



Woman's Hour

⌚ Despite a respectable history of one-off and limited-edition timepieces, such as the world's first ladies' automatic wristwatch, the smallest round movement, and the regulation Valentine's Day offerings, Blancpain has never devoted an entire collection to women, until now. *QP* wades through the breathless hype to discover genuine originality and integrity in a notoriously awkward market - that of the ladies' mechanical. And you can put your chequebooks away, gentlemen; the new 'Women' collection is for the contemporary woman with her own ideas and an escalating disposable income.

James Gurney

Blancpain has, so it says, discovered the place where "traditional mechanical watchmaking values and the aesthetic demands of contemporary femininity meet and mingle in perfect harmony". The press release accompanying news of the launch of the 'Blancpain Women' collection goes on to elucidate qualities such as "the precious blend of classicism, exquisite refinement and elegance" of the *Orchidée* calendar watch. All of which just goes to prove that tearing into press releases is about as challenging as shooting fish in a barrel. In fairness, it should be said that Blancpain's release is par for the course. Almost without exception, the major watch houses are all looking to get in touch with their feminine side - not perhaps the easiest of tasks for a company like Blancpain, which is so zealous in its pursuit of the traditionally masculine virtues of precision and craftsmanship.

(Left) Blancpain's new 'Women' models have apparently drawn inspiration from "the wondrous perfection and diversity of the floral universe". Pictured is the self-winding 'Orchidée' calendar and moonphase model (€10,920), designed to reflect the classic elegance of the orchid flower.



(Left) A vividly coloured flyback chronograph (€5,480) - one of three from Blancpain's new collection, named after the 'Camélia' flower. The counters are zeroed mid-lap by pressing the pusher at 4 o'clock.
 (Below) The F185 flyback chronograph calibre that drives the Camélia watches is operated through the superlative column-wheel transmission mechanism (visible through the caseback, top right).



The collection has been designed from scratch to exist alone as women's watches, which are, nevertheless, unmistakably Blancpain.

But apart from venting a little frustration at being expected to read such emanations, why bother raising the subject? Mainly because the tortured language of the press releases reveals the extent of the problem that the watch houses face. As it is fairly certain that communication, particularly to the press, is taken with the utmost seriousness, we can assume there is a genuine issue at stake. So what is going on?

Keeping the promise

The heart of the problem is that however well a watch company does in selling high-quality, high-value watches to men, it knows that similar success selling to women would see its businesses growing bigger and faster. Women's disposable income is growing faster than men's across almost every demographic of interest,

and this is a problem for companies whose main market is a male-dominated one. While the obvious answer is to increase the offerings to women, successfully doing so is not quite so simple. A watch house such as Blancpain whose core brand values are all about technicality and tradition is never going to find it easy to supply a market that prizes style, fashion and glamour above most else. Thanks to the long-running strap line of its advertising, the Swatch Group's 'prestige' brand is, of course, morally barred from ever using a quartz movement - a further handicap if ever one was needed!

Even if Blancpain were to ignore its carefully crafted core values it would inevitably struggle in competition with the likes of Cartier, Longines or Dior, at least at the mid levels of the market,

without excessive levels of investment. At the same time, simply reproducing men's watches in smaller sizes and more 'feminine' colours is too limited a response to the challenge faced.

So it is to Blancpain's credit that it appears to be tackling the problem with originality. The 'Blancpain Women' collection has been designed from scratch to exist as women's watches, which are, nevertheless, unmistakably Blancpain. And a *vox pop* of QP contributors indicates some success in this - particularly the elegant flyback chronograph models.

And if this collection, or its successor, succeeds, then no one will remember the heights of fancy reached in the press release, and the image of outdoors-loving women appreciating the smooth push-button feel that only a column-wheel chronograph can procure will fade forever. ○

(Above) Not, strictly speaking, part of the new Women collection, this Léman Tourbillon Grande Date Diamants (€65,060) does, however, show Blancpain at its simplistic best, and proves the brand's commitment to feminine *haute horlogerie*. The patented 'rail effect' gem-setting technique, in striking evidence here, uses grains to hold each of the 194 dial diamonds in place, from the rear of the dial.

(Right) Of the entire Women collection, the most obvious allusion to a model's eponymous flower is made by the dial of this time-only 'Lotus' watch (€10,220), set with 46 rubies.



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