



A chameleon - one of Boucheron's many 'mascots' - is finely crimped onto the Parisian jeweller's tonneau-shaped 'Me' watch, as part of the new Jungle collection; the first to enjoy Boucheron and Girard-Perregaux's new partnership.

The Animal Within

Thanks to Girard-Perregaux, Boucheron's new Jungle watches are just as exotic beneath their chameleonic dials

Maria Doultou

This January, Boucheron launched a new range of watches in collaboration with Girard-Perregaux. That the Parisian jeweller should use movements made by another house is not exactly frontline news; it is, in fact, the norm for non-specialist houses to rely on the know-how of movement manufacturers when it comes to making their timepieces tick. So why was Boucheron, which has been selling watches since 1870, making such a song and dance about an apparently normal agreement? Usually, this level of detail at a *grande maison de joaillerie* would be relegated to the small print, or polished over by giving the calibres homegrown names.

Think again. Girard-Perregaux is, in actual fact, very rarely known for selling its movements to third parties. It is a watch brand in its own right, rather than an ETA or Frédéric Piguet, and it is closely fostered by parent holding body, Sowind. So why cosy-up to another brand?

And more importantly, why were both the CEO of Boucheron Jean-Christophe Bédos and Sowind CEO Philippe Maurette standing in a first-floor salon *chez* Boucheron, so keen to tell their story one January morning in Paris?

The odd couple

Before launching into the business of the day, it helps to set the scene. Boucheron was the first jeweller to move into Place Vendôme in 1893, choosing the sunniest spot with the plum view. Through the ceiling-to-floor windows, past the square's famous bronze column, the trees of the Tuileries Gardens are outlined against the blue winter sky and to the right the Eiffel Tower peeps over the roof of the Ritz.

It is against this backdrop that Bédos and Maurette start their presentation. And very soon it is clear that



CEO of Girard-Perregaux's holding company Sowind, Philippe Maurette and Jean-Christophe Bédos, head of Boucheron.

this is no normal customer-supplier relationship. "We were looking for a soul mate," is how Bédos begins explaining the marriage of Boucheron to Girard-Perregaux, "and in them we have found a brother." Fortunately, a bit of historical investigation has unearthed the fact that Frédéric Boucheron met Constant Girard in 1867 at the Universal Exhibition in the Palais Royal, where Girard had just won a medal for his famous three-bridged tourbillon watch.

"We do supply a few select brands but it is not a line of business we are interested in developing," comments Maurette in the neatly synchronised duet. "We don't even have a catalogue of our movements, and sales of these only represent around 8% of our profits, which we put straight back into research and development. But with Boucheron it is different, as we have a relationship."

But what prompted Boucheron to leave its previous supplier, Swatch Group's Frédéric Piguet? "We are a small customer and were suffering from the Swatch Group policy of 'controlling the tap'. Despite this, it was not a political decision however; more about finding someone more our size who we could co-operate with," explains Bédos.

So far, nothing Earth-shattering, but here comes the twist: "What is new is that we talk openly about our co-operation with Girard-Perregaux. We don't try to pretend to have watchmaking legitimacy. We are not watchmakers and we are not going to lie about that. What's more, we don't intend to acquire watchmaking legitimacy and as jewellers we will concentrate our efforts on the case and the bracelet.

"Previously," admits Bédos, "we were lacking in integrity with our watches."

"This is not a one-shot," chimes-in Maurette.

His new bedfellow then continues to explain that the motive behind the move is to upgrade Boucheron's watch offer, bringing it up to par with the jewellery in terms of quality and, of course, price. Bédos admits that the house needs to be prouder of its watches - despite being one of the first makers to offer watches on a bracelet - and so, together with Girard-Perregaux, the two have worked on a fresh, mechanical watches.

Selling a promise

Based on the existing Girard-Perregaux calibre, 'GP 4000', Boucheron is keeping it simple for now,



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applying all its effort to the watches' design. The basic movement is, however, capable of taking other complications in the future.

"We are not here to sell a bit of 'bluff'," emphasises Bédos. "Many houses sell complications that they cannot service. We refuse to proceed in this way. When we sell, we are selling a promise, so our first new watch is a very simple automatic movement. We are not trying to impress the world or make easy money by launching a tourbillon - we are doing something we can still be proud of in ten years' time."

Brand credibility is paramount to Monsieur Bédos, who explains that the future of luxury is headed towards brands that can justify their products. "Personally I think there are lot of lies around, so we decided to be transparent. It may be old-fashioned but it's the way we do things. And at this level of price premium, who can still believe 'stories'?"

At last, the watches are presented. And what watches. This is indeed a collaboration like no other. Boucheron, confidently handing over the mechanical side to Girard-Perregaux, was liberated as a jeweller to let creativity run wild, or more precisely, to unleash its trademark menagerie. The Parisian jeweller enjoys a strong feral streak, earning much of its repute for pioneering the art of crafting gems in the 'nature' style, by using snakes and other symbolic animal figures of 19th century art nouveau.

Here, a diamond-encrusted serpent slithers across the glass, over a mother-of-pearl dial, fangs gleaming and his eyes fixed on his prey. A multicoloured chameleon sparkling with pink, green and yellow sapphires curls his tail up at 5 o'clock, perched on the edge of a rose-gold watch case, resplendent against a hot-pink strap. On the third of the 'Mec Jungle' models (derived from Boucheron's 'Mec' tonneau collection)

(Left) In yellow gold with diamonds, this Mec Jungle watch's turtle mascot is screwed on by his feet over a pink mother-of-pearl dial.

(Centre) The caseback of the turtle Mec Jungle reveals the calibre GP 4000 and its customised turtle rotor.

(Right) 'Serpent' Mec Jungle watch in steel with white-gold and diamond snake motif coiled across the sapphire crystal. Correspondingly, the strap is python leather and the rotor forms a snake shape.



(Left and centre) Boucheron's existing Ronde models also scale the horological ladder this year, including these two elegant steel and red-gold pieces.
 (Right) 'Serpent' Mec Jungle watch in steel with white-gold-and-diamond snake motif coiled across the sapphire crystal. Correspondingly, the strap is python leather and the rotor forms a snake shape.

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a twinkling sea turtle has pegged himself over the entire dial, as if leisurely soaking up the sun, sprawled on a distant seashore.

Turn over the beautifully rounded case and a sapphire caseback reveals even more delights. Looking into the movement is like opening the lid of a jewellery box. Filled with exquisite shapes, colours and finishes, the movement shines and catches the light. A snake has curled himself up into the rotor with a ruby twinkling above him, a polished gold cog whirrs away and blued screws are as rich as a night sky.

Client facing

The other watches benefiting from the G-P treatment, such as the Ronde, are considerably less wild interpretations, being simple upgrades of existing models. What they have in common though is that they hit new heights of opulence and exoticism for Boucheron watches with their stylised shapes, rich guilloché details and clever diamond setting and chunkier cases. They are

pure 'Boucheron' and will find themselves at ease in the refined salons of 26 Place Vendôme, where Maharajas once came to buy baubles and illustrious clients slipped out of the red-lacquered Chinese Room through a secret door.

It all looks rosy for Boucheron, but apart from contributing to that 8% of income for R&D, what is in this very public collaboration for Girard-Perregaux? Maurette explains that being based in La Chaux-de-Fonds with only two brand boutiques, G-P has little contact with its final clients. "But being in Place Vendôme, we learn a lot about dealing with our customers. It is a great opportunity for us to be here. It helps that we operate in very different businesses but are similarly sized companies with a common interest in craftsmanship."

So, given the current climate of sharing and crossover, would Girard-Perregaux consider making jewellery? "I don't think so," replies Maurette with a smile. ○