

Style *Substance*

Chanel J12 launched 2000,
with a 38 mm watchcase and
bracelet in black ceramic and
steel. £2,400.



License produced watches and generally low ambitions meant that watches emerging under fashion or jewellery house names were rarely given even a first glance by watch collectors. But the massive growth in the watch industry raised the stakes and attracted both attention and talent. Bearing the legend Paris on the dial now means pay attention not pass by, as QP discovers.

James Gurney





With the exception of Cartier, whose status as serious watchmakers has never been in doubt, the utilitarian approach to movement choice by Parisian luxury houses meant that they remained off the radar for anyone looking for more than a little wrist-candy. The design and quality of the cases and straps might have been distinctly above average, but the knowledge that underneath the glamorous design lay the heart of a perfectly respectable, but nonetheless suburban ETA movement dulled the desire.

Luckily, the last few years has seen the likes of Hermès and Van Cleef & Arpels come to the realisation that there is a market for watches that carry both the imprint of their house style and movements that at least match the aspiration of the designs.

Breaking the mould

Looking back, the moment of change came with the launch of the J12 by Chanel. At a time when most of the watch business were trying to be more Breguet than Breguet, anything from Paris was likely to be dismissed as fashion watch tat. The J12 made it impossible to maintain that point of view and it was swiftly recognised as iconic design.

The success of the J12 also made it clear that a demand existed, with the result that the watch offers from the likes of Boucheron and Louis Vuitton started to become more considered and ambitious. While the J12 and watches such as Louis Vuitton's Tambour have already been made available in high-jewellery tourbillon versions, it is only recently that the push for horological credibility has been comprehensively adopted.

Hermès launched the Clipper H1 at this year's Baselworld. It has a self-winding H1 movement; displaying hours, minutes, seconds and date. £5,995.



The push for horological credibility has now become comprehensively adopted

Hermes can be said to have lead the field here with their purchase of a significant share in Manufacture Vaucher Fleurier, the results of which are beginning to filter into their collection. This year has seen the launch of the Clipper H1, which is Hermes' first series produced watch based on the Vaucher designed and made movement - there have been other limited edition Dressage and Cape Cod versions previously.

As part of the Richemont group, it was no great surprise to see Jaeger-LeCoultre movements in Van Cleef & Arpels watches, usually with a little twist, such as showing the power reserve in a window in the case side. Less expected was that Van Cleef would look to combine their much appreciated wit and style with the skills of super complication designer Jean-Marc Wiederrecht, of Agenhor in Geneva. The 2007 Arpels Féerie with its retrograde fairy's wand and wings was one of the watches of the year and put the house firmly on the map as a watch designer, if not watch maker.

The Hermes Clipper H1 includes the Hermes Big Date mechanical automatic movement developed by Manufacture Vaucher Fleurier.



Fashionable horology

Without LVMH or Richemont links to smooth the way into haute horlogerie circles, or the chance that put Hermes in the way of Vaucher, Chanel and Boucheron have followed the more traditional route of finding suppliers able to give their watches the movements they deserve.

For Chanel, the J12 comes of age through their new partnership with Audemars Piguet. AP has developed a new automatic calibre for Chanel, the 3125, which makes its first appearance in a yellow gold and black ceramic case. Interestingly, the watch and movement make only fleeting reference to Audemars' production of the movement, this, after all, is a J12 with a movement, and price tag, to match the design rather than an exercise in co-branding.

Movement à la monde

Pitched at slightly more accessible levels, both Dior and Chaumet have also been working hard to give their collections the stamp of credibility. Dior has concentrated on bringing the undeniable star touch of house designers such as Hedi Slimane and Victorie de Castellane. The Chiffre Rouge certainly has the individuality and style to become an icon if only Dior would be more ambitious about its execution - it's easily good enough at the price, but somehow seems to fall short of the allure of the Dior name. This year did see the launch of a stunning tourbillon, but at some point the middle ground still needs to be found - though this segment is already occupied by LVMH stablemate, Chaumet.

Finally style now comes with substance

Boucheron Reflet XL
has a Girard-Perregaux
calibre G-P 4000. £9,750

Chaumet's Dandy comes with a variety of interesting movements from simple automatics and a GMT, to seriously smart "heures sautantes" (jumping hour display) and has a level of finish to match. More satisfying is that the watches seem to be more integrated into the brand as a whole, making strong use of Chaumet tics such as the bayadere stripes.

Boucheron's Reflet is one of the classic designs of the industry; it exudes the style of post-war and mid-Century Paris. And in the house's 150th anniversary year, the Reflet XL also gets a movement more in keeping with its status, in this case Girard-Perregaux's calibre 5000 automatic. Finally style now comes with substance. ☺

Further information:
www.chanel.com



Chaumet Dandy
 Heures Sautantes.

Van Cleef & Arpels, Arpels Féerie, 2007.
 £50,800.