

The Purist

i In the last of our series charting the brilliance and influence of FP Journe's watchmaking, the horological polymath himself shares some forthright opinions over lunch with **Alan Downing**, and drops a little horological bombshell of his own.

Now's the time to spend £100,000 or more on a wristwatch. There are at least 40 Swiss brands competing in the top-price sector, and more are rushing in, desperate to absorb the serious outbreaks of excessive wealth flooding the planet, from Kazakhstan to Hong Kong. Even the builders of Italian mega-yachts have been taken aback by the relentless demand for ever-bigger water-toys.

Thus have watchmakers and designers plumbed the creative depths to line up an even more stupendous collection of horological stunts for the watch fairs in April. Never before have watches been so complicated, so huge or so vulgarly expensive. Richard Mille, DeWitt, Jean Dunand, Bovet, de Grisogono, Greubel Forsey - brands have sprung up from nowhere (at least in horological terms) to feast on the newly rich hatching like mayfly. Even Michel Jordi, the 1990s king of kitsch brought close to bankruptcy by massive plagiarism of his 200-dollar cow-and-edelweiss watches, is now expecting up to £75,000 for his new double watch on a hinge. "It's impossible to make a cheap watch in Switzerland," he observes.

Subtle and precise

Such euphoria, such gadgetry inevitably provokes a conservative backlash. And what the conservatives fear is that the concentration of brands in the *haute horlogerie* sector will lead to competition and then to the unthinkable - price cutting. The established brands proclaim common messages to distinguish themselves from the upstarts: craftsmanship, tradition, authenticity. The upstarts trumpet their originality, their futuristic concepts and, above all, their passion.

With the luxury-watch sector splitting into two ideological camps, the traditionalists have found a weighty spokesman: François-Paul Journe - himself a newcomer, but with the credibility of one who communes with the spirits of the great watchmakers of the late 18th century. He deplores today's over-powered, under-engineered wrist machinery as contrary to the basic horological principles. "Watchmaking is all about being subtle and precise," he says. "Above all, it means using the least possible amount of energy." His model is the Atmos clock invented by Jean Reutter in 1928. Working indefinitely off temperature variations, and with a balance frequency of 120 vph, it famously uses so little energy that the power consumed by a 15-watt light bulb would keep some 60 million of them running simultaneously!

(Above) Inventor and maker: François-Paul Journe pounds the corridors of FP Journe Invent et Fecit in Geneva. The Grand Prix d'Horlogerie awarded Journe with L'Aiguille d'Or (the Golden Hand) in November for the Sonnerie Souveraine, which joins the Aiguille d'Or already on his mantelpiece for 2004's Tourbillon Souverain.

(Right) The purest of FP Journe's oeuvre is the Chronomètre Souverain in rose gold (£12,100), which defiantly flouts COSC's rule of certified 'chronometer' appellation. Journe has said that it took years of complicated watchmaking before he could return to the core principal of 18th century horology and make such a simple precision timekeeper.



Journe's new watch

This year, Journe demonstrated energy conservation in his 'Sonnerie Souveraine', grand-striking, minute-repeating clockwatch, and plans to repeat the exhibition in his latest watch, due to be unveiled in April. This time, it's an equally power-hungry 100th-of-a-second chronograph, with a supplementary flying-seconds hand ('seconde foudroyante'), which rotates once a second on a subdial divided into hundredths of a second. It also neatly solves one of the major problems of chronographs, eliminating the disturbance of the balance's amplitude. Like the clockwatch, the new chronograph has a mainspring barrel that unwinds at both ends - one end driving the movement and the other the chronograph. This means that the chronograph is powered independently from the movement and therefore has no effect on the rate of the watch. The 100th-of-a-second chronograph is built in a modified Octa calibre with a 120-hour mainspring, and features elapsed-time counters of 10 minutes.

Safe with Patek

Journe predicts that the current obsession with elaborate wrist-machines, which distance themselves from the mundane function of telling the time, is but a passing fashion. There are parallels with the vogue for fantasy watches disguised as fruit and insects, perfume-spraying pistols, singing birds and the other charming absurdities of the 1820s and '30s. "There will always be consumers who buy a watch just because it's expensive," he says. "But the discriminating collector, who wants a good-looking watch that works, inevitably returns to the serious global brands you can trust, like Patek Philippe."



(Top) Best representing one of Journe's key watchmaking beliefs - the minimal expenditure of energy - is Jaeger-LeCoultre's Atmos clock (£4,350). Using a perpetual-motion mechanism invented in 1928 by a French engineer named Jean-Leon Reutter, subsequently perfected and patented by Jaeger, the mainspring is wound by small air-temperature variations. A change of just 1°C is sufficient for over two day's operation.

(Above) This year's minute-repeating, sonnerie-en-passant 'Sonnerie Souveraine' (SFr.650,000). One of the 10 patents filed by Journe concerns the ingenious method by which maximal mechanical efficiency is drawn from its single mainspring, driving the going train from one end (for 48 hours), and the strike train from the other (for 24). A similar approach is being taken for next year's 100th-of-a-second chronograph.



They don't make watches like this any more...

In 1986, François-Paul Journe was a 28-year-old independent watchmaker in the rue de Verneuil, Paris when he completed one of his most impressive horological pieces for the curiosity cabinet of a scientific instruments collector. It's an astronomical watch with a 'tellurion', and the most sophisticated of chronometer escapements - a spring-detent tourbillon with a constant-force remontoir.

The dial shows the sidereal hours and minutes at 9 o'clock, and mean time in a regulator configuration, with running small seconds. The two sectors at 12 o'clock are for the power-reserve and the equation of time.

The marvel is at the back of the watch though, where the tellurion - a mobile Earth and orbiting moon with an ecliptic showing the seasonal journey of the sun - creates a model of the days, months and years. Although an early work - his fifth watch - it shows remarkable watchmaking maturity.

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The admiration between the prestigious Geneva watchmaker and 'Invenit et Fecit' is mutual. Last year, for example, Patek's heir apparent, Thierry Stern, publicly bought a Journe Résonance watch at a charity auction. Despite the occasional lapse into gadgetry, Patek Philippe has high watchmaking credentials in Journe's eyes. The brand has so far adhered to its traditional standards of always hiding the column-wheel under a cap, and never showing bits of the movement, including the tourbillon, through holes in the dial. "In the ideal, worry-free watch, the wearer should be able to forget that it has a mechanical movement," says Journe. However he is critical of the silicon balance springs, championed by Patek Philippe, deeming them as totally impractical. "They are as brittle as glass. They shatter at the slightest touch. Then you have to put in a new balance assembly. It's nothing more than an experiment."

Will Marie-Antoinette fly?

Journe also holds concerns that the publicity value of Breguet's attempt to recreate the lost 'Marie-Antoinette' watch - apparently stolen from a Jerusalem museum 23 years ago - might lead Breguet's watchmakers from the true path. "I don't think they can make it without plans or the original watch. You need a good watchmaker who has absorbed the culture of Abraham-Louis Breguet and knows how his mind worked. I wouldn't be surprised if the project were abandoned."

Noémie Wüger, spokesperson for Breguet, acknowledges the company is still uncertain whether it will succeed in making an exact copy of the watch. "We are using the experience we gained in making the No. 5 replica [in 2004], and at this stage we

believe we're on the right track." According to the company, they are trying to decipher the mechanisms from photographs in the in the Chaux-de-Fonds watch museum showing the back and front of the crystal-cased watch. They are also relying on some written descriptions found in their archives and the few pictures and drawings published in 1974 by George Daniels (*The Art of Breguet*). Daniels was the last watchmaker to have studied the famous watch, so nobody except him will know whether any reproduction is exact.

The sky's the limit

Just about every brand in the Swiss watch industry is stampeding upmarket into the *haute horlogerie* sector with cries of "the sky's the limit!" And why not? The Swiss have a monopoly in luxury watches, the rich will always be with us, and the market seems to bear increasingly astronomical prices. But Journe warns that the prices being asked for horological toys are unrealistic. Hypocrisy from a man whose *Sonnerie Souveraine* clockwatch retails for near-enough £275,000? Journe hastens to add that his tourbillon watch in platinum costs a mere £65,600 and that several people who bought his *Chronomètre Souverain* - a snip at around £12,000 - went on to acquire a *Chronomètre à Résonance* at three times the price. Journe says he fixes the prices of his watches on a cost-plus, "so that owners can enjoy my watches and get their money back when they sell them."

A man of undoubted horological integrity, Journe gallantly won the battle to pick up the lunch bill. ○

(Right) Invenit et Fecit: FP Journe's genevois atelier now boasts an impressive battery of machines, recently installed in the basement. Here, approximately 90% of Journe's components can be manufactured entirely in-house, including the baseplate pictured here, which, like all of Journe's plates and bridges, is made from gold.

Further information: William and Son, 10 Mount Street, London W1K 2TY. Tel: 020 7493 8385, www.williamandson.com, www.fpjourn.com

