

Alchemy

Richard Mille's unerring formula for success



Love them or hate them, it's impossible to deny, let alone ignore, the impact that Richard Mille's watches have had on the industry over the past six years. While it normally takes a new brand at least six years to find its feet in such a bustling market, Mille arrived fully formed to a clamouring client base - notably a young, Far Eastern crowd, eager to flaunt a status symbol that matched their Lamborghinis far better than a Patek. Mille's blend of techy styling, extreme materials and mechanical perfection didn't compete or even offer an alternative - it created a completely new genre, subsequently co-habited by indebted gadget brands like Urwerk, HD3, Hautlence and now Wyler. But while the hype would have you believe that the watches are constructed by Formula 1 mechanics, the story of Richard Mille is actually a valuable lesson in traditional Swiss watchmaking. *QP* follows the RM trail from Fleurier to Les Reussilles.

Alex Doak

"When Richard first approached me with his idea for a new watch brand, he showed me two photographs: one of an old Ferrari engine, and one of a new Formula 1 Renault engine. 'In horology,' he told me, 'there has been no evolution like this for 30 years. I want my watch to be the Renault engine.' He wanted 30 years of evolution in one watch!"

You can forgive Fabrice Deschanel for being daunted. Even as General Director of Renaud & Papi, with some of the industry's sharpest talent at his disposal, the challenge of creating Richard Mille's first 'racing machine for the wrist' was an enormous one. For a start, the engine metaphor was no mere metaphor - Mille wanted

his new watches built with a literal F1 philosophy: maximum performance attained with zero compromise.

In a sense, form followed function, but since the intended function bore little resemblance to any known specification in watchmaking, the eventual aesthetic - spline screwheads, cut-out bridges, ribbed mainplates, that trademark tonneau case - instantly stood out, and still does. Up close and personal, however, and your immediate impression of a Richard Mille watch is the sheer depth within (dials being negligible, of course). This brings us back to why exactly Mille approached Deschanel in the first place.

To be made in a limited edition of 30 pieces, the platinum RMO12 tourbillon (€322,000) is utterly incredible. The 21,600 vph mechanism is bound by titanium bridges suspended from Inox alloy tubes - a seemingly delicate arrangement that imbues torsional rigidity, as well as a spectacle.





(Left) Richard Mille, aboard a yacht from Perini Navi's boatyard in Viareggio. In a departure from the usual motorsport analogy, Mille has now drawn inspiration from the luxury maritime aesthetic to create his RM014 and RM015 'Perini Navi' watches.

(Above) Star of Issue 18's cover, the RM005 FM - one of many 'Felipe Massa' editions from the brand, dedicated to Mille's F1-driver friend and brand ambassador.

Since then, it is not unfair to say that the Richard Mille brand has established itself as the most fêted of modern watchmakers. Freed from the confines of working for other brands, Mille's ambition has brought new levels of expectation to the industry simply by striving for, and achieving, unheard-of tolerances. If something could be made lighter, stronger, or harder, it would be - a philosophy of 'luxury' that is quite out of step with the lush opulence traditionally touted at the high end.

After Audemars Piguet, Mille is now R&P's principal client - small wonder, given the intensity of labour demanded by every wristwatch. They may be inordinately expensive, but they are watches made in a very expensive way. Take the RM008 rattapante tourbillon. It might start at €344,000, but if, having re-mounted its finely regulated tourbillon cage for the umpteenth time, an R&P worker so much as nicks the mainplate's PVD coating, the movement must come off, the plate goes into a capacious reject bin, and he starts again. And given that the entire split-seconds chronograph mechanism was developed from *carte blanche* over four years, and that just one man, Ferdinand Simao, is capable of assembling the 15 kits sent to his home by R&P every year, it isn't long before you appreciate just how much bang you're getting for your buck.

Createur

Richard Mille himself is not a 'watchmaker' by any means. He is probably best described by the French term, 'createur', implementing and guiding his singular vision through a carefully orchestrated chain of suppliers. In this sense at least, he's an industry veteran. Before Mauboussin, he'd spent a good 20 years

as Commercial Director for French giant Matra SA, whose entire watchmaking subsidiary was sold to Seiko Instruments in 1981. Immediately after Mauboussin, Mille teamed-up with his friend Dominique Guenat at Montres Valgine, where consultation work for Reossi, Baccarat and even Audemars Piguet paid the bills until the RM001 tourbillon exploded onto the scene.

It's here where things get a little complicated, and where the true, tangled nature of the Swiss watchmaking industry reveals itself. Thankfully, Mille's honesty means we can understand and ultimately appreciate it all the better, at least from the perspective of *this* brand. While Mille himself remains 'createur', you might like to think of Montres Valgine as his 'thinktank', pulling the strings behind the scenes, making an appearance only to stamp that italic 'V' on every caseback.

Not many people know it, but companies like Valgine are rife. They are project management consultants of sorts, working with brands on R&D and production planning; generally seeing a watch through from conception to delivery using a trusted base of suppliers. 'Richard Mille' the brand is actually held by Horometrie SA, which co-habits with Valgine - both of which Mille and Guenat part-own, sharing options in Horometrie with Audemars Piguet (I told you it would get complicated). Valgine still works on the odd outside project, such as AP's recent Rubens Barrichello edition Royal Oak Offshore, but Horometrie takes up the majority of its time. Again, few brands would admit all this, but, again, all credit to Mille for making no bones and focusing on the product rather than the fripperies of myth-making.

A family firm since 1900, Valgine itself is based in an unremarkable grey building in the unremarkable village of Les Breuleux. It overlooks, as do the majority of Swiss watch companies, a tranquil, coniferous valley in the Jura mountain range. Its sign looks dated and the stucco is flaking. I find it difficult to comprehend that every Richard Mille watch makes its final pitstop here, before dispatch. I should know better as a watch journalist, but it was still rather disappointing to imagine that if I could ever afford an RM002-V2, it won't have emerged ominously from a Death Star-like structure in a cloud of dry ice.

Things are changing though. Rising from the red rooftops of Les Breuleux, only recently shorn of scaffolding, is Richard Mille's brand-new, three-storey headquarters, connected to Valgine by an elevated, glazed tunnel. Despite spoiling the view for Valgine's janitor and Guenat's aunt and mother, who all live in the apartment next door, it is an impressive building and actually does well to reflect the aesthetic of Mille's watches, with its grey, matte cladding. In keeping with Mille's hi-tech philosophy, it is the first industrial building in the Jura to run entirely on geothermic energy ("minergie de belle"). And, more importantly, it will double Valgine's workforce to 60 when it opens in September.

Showing me around the building site is Yves Mathys, Director of Valgine. He's a big man, and his chunky RM011 'Felipe Massa' flyback chronograph looks at home on his wrist as he waves the dangling wires and flexes out of our way. "This building will

(Left) You need to hold the RM012 up to the light to appreciate the full effect of the spaceframe movement.

(Above) An RM002-V2 tourbillon with torque indicator and power reserve (from €148,000), sat next to its 'Perini Navi' evolution, the RM014 (from €161,000), both awaiting dispatch to their new owners. Note the feeling of depth allowed by the carbon nanofibre baseplate.

There was history between them. For four years before embarking on his eponymous project in 1998, Mille was heading-up the watch and clock division for French *haute joaillier* Mauboussin, where he conceived a flamboyant line of tourbillon watches with baseplates made of semi-precious hardstone. Enter Renaud & Papi - Audemars Piguet's renowned tailor of complications. "Richard was the only man at Mauboussin who saw the potential of the product," recalls Deschanel, whose business management background complements the watchmaker in Giulio Papi (co-founder Dominique Renaud cashed his chips back in 1998). "We eventually made just four watches, but we gained huge know-how from working and drilling the hardstone materials, which has since filtered down into watches like AP's moss-agate tourbillon and the carbon-nanofibre baseplates in the 'V2' Richard Mille watches."

Closer observers back in 2001 will, however, have noticed hidden similarities between the very first 'RM001' tourbillons to leave R&P's Le Locle workshops and the ornately sculpted components of those four Mauboussin watches: the elevated tourbillon bridge and mainspring; components sitting proud on a sparse mainplate; no dial to obscure an impressive architecture. With Deschanel and Papi, Mille had cemented the first and foremost of several carefully chosen partnerships.



“We make emotional, artistic watches. I’d refuse to make a watch without hand finishing.”

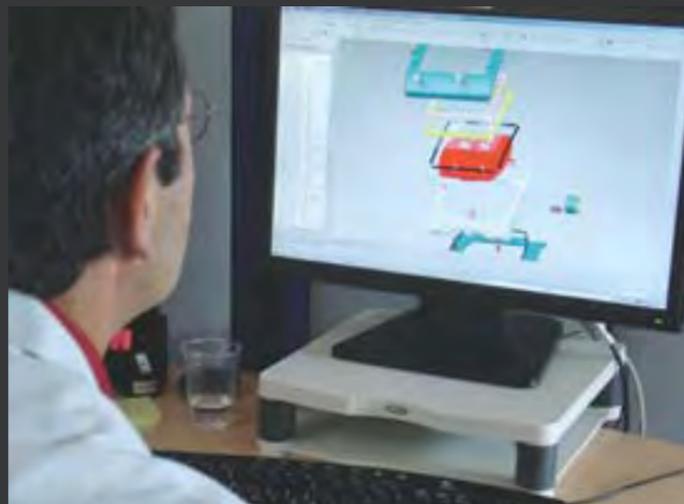
Fabrice Deschanel, General Director of Renaud & Papi.



Gérard Donzé points out how complex a Richard Mille case actually is.



A third of Donzé Baume’s staff are polishers. The purple coating is to protect pre-polished surfaces during transit from one process to another.



The new RM016 case is honed by CAD at casemaker, Donzé Baume.

allow us to increase our production from a current level of around 1,800 up to a maximum ceiling of 5,000 pieces a year.

“All of our automatic movements from Vaucher Manufacture Fleurier and Soprod will be assembled on the second floor, as well as some of R&P’s tourbillons. Some polishing and minor machining will even be possible, plus casing-up and final quality control. For me, quality is everything, especially at these price levels.” This is something that Mathys emphasises repeatedly on our tour, and the sight of the massive walk-in safe on the ground floor punctuates his mantra. The 4 m x 20 m stronghold will accommodate several Witschi timing machines, allowing final testing to continue throughout the night, once everyone’s clocked out. This should literally double the certainty that every watch leaves Les Breuleux in perfect working order.

Mathys has been at Valgine for seven years, after stints at Nivarox, Tissot and Rado’s R&D departments. At Valgine, however, he has found his elixir, and talks about Guenat and Mille in a way that becomes increasingly familiar as I meet more and more of Mille’s professional acquaintances. “Richard and Dominique are two very different guys; but two lovely guys. We speak a lot and Richard makes his vision well known, but they ultimately trust me to do what I want. There are no hierarchies at all - we work together and everyone has their input. And Richard knows we all do 120% for him.

“I don’t think,” Mathys summarises, “I’ll ever find a relationship like that elsewhere in the industry.”

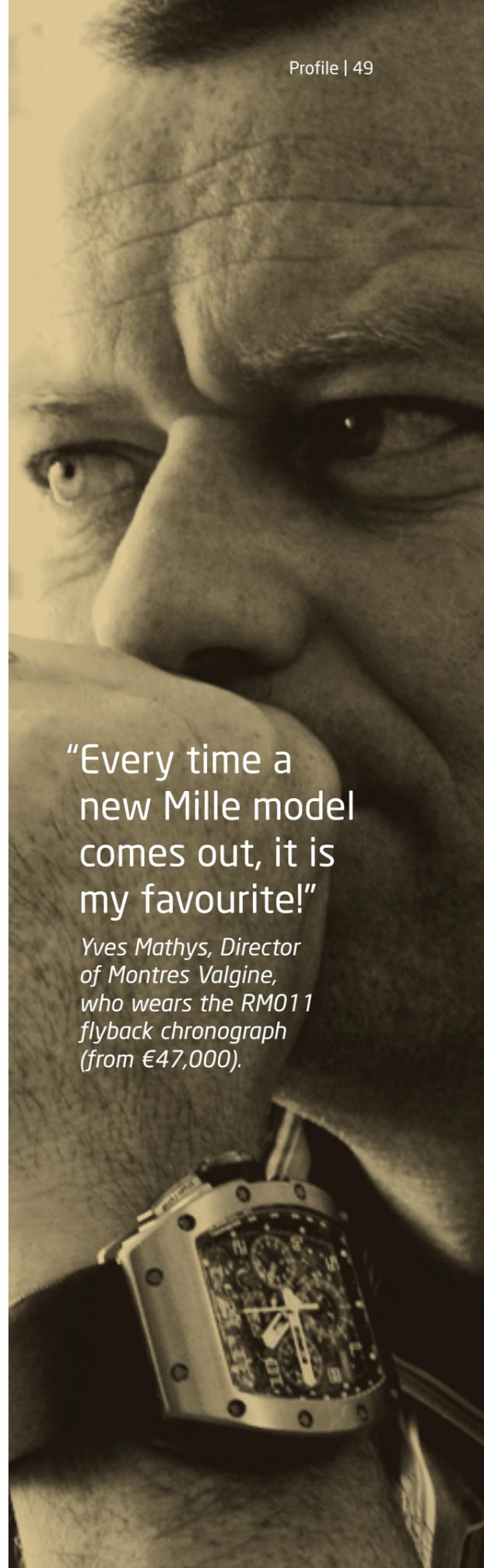
People guy

It seems Mille’s real talent is in bringing the right people together. For while it might be fashionable to chase that

self-sufficient ‘manufacture’ status, the majority of the industry is still based on a horizontal system of suppliers dotted throughout the Jura mountains, all a mere ski lift from each other (many hold the mountainous topography responsible for these pockets of speciality). True, many brands are ‘verticalising’ simply to avoid unstable supply chains, but Mille has chosen his collaborators wisely. The unwavering reputation of the product means that their mere association brings instant prestige within the industry, eliciting long-term loyalty.

A good example is Donzé Baume, the company that makes Mille’s cases. It’s certainly not often that case-making is included on the half-crown tour, but given that Donzé Baume is literally around the corner from Valgine, and that the Richard Mille case is a *tour de force* in engineering precision, it seemed rude not to say hello. I asked Commercial Director Gérard Donzé what it was like working for Mille. “It’s the hardest range of cases we make - technically, they are a huge challenge. They are the only brand to which six of our milling machines are solely dedicated! If we switched to another brand and back, the re-adjustment process would mean destroying too many cases before the calibration was correct. Another problem is that no components can be farmed out - everything must be made in one place because every case is different; the tolerances are less than a quarter of a millimetre. The tri-planar curvature of the case means milling is very complicated, too. And the finishing?” Donzé rolls his eyes. “It’s a headache.”

So why bother? As the oldest and biggest independent casemaker in the industry, with a roster of stellar clients (remaining nameless here, I’m afraid), Donzé Baume hardly



“Every time a new Mille model comes out, it is my favourite!”

Yves Mathys, Director of Montres Valgine, who wears the RM011 flyback chronograph (from €47,000).

Why choose Soprod?



Christian Châtelain uses a Perspex model to demonstrate one of Soprod's mechanisms.

The job for Richard Mille's first automatic ladies' movement wasn't given to R&P - Mille's longest collaborator - or even Vaucher, which already makes the automatic RM005-S calibre for the RM010, RM016 and the base of the RM011 (whose flyback chronograph module is, in turn, made by Dubois Dépraz). Instead, RM007 was given to Soprod; a choice that's indicative of the emphasis Mille places on working with the right people.

Another steel and glass carbuncle sat awkwardly on a rolling Jura hillside, just two villages from Les Breuleux, Soprod was established in 1996. "It's nice to see a journalist!" greets Christian Châtelain, head of R&D. "We are normally quite hidden; in the shadows." This is for good reason, as Soprod has built a reputation for modifying ETA movements and adding modules of their own conception to other brands' watches, often without due credit - a privilege of brands wishing to maintain the guise of independence. Touring Soprod's *atelier*, the shelves of kits read like a Who's Who of the modern watch industry.

needs Richard Mille, does it? But the familiar tune was played again: "I have an excellent relationship with Richard. We go back 27 years."

And as well as their good relationship, there is a tangible sense of pride. Production headaches aside, Donzé is probably the only guy who can meet Mille's demands, saying, not without puffed chest, "If Mille left Donzé Baume, the brand would consume 80% of the next biggest case-maker's capacity, which is 50% less than us." I'm inclined to believe him, especially after witnessing the batteries of deafening, five-axis CNC machines, and the rows-upon-rows of hunched polishers down in the basement (all 100 of them, to be precise).

Soprod makes a few movements of its own though, including a small ladies' automatic, the calibre 6024 - a part of Soprod's repertoire on which Mille determined to capitalise. Its geometry was 'translated' (in contrast to Vaucher's direct transcription of its calibre 4000 for RM005) and adapted to the trademark tonneau shape with PVD-coated baseplate. But it's the rotor that everyone talks about - just as whimsical as RM005's variable inertia rotor. "Richard's original idea was to have loose diamonds inside, but they scratched the crystal," recalls Châtelain. "The next idea was sand from around the world, which, while romantic, had the same problem. Eventually, it was my idea to use the gold bearings. Richard and Dominique [Guenat] had always said, 'If you have ideas, tell us.' This was the first time I'd thought of something for one specific brand."

RM007 is doubtless cause for much pride at Soprod, and much prestige throughout the industry. Now that 'Soprod-modified' is a specification increasingly admitted by its clients, could this be a result of the Mille Effect?

Coherence

Donzé Baume is in fact playing an unheralded role of importance here, as the seamless integration of movement and case is key to the Richard Mille philosophy. This is no better apparent than with this year's surprise release, the RM016, which dared to differ from the curved tonneau shape.

Relatively speaking, the ultra-slim rectangular case is a radical departure. However, somehow, it is still unmistakably 'Mille'; with, as Donzé puts it, "the usual problems of Mille!" Vaucher's skeletonised RM005-S calibre fits inside the case like a glove, and the aesthetic is still on message - if a little less high-octane.

"Even from 100 m away, you know the RM016 is a Mille."

"Women in Singapore have already flooded our order books," says Mathys. "They were wearing the RM005, our smallest model, but now the RM016 offers a more slender way to wear the brand. Even from 100 metres away," he affirms, "you know it's a Mille. The DNA of the brand is entirely integrated."

This integration, or 'coherence' is a topic on which R&P's Fabrice Deschanel is particularly passionate. Herein lies the success of the watches as purely physical objects. "Originally, we worked with an architect to master the original three-dimensional concept behind Richard Mille; the coherence between the case and movement. Achieving totality of these visual and mechanical traits, where everything is painted in the same brushstroke, is unusual in watches, as evolution of that harmony is difficult... a notable exception being perhaps Lange's Datograph," admits Deschanel. "Our choice of materials, inside and out, was an excuse to make a beautiful object - the materials are in correspondence with the whole watch, not used for the sake of it. We won't use silicon, for example, if it doesn't work in totality; its use in improved timekeeping is not important for us. If you want a timekeeper that good, buy a Seiko!"

The coherence of Richard Mille watches is often likened to that of a car's chassis and engine, which goes to show how inspirational Mille's Ferrari and Renault engine photos proved to be. The analogy is no better apparent than with the RM012. The tourbillon movement is suspended from a tubular spaceframe that is more skeleton-like than any two-dimensional 'skeletonised' movement you've ever seen. The spindles, like those of a racing car, offer torsional rigidity, and are braced against each other and the edges of the case in such a sparse, economical manner that the sense of space is breathtaking. It is almost unfortunate that you have to remove it from your wrist for maximum effect.

Computer renderings of the new 'extra-plate' RM016 (from €32,000): 49.8 mm x 38 mm (at widest point) x 8.25 mm (at thickest point). Vaucher's skeletonised RM005-S movement is used. By adjusting the position of the rotor's two ribs (visible through the caseback), the rotor's inertia can be personalised to the wearer's lifestyle, thus preventing over- or under-winding.



"Richard never does anything without good reason." Unofficially named 'RM013', the next release from Mille will be a planetarium-tellurion, with ribbed bridges similar to those in the watches.



The sinister new Richard Mille building in Les Breuleux will double the workforce of Montres Valgine and offer the state-of-the-art facilities it needs in order to maintain the brand's swell in production.

Begotten

In fact, you are never quite prepared for how awe-inspiring Mille watches are in the flesh. Many years ago, George Daniels once advised fledgling apprentice Roger Smith that his watches must look “begotten, not made” - in other words, the watchmaker’s touch must be invisible. No more so is this apparent than with Mille. The watches are flawless and beguiling.

And I know I’m not being naïve here, owing to one recurrent phenomenon on my tour of the Jura. Upon entering every workshop in every *atelier* we visited, Richard Mille’s PR and my chaperone for the week, Theodore Diehl, was reluctantly obliged to remove his RM003-V2. The red-gold tourbillon GMT was then passed from bench to bench with palpable reverence; seasoned watchmakers gathered to examine the tiny machine. It was a ritual made more pertinent by the fact that much of the audience was at that very time constructing identical movements. Rarely do Mille’s suppliers have the opportunity to examine the end result of their toil, and their fascination shows how well the final package works. What’s more, their fascination invariably turned to a tangible glow of pride. ◯

(Right) Richard Mille watches consistently perform well at auction - one of the few modern brands that do, owing to its strong reputation amongst collectors and the watches’ low production. An original RM001 tourbillon (bottom) sold at Christie’s record-breaking May sale for SFr.264,000 - twice its estimate! For this September’s ‘Only Watch’ charity auction in Monaco, held by Antiquorum, Richard Mille and Philippe Starck are hoping to match their runaway success two years ago with another collaboration (above) - an RM011 with, for the first time, an integrated titanium bracelet.

