

# Pillars of Character



(Above) DeWitt's 'Academia Tourbillon Mystérieux Haute Joaillerie', set with blue sapphires (£339,400). The 'Imperial Columns' pattern around the caseband is a distinctive characteristic of the brand, found throughout both the Academia and ladies' Alma collections.



DeWitt is something of a paradox. In three years it has come from nowhere to be talked of as a hot niche brand; a sort of Muller-meets-Mille-meets-Dubuis. Then again, in contrast to the brand's unabashed modernism, you could argue that DeWitt can trace its ancestry back to the 1790s when a lank-haired 20-something French General won victory after stunning victory over the forces of the Austrian Empire. His name was Napoléon Bonaparte. His descendant is Jérôme de Witt - the CEO whose quiet refinement belies his watches' boldness: multicoloured dials, ambitious complications, white rubber straps and those chunky pillars skirting crenellated bezels. Over luncheon *chez de Witt*, QP learnt how such character was born.

## Nicholas Foulkes

Two hundred and ten years after the First Italian Campaign, I am sitting in the parkland surrounding the country house of 56-year-old Jérôme de Witt, fifth generation Bonaparte and direct descendant of Napoléon's youngest brother Jérôme. A delightful al fresco lunch has just been cleared away by a servant so discreet that he seems to move on casters, and whose conversational range appears to be restricted to murmuring a barely audible "oui Monsieur Le Comte" or "bien sur Monsieur Le Comte" or "merci Monsieur Le Comte".

Talk turns to de Witt's ancestors. Having written a biography of 19th-century dandy, artist, gambler and political fixer Count d'Orsay, who was close to members of the Bonaparte dynasty, I am naturally interested in de Witt's background, and he suggests that we move from under the shade of the trees and step into his house.

The drawing room and office are crammed with cabinets of Bonapartist paraphernalia: a genuine trove of souvenirs from one of the most turbulent periods in European history. Everything from the keys to kingdoms created by Napoléon as he conquered ever greater swathes of Europe (quite literally large elaborate keys) to a drawing of Napoléon's final home, the inhospitable Atlantic island of St Helena - each has a story, a meaning and a resonance. Occasionally these objects reach out from the past to touch DeWitt's watch production.



(Left) Chairman of DeWitt, Jérôme de Witt, who founded his brand in 2002 at Vandœuvres, near Geneva.

## DeWitt's 43 mm by 12 mm timepiece is a concoction of the polyglot aesthetic that Jean-Claude Biver has christened 'fusion watchmaking', making use of titanium, red gold and rubber.

Examining the chasing on a set of silverware belonging to Princesse Marie Clotilde Napoléon, it is possible to discern the *panier* pattern that decorates the back-plate of his tourbillons. Pointing out a niello snuff box owned by Catherine The Great, he mentions that he is hoping to replicate the black metallic finish that was once so popular for watches and decorative objects in central Europe.

Moreover, the owner of these items is a many-layered man with an interest in everything from African tribal art to shooting to automotive engineering to cheese. He talks gnomically of an earlier life in "general management, as a general contractor. I was working for many years in developing countries including Arabia and Africa to create hospitals and harbours - always through the same concept of using the best contractors, the best architects, putting it all together and making the project succeed." If anything, he is even more mysterious about what drew him to creating a watch brand. "After a certain time, the older you are, you have a duty to transfer your knowledge," is de Witt's Delphic answer.

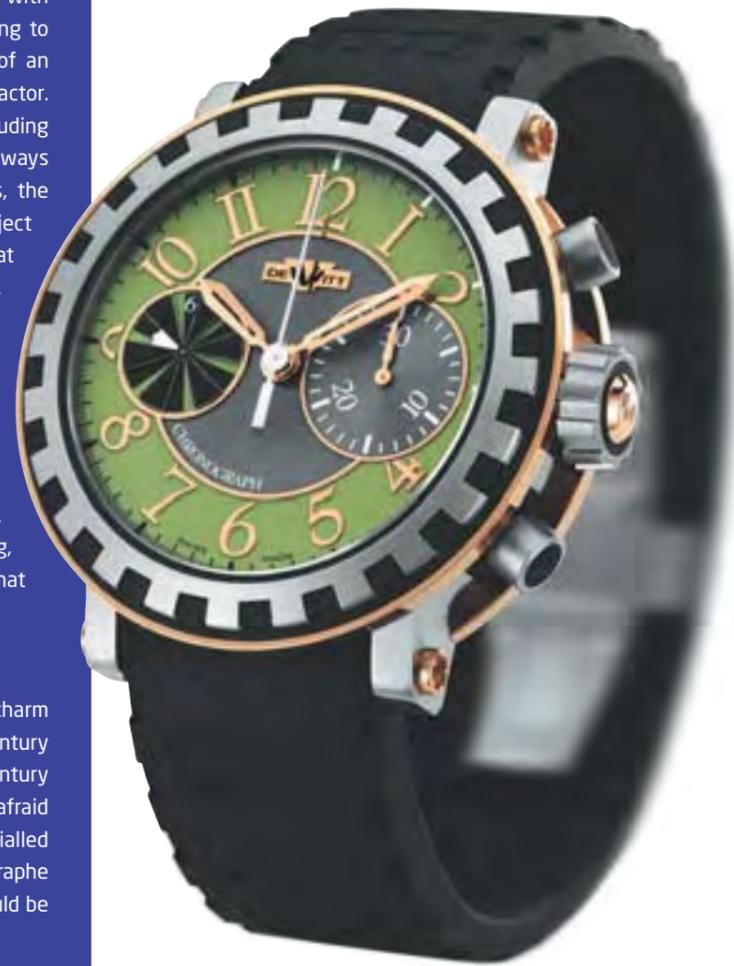
All of which makes DeWitt the brand more, rather than less, complicated. Before I met the eponymous founder I thought I had this brand pigeonholed somewhere between Pierre Kunz and Harry Winston Rare Timepieces. However, the juxtaposition of this distinguished-looking, quietly spoken, cultivated man alongside the watches that bear his name is a puzzle.

### Hunting, shooting, fusing

Where he is the embodiment of a certain old-fashioned charm and *politesse* that belong between the covers of a 19th century novel, the watches are very much plugged into the 21st century aesthetic of big, bold statement timepieces that are unafraid to divide opinion. De Witt picks up a green and grey-dialled piece from the catchily named Academia Sport Chronographe Séquentiel collection and says, with poker face, that it would be perfect for hunting.

Even given that the European conception of hunting is usually what we Britons would call shooting, this is the sort of watch that might easily scare the birds, possibly alarm the beaters and

certainly raise a few eyebrows amongst fellow guns (not to mention pack enough weight to ruin the poise of your Purdey). As well as having DeWitt's trademark pillar motif on the case sides and crenellated bezel inspired by the toothed wheels found in old cars, this 43 mm by 12 mm timepiece is a concoction of the polyglot aesthetic that Jean-Claude Biver has christened 'fusion watchmaking', making use of titanium,



(Above) Limited to 99 pieces, the Academia Sport Chronographe Séquentiel (£16,700) has a sequential seconds counter at 9 o'clock and a choice of khaki and grey dial with black rubber strap (pictured) or the more summery red and white version pictured.

red gold and rubber. Even the running seconds are not a traditional arrangement, rather something akin to a fan-like vent. And yet de Witt apparently goes shooting with the Duke of Kent and his gun cabinet boasts some impeccable examples of sporting weaponry. As it is high summer, de Witt is wearing a white and red-dialled version of the same watch with this season's new white rubber strap. If he wears the green one in the butts then he is probably going to tell me that this is the watch for a Buckingham Palace Garden Party!

Then there is the man's honesty. Looking through his range of watches, he is disarmingly candid about what is behind the funky dials and inside the distinctive cases. Before I even have to ask, he has told me that the basic watch with hours, minutes and 30-second retrograde indicator is powered by an ETA movement; the huntin', shootin' and fishin' chronograph has a Valjoux 7750; and his perpetual calendar, characterised by retrograde day and date indicators, carries one of Karl-Friedrich Scheufele's LUC movements. Interestingly enough, the Chopard movement is assembled by DeWitt and carries the Geneva Seal.

He is almost apologetic about having to use other people's movements and promises that he is working on his own. "Next year I will launch five new models and two new 'visions'. I try to have a very high-end line but I always try to have fun." In realising these demands, and staying true to his philosophy of "using the best contractors, the best architects", de Witt has sub-contracted bespoke movement-maker BNB Concept for all of DeWitt's tourbillons, minute repeaters and grand complications. Created as recently as May 2004 by three master watchmakers named Barbasini, Navas and Buttet, BNB has evolved quickly, and, besides DeWitt, now attracts strong demand from other brands wishing to scale the heights of 'complication status', such as Jacob & Co. (see Issue 20).

### Next level

And it is indeed in the *haute horlogerie* pieces that de Witt's appreciation of fine watchmaking and his sense of whimsy become apparent. These timepieces allow him to develop and demonstrate the more subtle aspects of the DeWitt aesthetic. As well as the tactile



This summer's white-rubber and colour-dial Academia Sport collection includes a 25-piece titanium, and white-gold edition of last year's Tourbillon Différentiel (top and middle; £109,700), which won the first prize for innovation in the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie in Geneva in 2005. BNB Concept's patented DW 8002 movement has a winding system that saves one third of the time usually spent winding the watch. The ingenious planetary gearing that allows this makes for fascinating aesthetics, at 1 o'clock on the dial.



(Above) DeWitt's Academia Répétition Minute features a BNB Concept movement that chimes the hours, quarter and remaining minutes on demand - triggered by a lever cleverly hidden beneath the bezel.

(Above right) Conventional movements experience a progressive decrease in force transmitted to the regulator, from when the barrel is fully wound to the end of the power reserve. To remedy this, the constant force device in this year's Tourbillon Force Constante (25 platinum pieces only; £122,700) is designed to transmit identical impulses of torque to the tourbillon every 10 seconds, whatever the state of winding.

(Right) The Tourbillon Force Constante's self-adjusting 'energy transformer' (top left) absorbs pockets of energy from the winding barrel (top right) once a second and redistributes it every 10 seconds to the tourbillon escapement (bottom right). This principle can be observed by watching the cross-shaped inertia weight complete 6 revolutions per minute. The small energy accumulator spring is underneath the inertia weight.

exteriors of his cases, he has a vision for the interior of his watches too: "Inside a DeWitt, it is never flat; it has different levels of different materials, different colours and a very high standard of polishing." The interplay of these different heights, colours and finishes provide a constantly shifting visual ballet. "I decided to use matt and polished surfaces and to mix the materials to give a variety of different effects depending on the light; like make-up for a girl trying to find the effect to catch the light and the eyes of people. People are very interested in looking for something with character."

But de Witt's watches are not just about catching the light and the eye, as the innovative mechanical patents demonstrate.

Last year it was his Tourbillon Différentiel, equipped with a gearing mechanism to protect the barrel spring and the power reserve from overwinding. This year at Baselworld he launched a constant-force tourbillon: an intriguing piece that improved the accuracy of the tourbillon by eliminating the variations in torque from the barrel spring. The 'ticking' dead seconds-style motion of the cross-shaped balance weight creates an interesting visual effect, displayed on the dial to complement the adjacent tourbillon carriage.

"I want to give a very easy message," de Witt explains. "A watch must be able to display the time easily and correctly. I want to have something simple." The interesting thing is how he manages



(Above) The ladies' Alma range features the same Imperial Columns caseband as Academia, but with a softer, oval case. The bejewelled white-gold model on the left has an auto-quartz movement (£27,700), while the 'Utopia' model on the right, in red gold (£9,400) has a new, patented double-retrograde date indication.

(Right) From DeWitt's new Academia Sport collection, this retrograde perpetual calendar model (£37,100) uses a Chopard LUC calibre. The fusion of carbon-fibre dial, titanium and rubber case, and white-gold rim lends a very sporty feel to a traditional complication.

to pursue simplicity while also satisfying the diametrically opposed desire to "have a lot of effects". The resolution of this is in the mechanically exigent and visually explosive appearance of his *haute horlogerie*.

### Brand of the man

As well as the serious timepieces, de Witt seems to be serious about the business side of his operation as well. As soon as Claude-Daniel Proelochs stepped down from Vacheron Constantin, de Witt lunched and lured the Richemont Group veteran into working for him. His UK agent is another highly experienced individual, Denys Pasche, who built Ebel and then Jaeger-LeCoultre and IWC in the UK. And although I am not so familiar with individual watchmakers in the Geneva area, Monsieur Le Comte assures me that his are among the best and most highly paid. If his choice of butler and executives are anything to go by, I am inclined to believe him.

"We have almost 30 people working in the company and it is the knowledge and the quality of the people working with the company that is important. We have the knowledge and the skills to bring the small touches that make the difference between an

industrial and completely handmade product. This is the value of a small company; we can be very reactive and very curious, always ready for a challenge."

It is DeWitt's agility and low output that has contributed to its high level of recognition as a so-called 'garage' watch brand in such a short period of time and its founder is clearly serious about developing its potential. At the moment he estimates he makes about 800 pieces a year and wants to bring this up to 2,200.

However, he has had setbacks in his journey. "When I created my first watch, it was in my taste and everyone was giving me advice saying that I had to change this and that. I followed their advice and at the end of two weeks I had something without character." Given the look and undeniable character of his watches today (like it or not), it is evident that while Monsieur Le Comte may listen to the advice of others, he makes up his own mind for himself. ○



**Further information:** DeWitt watches are available in the UK from Watches of Switzerland (69 Brompton Road, 020 7581 7037; 16 New Bond Street, 020 7493 5916) and Harrods, 020 7225 5908. [www.dewitt.ch](http://www.dewitt.ch)