

Size Matters



Maurice Lacroix could hardly have chosen a more suitable debut as a *manufacture* watch company. Le Chronographe - its first movement to be developed and made entirely in-house - meets a demand from watch collectors from all parts that is otherwise hard to satisfy. At the end of the day, it's a size thing.

James Gurney

It is no secret that watches have been growing steadily larger over the last 10 years. Where once 36 mm was the standard diameter for a men's watch, 40 mm seems to be the bare minimum nowadays. Not exactly news, and not exactly a problem for the watchmakers, as fitting the existing movements in the new larger cases requires only a collar fitted around the ébauche. However, this approach has left many collectors cold, and for good reason: while it is a functional approach, it is hardly elegant. By using movements designed for smaller watches, the designers are stuck with a geometry that is out of proportion

with the new sizes; a flaw that particularly shows up with chronograph watches. It is not a great flaw, but in a field where detail is all, having subdials that are too close to the centre is less than ideal.

Using the existing smaller movements has a second design flaw; a case of less is less, rather than more. As most modern watches have sapphire casebacks that show-off the interior works, having a movement that does not use the space is a lost opportunity. The difficulty for watch companies was how to meet this challenge. Until recently, there has been no modern production of movements



(Right) Le Chronographe (€12,500) is driven by Maurice Lacroix's first in-house calibre, ML 106, whose larger-than-average proportions justify the watch's 45 mm diameter. Its pink-gold case has a new shape, where lunette and caseback do not face inwards, as usual, but remain wide open. The view of the dial and the movement thus remains unhindered. The silver dial has applied hour numerals and index marks, and a rare 'Rayon de la Gloire' guilloché pattern. First edition in pink gold limited to 250 pieces.

A 300-tooth wheel required the use of the new 'Mimotec' photolithography technology - an option distinctly unavailable to the Venus' original designers!

that make the most of the space available on larger watches - excepting, of course the Lemania movements used by Breguet, Patek Philippe and Vacheron Constantin.

With that exception, the only alternative was to tap into the legacy supply of Venus movements that had lain unused since the 1960s (or even earlier in some cases). One glance at these old movements makes the attraction of this option clear. As Alan Downing has already pointed-out in these pages (Issue 13), "The classic chronograph is the ideal display-caseback movement - everyone's image of complicated watchmaking. The turning column wheel lifts and drops levers to engage and disengage the clutch-wheel, while mysteriously shaped hammers reach across to touch hearts and send the chronograph hands flicking back to zero." Without an automatic winding assembly in the way, the functions can be clearly seen, while the open layout provides plenty of space to demonstrate the various arts of finishing from chamfered edges to perlagged surfaces.

From scratch

The demand for these watches has been consistently high, allowing watch houses to charge high-enough prices to justify lavish levels of finish. While there seems to be an adequate supply of these admittedly classic movements (La Joux-Perret produces around 100 re-made movements a year, while a Chinese company is apparently producing "screw for screw" replicas), it seems Maurice Lacroix decided that following this

path was not a viable long-term strategy, and that re-making Venus movements, even with modern escapements and techniques, was a developmental dead-end.

Patrick Graells, whose project this was, is a great fan of the Venus movements, for their aesthetic appeal and the mechanical qualities. Nevertheless, he felt that to build on the legacy of the Venus meant designing a new movement from scratch. This allowed Graells and Andreas Strehler (an independent chronograph expert based in Winterthur) the freedom to incorporate several new developments into the basic design of the movement, while retaining the particular qualities associated with the Venus. In practice, this means a movement visibly descended from the Venus, but with a definitively modern feel; a movement with all the expected elements such as column-wheel control, but also contemporary developments such as the new reset arrangement, which involves an improved unlocking lever.

One of the new elements that sets Graell's ML 106 movement apart from the Venus and its latter-day clones is a 60-minute counter run from a 300-tooth wheel whose tiny dimensions, including 0.04 mm countersink, required the use of the new 'Mimotec' photolithography technology - an option distinctly unavailable to the Venus' original designers! A bonus of the Mimotec process is that the nickel phosphorous alloys used (generally considered to have excellent functional properties: good corrosion resistance, high hardness and wear resistance) can be fine-tuned to the exact specifications of the designer, as part of the moulding process.

Shifting perceptions

As for the design of the watch itself, the development of the Masterpiece series away from the safety of a straightforward, classical Breguet-style approach has matured here into a distinctive house style that nicely matches the design of the movement. Further, this new sensibility was on even more dramatic display in another of Maurice Lacroix's eye-catching Basel launches, the Pontos Décentrique GMT.

ML 106 has a generous diameter of 36.6 mm, permitting the use of larger components, improving reliability and precision. Beating at 18,000 vph, Le Chronographe features a 60-minute counter instead of the usual 30- or 45-minute counters, requiring a 300-tooth wheel whose intricate dimensions were realised by a new photolithography technology. A traditional column wheel (visible here at '10 o'clock') controls the chronograph functions, rounded out by a specially developed lever mechanism for stopping and zeroing, for which a patent has been registered.



(Left) Both the case and dial of the 999-piece Pontos Décentrique GMT (£3,600) are crafted in titanium, which serves to heighten the stylish, 'architectural' form of the watch. A white square underneath the punched-out date ring highlights the current day beneath a polished window in an unpolished sapphire-crystal arc. In order to bring the date level with the dial, a connection between the basic movement and the complication module was developed internally at Maurice Lacroix, with patent pending.

(Below) Sparing use of Superluminova retains the Décentrique GMT's clean, modern look even in the dark.



The Décentrique relies on a new module rather than an entire new movement, but nevertheless represents real creative thinking on the part of Maurice Lacroix's development team. The main time indication is slightly shifted towards the 10 o'clock position leaving room for a subsidiary dial towards 4 o'clock. This dial is the home-time dial and has an integrated sun and moon display to indicate day and night. The date indication is also quite interesting as it uses a very modern and clear way of highlighting the date that also fits in with the overall design.

This mechanism enables a large disc with the date numbers cut though it, to turn directly under the main dial. The current date is highlighted as the disc passes over a white underlay, giving the numbers a strong contrast - not entirely unlike designs from

Gérald Genta and Richard Mille it must be said, but nevertheless highly effective.

The Pontos Décentrique will be available in two versions; a stainless steel case version and a slightly larger limited-edition titanium version. Grade 2 titanium was chosen for the 45 mm diameter case and the dial base of the 999-piece series (upped from 500, following strong early demand) sits well in terms of tone with the anthracite dial details. An appropriate touch is the 'black gold' treatment given to the main movement components visible through the caseback.

Maurice Lacroix's status as a serious independent player in the watch world is, thanks to these two watches, quite assured. ○

Further information: Maurice Lacroix, 020 8749 2405, www.mauricelacroix.com

