico in stainless steel and black dial.



Robusto with stainless steel, screw-in case and automatic movement.

to emphasize it. Cuervo is not just a watch for cigar smokers. You have to be careful with the cigar analogy. We've even had petitions from Montecristo to design a watch for them, but I don't want to fall into the trap of becoming a gadget, a gimmick."

In a departure from an eminently masculine world, Villa revealed that they will be launching a line of women's wristwatches in 2009. Although still top secret, Villa alluded to a very special gold bracelet typical of 1940's styling that will adorn the two new models, possibly sisters of the Prominente family, "and no," he reassures me, "they will not be presented in a humidor, but in a jewellery box."

"We are in an impeccable situation right now in the world of prestige watches," says Villa, "and want to give even more credibility to our brand. Beyond the appeal of vintage styling, Cuervo y Sobrinos is committed to create high complication pieces that deliver performance."

However, as a small watchmaking company that has relied on outsourcing movements, the brand has had its share of difficulties procuring supplies. "The Swiss drama is affecting everybody," laments Villa, "everybody is experiencing delays, including ETA. Our path is to develop our own in-house movements and create specialties in existing movements for additional performance. None of our models are currently COSC certified and it's not really the direction we're moving in."

In tandem with movement manufacturers including ETA, Dubois-Dépraz and La Joux-Perret, Cuervo y Sobrinos modifies and creates special functions to distinguish and improve the performance of their watches. Their first calibre CYS 2450 powers a single-pusher chronograph and was developed exclusively for a limited edition Espléndidos release. The CYS 2854 calibre behind the Robusto Tourbillon is the company's first tourbillon movement and a matter of great pride with its unique silicon hands and carriage. The new Torpedo Pirata runs on a CYS 3050 calibre - a modified Valjoux 7750 with chronograph functions, date and moonphases - and the latest Prominente has benefitted from in-house

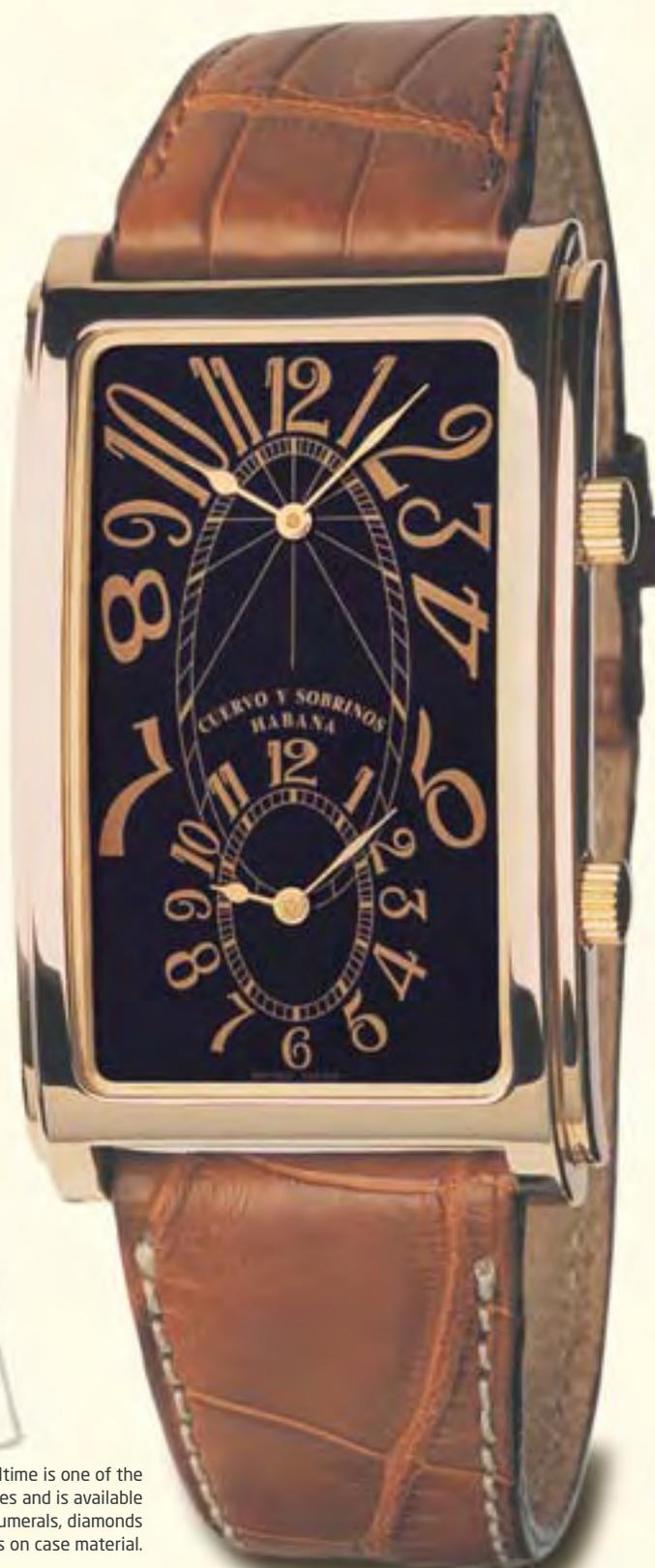
modifications to display a second time zone with 24 hours, instead of the customary 12.

La herencia

Next year there will be some exciting old-comers to the family with a replica of a 1930's Cuervo y Sobrinos timepiece that Villa obtained from an American collector featuring date, month, day of the week and week of the year readings. In addition the watchmakers in Lugano will be launching two limited edition watches with original vintage movements, including chronograph and moonphase features.

With a loyal following in America, Spain and Japan, 2009 production is estimated at 6,000 timepieces. Timepieces that Villa hopes will transport its wearers back to a world, "when there was time to admire beautiful objects, listen to the rustle of palms and sip a daiquiri. ☺

Further information: Jura Watches Ltd, 3 Burlington Gardens, Mayfair, London W1S 3EP / www.jurawatches.com



Prominente Dualtime is one of the four main families and is available with Roman numerals, diamonds and variations on case material.

