

It's a Love Thing

"If the Queen of England or Cindy Crawford or Nicole Kidman really wanted a Marie-Antoinette replica, I would let them have one... for around £10m!"



(Opposite page) The last remaining photograph of the original Marie-Antoinette watch, before it disappeared in 1983 following a robbery at the LA Mayer Memorial Institute for Islamic Arts in Jerusalem. The crystal dial allows a fascinating glimpse of Breguet's most complicated movement ever, which should be fully replicated by 2008.

(Left) Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793), born Maria Antonia to the Archduchess of Austria and the Holy Roman Emperor Francis I. She was married-off to Louis XV's grandson and heir, dauphin Louis-Auguste at the age of 15, in an attempt to cement an alliance between France and her parents' dynasty. Naïve and extravagant, Marie-Antoinette was notoriously unpopular as Louis XVI's queen consort, and was guillotined at the height of the French Revolution.



"It's like loving a woman; there doesn't have to be any justification for you to take her in your arms. You see, I am not setting out to prove anything other than my love for the art of watchmaking," declares Nicolas G Hayek, Chairman of the Board for the all-pervading Swatch Group. But exactly what object is capable of inspiring such passion in the king of the Swiss watch industry during a 7:30 am telephone interview? The answer could well be Breguet's greatest challenge yet...

Maria Doulton

It is none other than Marie-Antoinette that Nicolas Hayek would love to have and to hold. Or, to be precise, the 1827 No. 160 Breguet pocket watch created by Abraham-Louis Breguet and his son for the pompadoured and ill-fated monarch of France, queen consort to Louis XVI. Unlike other Breguet masterpieces that Hayek has been enthusiastically acquiring at auction for his Parisian Breguet Museum, this example is not for sale - not for all the love and money on Earth. For the original has been long-lost, following a theft from the LA Mayer Memorial Institute in Jerusalem in 1983. So the only way Hayek can have his beauty is by re-creating it.

"I wanted the Marie-Antoinette and offered \$10m for it. But if anyone came forward, the insurance companies and then the State of Israel would first claim the watch, so it is impossible to

have it. Who knows, it may not even exist anymore as Breguet was not so well-known at the time and the thieves may just have thrown it away," laments Hayek.

Work of a genius

This is but the tip of the iceberg in the intriguing story that surrounds the Marie-Antoinette. In 1783, an anonymous officer of the Queen's Guard commissioned Abraham-Louis Breguet to create the most technically complicated watch possible for his Queen, time and money being no object. History does not relate the identity of this mysterious officer, nor whether Marie-Antoinette was even aware of this generous request (perhaps the forthcoming feature film starring Kirsten Dunst will provide enlightenment?), but what is tragically clear is that the Queen was guillotined long before the watch was completed.



President and CEO of Breguet, Nicolas Hayek, who has nurtured the brand's historical reputation since the Swatch Group's acquisition in 1999, with such projects as the No. 5 replica, and last year's beautifully judged La Tradition wristwatch (see Issue 13).

Forty-four years later, A-L Breguet's son finally completed the watch. And even today it is considered to be Breguet's most complicated creation. A grainy photograph shows that behind the crystal dial lay a mechanical work of art that included a perpetual calendar, equation of time, metallic thermometer, chronograph, power-reserve indicator and - as was later discovered by Hayek's watchmakers - a jumping hours function. As is fitting for a regal commission, the back of the case was decorated with diamonds. In following the officer's brief, the timepiece incorporated the most advanced mechanics of its day, including a lever escapement, a gold Breguet over-coil and double 'pare-chute' shock absorbers.

The repeater function is interesting in that it incorporates two types of different mechanism to mark the time. One is an hour repeater sounded by the hammers hitting the case. This system is known as 'à toc' because of the knocking sound it produces. Hammers hitting a more melodious gong spring (a system invented by Breguet himself) create the quarter and minutes strikes.

Rebirth

Work on the Marie-Antoinette replica began in September 2005 and will be completed in 2008. While this is not the first time that Hayek has chosen to recreate an antique pocket watch, it is however one of the most challenging, as there is little to guide the 12 watchmakers in creating and assembling the 700 or so components, other than photographs and their knowledge of A-L Breguet's techniques. It was undoubtedly easier in 2004, when Breguet SA made a replica of the 1794 No. 5 pocket watch. The watchmakers were able to disassemble the original and study the components, as the piece was bought by the Breguet Museum at auction for \$1.5m.

Based on their experience with the No. 5, the team will follow Mr Hayek's tonic: "Where there is a significant advance in technology such as the metals now available for the balance spring, we will incorporate them. I want this to be a working watch." It is interesting to think that according to Hayek, in its time, the original watch would have been comparatively more expensive to produce as a larger number of watchmakers and developments in materials such as mass-produced steel have made the process more cost-effective.

The estimated cost of the Marie-Antoinette venture is around €2m, but Hayek stresses that this is not a commercial project. So what exactly is the purpose behind the re-creation of what could be considered the most extravagant watch ever created? "Since I took-over Breguet five years ago, I have been reconstructing Breguet's culture and heritage. The Marie-Antoinette is a legend in itself; an important part of our history that has always been linked to France. We are not doing this for the publicity, but for love."

Nonetheless, it is probable that - like the No. 5 that went on to inspire the reference 3130 wristwatch or the 1810 Reine de Naples that became a women's range of timepieces - the Marie-Antoinette may be the start of something bigger. Indeed, Hayek hints that in the future we could well see a Marie-Antoinette wristwatch.

So, apart from the Breguet Museum, who does he think might be badgering him for a Marie-Antoinette? The precedent has been set by the No. 5 watch, which started as a one-off, but necessitated a further four to satisfy one particularly adamant head of state. "If the Queen of England or Cindy Crawford or Nicole Kidman really wanted a Marie-Antoinette I would let them have one, for around £10m," laughs Hayek. "Or I might wear it myself!" ◉