

# Opening Up

🕒 Philippe Léopold-Metzger's quiet reign at Piaget has seen the famous house regain much of the prestige and flamboyance that made the La Côte-aux-Fées company the absolute choice of a post-war, jet-setting elite - an elite for whom Geneva was a key destination and Piaget's boutique on the rue de Rhône an obligatory stop. *QP* bypasses the boutique this time, and goes straight to Léopold-Metzger's office, from where the CEO is orchestrating an exuberant return to form.

## James Gurney

Although originally founded in the 1870s it was not until the close of the 1940s that Piaget emerged as a brand in its own right rather than a supplier to others. Piaget grew steadily through the subsequent years, following a path determined in part by its experience as a *manufacture*; the pursuit of extreme slimness of the movement. This specialisation ultimately led to the 1957 launch of the Calibre 9P, followed in 1960 by the self-winding 12P movement which, at just 2.3 mm thick, put Piaget in the *Guinness Book of Records* as creator of the "world's thinnest self-winding movement". These set the benchmark for future movements across the industry and set Piaget on a path to becoming semi-official maker to the jet set.

Pressing the push-piece at 3 o'clock opens the Altiplano Double Jeu's (£14,100) upper case to reveal a second display underneath. The upper case houses the hand-wound calibre 838P, while the lower case contains the 2.5 mm calibre 830P, the new equivalent of the 2.1 mm 430P, which replaced 1957's legendary 9P in 1996.





Philippe Léopold-Metzger is becoming very much the man of the brand as Piaget once again rises to the sort of form it enjoyed in the Seventies.



This year's Polo Chronograph (£12,000) debuts Piaget's new calibre 800P, the first chronograph movement entirely developed within the *manufacture*. In addition to time, chronograph and flyback functions, the proprietary movement drives a second time-zone indication at 9 o'clock. It is column-wheel activated, the clutch is vertically coupled and two barrels hold 52 hours' power reserve in activated chronograph mode.

Even when seen languishing in auction previews or on the pages of the catalogues, the Piagets of the late '60s and the '70s and even the '80s have a special glamour - the ultra-slim cases with their dials made of tiger's eye, malachite or lapis lazuli matched with incredibly supple, textured bracelets. By appearing to lead the company from the dance floors, polo fields and yachts of the rich and famous, Yves Piaget infused the house with a patina of that alluring world.

When Cartier took over Piaget in 1988 it was perhaps inevitable that some of the freewheeling spirit would be lost and in any event tastes were changing and it was time to move on. The point of this all-too-brief history lesson is that by the time Philippe Léopold-Metzger took up the reigns as CEO (Yves Piaget remained as Chairman) Piaget had built a solid watchmaking base, gained experience as a jeweller but somehow lost the magic fascination of earlier years.

Léopold-Metzger, nevertheless, denies that Piaget lost ground, pointing out that the 1990s saw Piaget gain awareness and presence in the Asian markets that are the current motor for growth in the industry



From Piaget's elegant 'Black Tie' collection, the Emperor Cushion in pink gold (£10,400) is a time-zone watch driven by Piaget's in-house 850P movement, first launched last year.



The 18-carat white-gold case of this Limelight Party model (£30,800) is composed of six mobile rings set with 320 brilliant-cut diamonds (approx. 2.9 cts) and 30 brilliant-cut black sapphires (approx. 0.4 ct). An onyx dial displays the time, kept by Piaget's 56P quartz movement.

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as a whole. A network of boutiques in 20-plus cities across East Asia more than offset the stall in European growth. Similar success in the US and the Middle East gave the company the economic stability to invest for the future and this means bringing back the spark that Léopold-Metzger almost admits was lost when Piaget changed hands.

### Creative, contemporary, classic

In his office at the bow of the liner-like *manufacture* at Plan-les-Ouates, Léopold-Metzger expounded the guiding principles that have marked his leadership at Piaget. Clearly pleased with the way the house stands today - Piaget was one of the highlights of what many perceived as a below-par Salon at Geneva in April - Léopold-Metzger stressed that Piaget is an emotive brand, bringing an expectation of

creativity and exclusivity. All the business planning and strategies serve only to support this ethos. "Piaget must be creative, contemporary and classic" - not perhaps the most earth-shattering mantra for running a luxury house but one which Piaget knows how to live up to. Even at the more flamboyant edges of the current collection there is a restraint and a sense of elegance that demands attention and respect - were you ever to see me sporting a diamond-set watch, the chances are that it would be something from Piaget's elegant Black Tie collection.

Achieving the mantra is done partly through a policy of using just precious metals (though there are



In keeping with the current revival of three-piece tailoring for men and indeed the original purpose of the tourbillon, Piaget has launched an extraordinary pocket watch this year (Sfr.150,000), driven by calibre 602P - the world's thinnest tourbillon movement.

# Piaget & Venice

Piaget and the City of the Doges have established close ties over the last 11 years. As a patron and player in the renovation of the Torre dell'Orologio clock overlooking St Mark's Square in Venice, Piaget has contributed its horological know-how as well as funding to restore this monument to its former glory of 1499. Originally built by Gian Paolo Ranieri, the clock ran off a deadbeat escapement, which was changed to a pinwheel pendulum in 1757 during the clock's first major restoration by Bartolomeo Ferracina. A second overhaul in 1858 added a support to the pendulum and made the clock official timekeeper for all of Venice's clocks.

To commemorate the latest major restoration, Piaget has presented a one-of-a-kind edition of its Polo Tourbillon Relatif (SFr.350,000), decorated in a special way to echo the Venetian tower. The white-gold case and dial are 'grand feu' enamelled using the 'champlevé' technique. Here, the enamel specialist hand-engraves the white gold, leaving-out the motifs, which protrude gleaming from the pigment. Like the clock face itself, the white-gold stars sparkle against a blue sky and on the side of the case is the winged lion of St Mark.

Unveiled to plaudits last year, calibre 608P's flying-tourbillon carriage, weighing just 0.2 g, is suspended from the tip of the minute hand and appears to be visually disconnected from the base mechanism, concealed beneath the dial. It spins on its own axis once a minute, completing one rotation of the dial every hour.



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some steel watches), limiting the numbers of any particular model, and - most of all - through considered design. The last part of the mantra is more a filter than an aim in itself, and this is the real difference between the Piaget of the past and the Piaget of today. While classicism is no longer the guiding principle that it was in the 1990s, the 1970s are not about to be revived at Piaget either. In practice this means that bold shapes and designs are to be found aplenty within the collection (see the Emperador Cushion from 2006, as worn by Philippe Léopold-Metzger when we met). But you will look in vain for 50 mm carbon-fibre behemoths tricked-out with green ostrich straps. There are no 'crazy' dials at Piaget but there is a playfulness that can be found in the current vinyl-inspired collections or the mobile gem-set rings and onyx dial of the Limelight Party.

the 830P, which is simply more pleasing and more in proportion that its predecessor for today's larger watches. As Léopold-Metzger puts it, "Men simply expect a Piaget to have a beautiful movement."

As for the future, Léopold-Metzger promises more of the same. Of course there are minor imbalances to smooth out: the proportion of mechanical to quartz watches is moving in the right direction and the men's collection is growing. More importantly, Europe needs to be convinced afresh, particularly now that the spark of creativity is as much in evidence now as it ever was. This will mean more boutiques (London does not yet have one), busier communication and even, though he shies away from the idea, a little more of M. Léopold-Metzger himself. ○

(Above) Clean, elegant and contemporary but with a slight retro twist - the new Altiplano model in pink gold (£5,750), driven by Piaget's ultra-thin workhorse, calibre 430P.

(Below) Calibre 9P: what started Piaget's 50-year pursuit of ultra-thin refinement.

For a house that is one of the largest movement makers in Switzerland it might seem odd that a profile should not highlight the latest horological innovations. When even Rolex seems on the verge of joining the complications arms race, Piaget is content to let the movements serve the design. With the exception of the Tourbillon Relatif, Piaget's efforts are directed at developing the movements it needs - such as the new proprietary chronograph calibre, 880P. The 50th anniversary of the calibre 9P is celebrated this year with a new, wider equivalent,



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