

You've Come a Long Way Baby

🕒 Of all the evolutions that have transformed watchmaking from traditional craft to cutting edge luxury brand-engineered, horological pyrotechnics, few have been quite as unforeseen or unlooked for as that of Maurice Lacroix.

James Gurney

A decade ago it seemed quite interesting but of little real account, that a company best known for good value, but not over-inspiring, mid-market ladies watches should be focussing the Basel Fair communication on men's mechanical watches. It was, after all, at a time when the main aim of most watch designers was to be more classical than Breguet. Maurice Lacroix's Masterpiece collection, if nicely executed, was no exception. This sort of thinking, incidentally, was probably the reason why most watch companies were looking to ladies watches as the source of all growth and profit.

A return to tomorrow

And now, well the name on the dial is the same, but the Mémoire 1 is something truly different. There really was nothing discernible, even with the benefit of hindsight, to suggest that Maurice Lacroix would be counted among the ultra-progressives of the watch industry a decade later, rubbing shoulders with the wunderkind likes of BNC and Renaud et Papi. Then again no one really had any idea of the hold today's golden generation would have on the business of making watches.

But if the Mémoire 1 was unimaginable a decade ago, the moves necessary to embark on the project were made partly following a strategy and partly following the reception to their current collections. In this way the more contemporary Pontos collection was added to the slightly old-fashioned style of the Masterpiece watches. As both did well, Maurice Lacroix's owners started to believe that the relatively small size of the company could transform itself far more effectively than larger more established concerns and gave Philippe Merck, Maurice Lacroix's CEO, the backing he needed to take the company forward.

The Alternative factor

Since his arrival in 2001, Philippe Merck has been busy putting the structures in place to take Maurice Lacroix to its current enviable position as new favourite house for watch followers across the world. Part of this process has involved creating relationships with external partners such as ETA, La Joux-Perret, Andreas Strehler (who helped develop the ML106 Chronograph movement) and, with the Mémoire 1, Les Artisans Horlogers. But



Maurice Lacroix, Memoire 1. By pressing the button integrated into the crown, the mode changes from "Time" to "Chrono". The hands and the hour disk immediately change their positions. If their previous function was telling the current time, they are now available for the precise measurement of time intervals. When the button is pressed once again, they all return to their positions for telling time. Even when the chronograph is running, it is still possible to shift back and forth between the two modes without losing the information provided by one or the other function.

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more importantly, Merck has developed the company's internal capabilities, both in terms of development and production, at the heart of which is the "Atelier Maurice Lacroix". As M. Merck describes it, "The "Atelier of Maurice Lacroix" was set up in January 2006 [and it] started with six team members. The Atelier is a fusion of designers, engineers, constructors and watchmakers. As creative cell for research and development, its main role is to generate revolutionary ideas for movements and complications and to set new benchmarks in the watch industry."

"Maurice Lacroix has consolidated its position as a Swiss Manufacture brand with the development of our own manufacture movements and complications as well as with the production of complex movement components in our own workshops. Our motivation to develop a watch such as the Mémoire 1 was that we wanted to give our brand a stronger horological credibility and legitimacy. The Mémoire 1 proves our power of innovation and our capability to create real innovations which enrich the world of mechanical timekeeping..."

...In creating a new "haute horlogerie" in function and design, our objective was to show that real innovation can not only happen in big companies with enormous budgets, but also in smaller entrepreneurial ones."

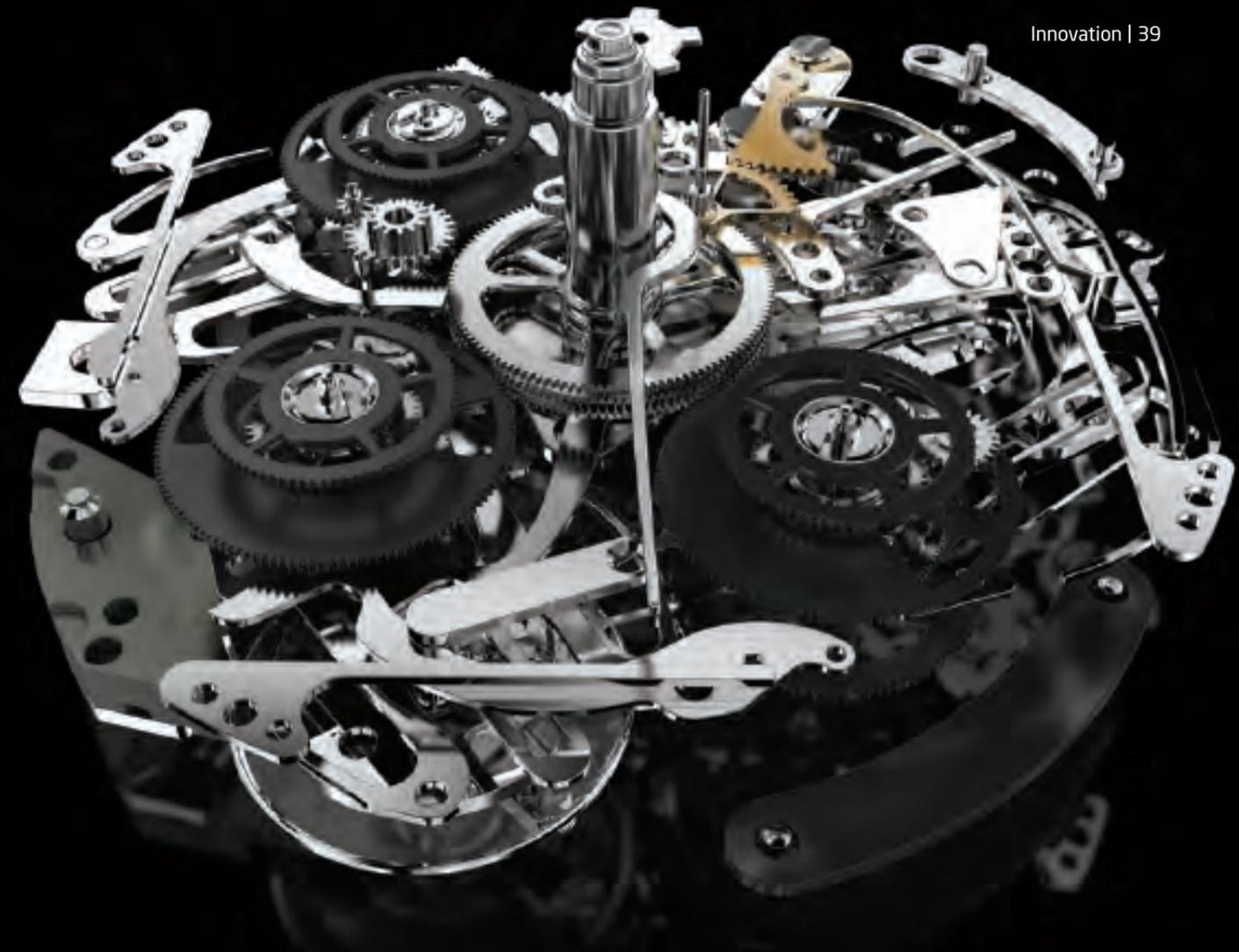
Where no brand has gone before

And with that level of ambition the Mémoire 1 becomes less of a surprise, and indeed, M. Merck has said that the Atelier has a decades worth of ideas to pursue. So what is the Mémoire 1? Symbolism aside, the Mémoire 1 is a chronograph watch with mechanical analogue memory, a first in both concept and practice and, perhaps an over-complicated way to describe a very simple watch. The three hands show either the time or the chronograph time at whatever state the chronograph was left in when last in use.

Even a moment's thought is enough to appreciate the complexity required to achieve such a simple task. As Maurice Lacroix are not releasing final details of the movement's inner workings until Baselworld 2008, we'll save the a description for another article. Suffice to say that there are enough cams and gears for Maurice Lacroix to suggest the watch belongs to the classic Grande Complication category. QP disagrees.

The enterprise incident

For once Maurice Lacroix' ambition falls short of the mark as Mémoire 1 more truly belongs to a new, dare we say it post-modern, category that would more properly be labeled the Grande Simplification. Classic Grandes Complications attempt to match complexity of display and function (split-second/flyback chrono, retrograde



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perpetual calendar tourbillon, minute repeater etc) with the simplest possible mechanical under-pinning. By contrast, this new category looks to achieve the superficially simple regardless, even embracing of, the complexity required.

This acceptance of mechanical complexity does mean the Mémoire 1 pays a price in terms of height with the strap attached at the lowest point on the case, the watch sits uncomfortably high on the wrist - almost to the point that stretches the credibility of Mémoire 1 as a wristwatch. But height aside, the Mémoire 1 is supremely well designed inside and out, it is full of clever touches with interesting textures and it rewards closer

inspection. Needless to say, it is light-years away from the Breguet clone watches of a decade ago.

Machines like the Mémoire 1 clearly don't emerge from thin air or even by having the right set of tools to hand, the Mémoire 1 is a modern watch in its realisation as much as its design or function. In the development of the Mémoire 1, Maurice Lacroix graphically illustrates their new disposition. Where once it was unthinkable even to suggest that some components might not have been made in the manufacture, external contributions are now seen as a sign of serious intent, whether in terms of design or the movement. Les Artisans Horlogers worked closely

Created within the new Atelier de Maurice Lacroix, the ML 128 Calibre movement of the Memoire 1 is composed of 537 individual pieces and required a number of newly developed components. The balance has been given a core of transparent sapphire and a fellow of gold, the escapement is unique and the spring is compressed inside the barrel arbour from right to left, allowing the wheels that transfer motor power to the regulator to turn backwards.





with the Atelier unit at Maurice Lacroix both in terms of solving the myriad complexities of the movement and in terms of actually making the watches in anything approaching a series – there being a vast difference between getting one piece to hold together and function and making the process repeatable and predictable.

Edge of forever

Is the Mémoire 1 a success? It's hard to imagine the production run failing to sell out at a respectable pace and it has certainly

caught the industry and public's attention. It embodies a new category of watches that looks set to dominate the upper reaches of the industry over the next few years and it looks fabulous. Of course, delivering working, reliable models within the time scales promised will establish Maurice Lacroix's credentials as serious players at this level of the business in a way publicity cannot quite manage. And, quite possibly, as Philippe Merck hopes, "One day, Maurice Lacroix will be mentioned in historical watch books as the inventor of the first mechanical watch with memory!" ☺

(Left) The Memoire 1 was unveiled at an event in Shanghai, November 2007, but will be launched officially during Baselworld 2008. (Centre) Sandro Reginelli, Maurice Lacroix Product Manager and Philippe Merck Maurice Lacroix CEO. (Right) Atelier de Maurice Lacroix.

