



Revival



Longines has always been more than just another watch brand. Its name recognition is so high that, for watch buyers in certain markets, or of a certain age, the prestige associated with it is the envy of far loftier makes. The reality is that Longines once was able to cross swords with the likes of Audemars Piguet, Patek Philippe and, yes, even Rolex. Navigational watches, supremacy in the manufacture of chronographs, official timer of major sporting events... Just how did it end up as sub-£1,000 shelf-filler in the multiples? *QP* looks at how Longines is reaching into its past to recreate some of the old magic.

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(Opposite page) Launched last year, Longines' Master Collection consists solely of men's mechanical watches, more in keeping with the house's reputation for traditional watchmaking than the many quartz-driven 'fashion' watches launched in recent years. Like all Master Collection watches, this chronograph (£1,150) has a dial rendered in 'flinqué', where transparent enamel coats the engraved barleycorn pattern. (Above) The new Spirit collection is based on a chronograph model from the 1920s, first produced in 1913 under Alfred Pfister, the Technical Director at the time. With its automatic movement, 'skeleton pear' hands, and cushion-shaped case, this model (£1,020) reminds us of Longines' worthy provenance.



(Above left) After the first solo transatlantic flight from New York to Paris in 1927, the pilot Charles Lindbergh conceived the Hour Angle Watch, which was produced by Longines based on a patent registered with Longines by Capt. PVH Weems. Eventually used by many other pioneering pilots, the bezel is used to adjust the central dial and synchronise the nearest second with a radio time signal. This re-edition (£2,260) features the same Breguet hands, legible proportions (47.5 mm) and 'Louis XV' crown, which can be adjusted while still wearing pilot's gloves. (Above right) Longines' new Clous de Paris collection draws its inspiration from early 20th century French jewellery, characterised by 'diamond point' decoration, or 'Paris studs'. Here, the distinctive pattern is used on the chronograph's caseband and dial (£1,450). (Below) This 47.5 mm automatic with power reserve (£1,100) has a new black dial, in the Master Collection's distinctive barleycorn pattern.

It wasn't always thus. Longines genuinely possesses a track record second to none. The company was a key player in the development of chronographs in the era of the pocket watch, released its first wristwatch in 1905, and launched its first in-house automatic in 1940. Longines developed both the Weems and Lindbergh watches for pilots, enabling them to synchronise the timekeeping with radio signals and to navigate with pinpoint accuracy in the early days of flight. In 1947, Longines released the 30CH - regarded by certain cognoscenti as the finest manual-wind chronograph movement ever. Longines was an associate of Ferrari's F1 team, it served as the Olympics' official timer, and was an early developer of quartz movements, including the Longines Ultra-Quartz from 1969.

Longines even holds the oldest registered trademark for a watch company, the winged hourglass, applied to Longines' very first movement in 1867 to discourage forgeries and patented in 1889. Beyond watches even, Longines had cultural significance that escapes its rivals: in the USA for example, the company sponsored a TV show in the early 1950s, *The Longines Chronoscope*, not dissimilar to today's *Hard Talk*. Yankee audiophiles still wax nostalgically about the company's own record label and the 'house' orchestra, the Longines Symphonette. They Might Be Giants even featured 'Longines Symphonette' in their lyrics to *Birdhouse in Your Soul*, probably referring to a watch of the same name. Yes, we're talking about one of the true greats.



(Right) From the Heritage collection, this yellow-gold replica of Longines' classic 'Flagship' measures just 35 mm in diameter (£1,650), exuding an old-fashioned purity that is getting lost amid current trends for sportier, chunkier timepieces.

(Far right) This chronograph used to be part of the Longines' Olympic collection, but is now minus rings and serves as the sporty member of the retrospective Heritage collection (£1,130).



Going vertical

Named after the 'long and narrow fields' near the factory, Longines was founded in 1866 by Ernest Francillon at Saint-Imier, Switzerland. Its roots, though, go back to 1832 when Auguste Agassiz moved to Saint-Imier to work at the *comptoir horloger* Raiguel Jeune, a watch parts trader. As was the practice back then, watch companies bought in parts and subcontracted assembly to outside watchmakers. But Agassiz' standards were high enough to lift his products above the average.

Agassiz and his two associates, Florian Morel and Henri Raiguel, set up the Comptoir Raiguel Jeune & Cie a year later. One of Agassiz's sisters married Lausanne businessman Charles-Marc Francillon; the couple produced a son, Ernest, in 1834. By 1847, Auguste Agassiz became the sole owner of the company, and was in the fortunate position of having a nephew who immersed himself in the company. Young Ernest joined the company in 1852, taking over from Agassiz a decade later.

Renamed Ancienne Maison Auguste Agassiz, the company would become an industry leader, for Ernest Francillon proved to be a visionary: he saw that the future health of the brand meant becoming a *manufacture*. Francillon brought everything in-house, thus creating a watch company that would garner awards on a regular basis, operating at the cutting edge for over a century. It was a major exporter, a supplier to various armed forces, a giant amongst the Swiss houses. But, like every other

watch brand in Switzerland, Longines was not unaffected by the upheavals of the 1970s. And, like many other watch brands in Switzerland, it was acquired in 1984 by the company that would evolve into the Swatch Group.

Getting technical

But how, with all of this wonderful history to exploit, did Longines end up as 'yet another brand in the Swatch Group'? More importantly, what is Swatch going to do about it? We asked Katrina Jones, Longines' UK Brand Director, why, for so many years, Longines was treated like a downmarket make in the UK. Was this because the UK is a sink of retailer intransigence or consumer caution, or was there some corporate reason for concentrating only on Longines' least expensive models? Jones is too polite to point the finger - middle one recommended - at the previous distributor.

"In 2002, Longines became part of Swatch Group within the UK. Since then we have reassessed our distribution within the UK, as well as our marketing strategy. Longines is enjoying a high level of success and we are continuing to build the brand and its position within the prestige sector. This year we have looked at new marketing techniques too.

"In terms of price," continues Jones, "we have seen the average price increasing, year on year. We are selling more 'technical' watches than ever, including chronographs, models with power



(Above) In 18 carat pink gold (new for 2006), this Master Collection watch is one of Longines' most complicated (£3,410). Moonphase, day, date and month, chronograph and 24-hour indicator all vie for attention on the dial, while a sapphire crystal caseback (common to all Master Collection watches) reveals the movement on the other side.

reserve or moonphase indicators, and replica styles. There is still a market for Longines at the entry-level price point, but the core of sales in the UK are for technical watches. Retailers and consumers have reacted very positively towards the Master Collection in particular, which was launched in 2005. I think the collection is a true reflection of what the Longines brand now stands for."

British fans of the brand have looked at other markets with envy, for we have been denied most of the truly interesting models, including a number of historical replicas. Of particular interest to enthusiasts are the Spirit, Heritage and Master collections - the latter of which consists solely of men's mechanical pieces, in a case inspired by the famous 'Weems' model from the 1920s. Will these dearer Longines models finally be distributed in the UK?

"Absolutely! We presented all of our new collections to the UK retailers at Basel 2006, and they were received very well. Price did not seem to be the main factor; it was much more about the technical specifications of the watch, the heritage and its look and style. The Master Collection is already available in the UK and the new black-dial models will be available later this year. The Longines Spirit line will be available from September onwards."

So which Longines collections does she anticipate will push the right buttons in the UK?

"The Master Collection is already doing very well, especially the more technical models," says Jones. "I think the new black dials will prove to be a success too. The new Longines Spirit is also very exciting for us and has wide appeal. The watch was first

produced in 1913 and this new collection is based on a chronograph design dating from that time."

Fresh start

She is referring to a handsome range of watches with round dials in cushion-shaped cases, which bear all the hallmarks of vintage timepieces, including skeleton hands - very 'historical' and very 'Longines' - with only the most subtle updating to give them appeal to 21st century wearers. Case sizes, for example, go up to 40.5 mm across, so they'll feel right at home on modern wrists.

So too the Heritage collection, with its wealth of genuine classics. It is here we find the Flagship, the Lindbergh Hour Angle, and the milestone Conquest - a watch to rank alongside the Omega Constellation for its masculine purity. All this is a far cry from years of watch ranges (in the UK at least) that were indistinguishable from thousands of anodyne quartz 'fashion' watches. So now the market needs alerting.



(Above) Longines' factory in Saint-Imier - a small town north of Neuchâtel in the Jura mountains where Longines has been since its foundation in 1832.

What sort of image-creation programme for Longines does Swatch UK have in mind for this market?

"Longines' image will always centre around elegance," attests Jones. "This can be seen in the brand ambassadors we work with, including [Indian actress] Aishwarya Rai and Harry Connick Jr, who are both highly regarded for their looks and poise. Our strong links with equestrian events are also key to the image; show jumping is one of the most elegant sports in the world and we're

very proud of the association and relationships we have built there. We're also very keen to communicate the history and heritage that Longines has: we're celebrating the company's 175th anniversary next year and we're looking forward to organising activity around this amazing milestone."

If that doesn't sound like an opportunity to return to *manufacture* status, then I don't what does. And if any brand deserves its own in-house movements, it's Agassiz' and Francillon's baby. ○

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