

# Up Close & Personal

 Watches are a constant temptation to designers; the form seems so simple, so open to new ideas and, for the majority, a once-only experience. Laurence Lassalle - AKA Valensi - does at least offer a novel approach, creating watches tailored to his clients instead of branding guidelines. The results are surprisingly effective, even if the 'brand rebel' stance becomes a little strained, as *QP* finds out.

## Claire Adler

The bearer of a CV littered with unlikely names ranging from Vodafone and Fortnum & Mason to Bird's Eye and Nestlé (well, at least it's Swiss), Laurence Lassalle is transporting his unique take on the design process and placing it right into the world of luxury watches. An industrial and concept designer by training, Laurence Lassalle only recently turned his hand to bespoke watches.

I meet Lassalle in the plush setting of his Mayfair 'Aqua Studio', where his bespoke watches are available exclusively. Aqua, the brainchild of jewellery stylist Christina Ioannidis, is an imaginative boutique boasting its own 'creative sanctuary', devoted to the creation of personalised jewellery and watches.

"I love designing things with a purpose and meaning," Lassalle tells me. "A watch is an intensely personal item and I want to enable people to express their own individuality."

Coming from a large family of creative types, Lassalle is humble, thoughtful, chatty and artistic. Indeed, his

brand name 'Valensi' comes from Lassalle's grandfather, who was an accomplished abstract painter in 1950s Paris. But Lassalle is no watchmaker. How does he think he will be taken seriously by the sort of people willing to spend £6,000 and upwards on a bespoke watch?

## Brand breakdown

To his credit, Lassalle has already designed an impressive collection of sleek and sporty men's watches called Chronotime. Launching at Basel, they are tactile, bold and intriguing, incorporating matt rubber, shiny chrome and textures reminiscent of classic sports-car dashboards. They reveal their movements through finely meshed dials.

"After studying graphic design and spending 15 years working on a huge variety of branding projects, I became interested in watches five years ago," explains Lassalle. "My design training always taught me to question the *status quo*. I always enjoyed seeing watches about but as I looked at them more keenly, I found myself starting to glaze over. They all looked the same, so I started to think about time differently."



(Above) This bespoke watch resulting from a Valensi consultation with a South American client has a rich mother-of-pearl dial with sprinklings of rubies and sapphires that spill indulgently over onto the bezel. Curvy shapes communicate expansiveness and pride and a suede strap is all about sensuous luxury.

(Left) The designer for Valensi, Laurence Lassalle. A Londoner whose CV includes work for Bird's Eye, Aero chocolate, Playdoh and Lloyd's of London!



(Left) Valensi's extravagant 'Aqua Studio', where a one-to-one appointment with Laurence Lassalle formulates the watch reflecting your personality.

(Below far left) One of the four initial mood boards used to get client's creative juices flowing. This one reflects the 'Cartier' side of the client. Valensi always encourages people to bring in their own objects or favourite examples of design too.

(Below centre) The 'Paul Smith' mood board, which reflects the client's sense of modern, fun-loving style.

(Below) The final mood board, summarising the previous boards and ultimately dictating the watch itself. It reflects the South American client's Greek roots, her love of lush flowers, the piano, a sumptuous Mediterranean yacht and heroine Marlene Dietrich.



Lassalle has spent the best part of two decades learning how to break a brand down to its essence and translating it into 'brand personality'. Now he's using exactly the same principles for Valensi, interpreting an individual's 'brand essence' as a unique watch.

"What I design represents the actual person who is wearing the watch," he says. "Given that clocks are so ubiquitous now, on mobiles and computers and ovens, I think it's time to have a bit more fun with watches," he says. "We no longer have one watch to see us through our whole life. The bespoke watches I make are more than just pretty faces. It usually takes a healthy dose of confidence to wear something so individualised."

### In the mood

As a classically trained graphic designer, mood boards have always been central to the design process for Lassalle - essentially collages of disparate images triggering ideas, clues or reactions throughout. Lassalle and his clients kick-off with four themed mood boards. Despite professing to be rather disillusioned with

many huge brands, he links these introductory mood boards to the core aesthetic values of four leading brands. There's the classic 1920s collage, with sensual imagery such as the close-up of a rose, which evokes Cartier; the modernised classic that is Armani; the modern look and feel of Paul Smith and modern kitsch made up of fluffy and bulky images - undeniably Versace.

Typically, people are drawn to elements of each, says Lassalle. With each client, he then initiates a conversation eliciting intimate client information, which contributes to the content of further mood boards - the ultimate basis of the watch. Subjects discussed are as diverse as lucky numbers and symbols, beloved animals, dream houses, favourite architecture, textures and music, life aspirations and inspirational people. Lassalle also encourages clients to bring in objects of their own that might inspire the design of their bespoke watch. The client whose mood boards are on this page brought in a photo of her style icon, Marlene Dietrich, and a fur stole that her grandmother once gave her.



(Above) Preliminary ideas for a bespoke Valensi watch. All Valensi watches use Swiss movements and will be assembled in Switzerland. Typical production time is three months but bespoke casing can take closer to six months.

"The conversation can go in any direction, but I always end up with a picture I can work with. Aspirations can give clues to whether a person likes being in charge of their destiny. Being drawn to two contrasting colours or textures can be very telling. There might also be something striking about the person themselves such as the colour of their eyes, which I might then suggest bringing into the design," says Lassalle.

### Unlabelled

Lassalle's work is driven by an "antipathy to the branding that's happening all around us." He almost sees himself as a kind of 'anti-brand'. "I got to a point where I became frustrated with brands. Brands define a personality and you are then forced to adapt yourself within those parameters. I noticed this when I was looking for a pair of glasses. I found I was thinking about each brand's image before thinking about which pair of glasses I actually liked. Brands help to place people in society but at a certain stage, people aren't so attached to particular brands. More than anything, they just want to look and feel good. It's no longer cool to wear designer from head to toe and it's cooler to mix, say, Jimmy Choo with Topshop. So I am rebelling against brands, I guess. There is an increasing desire for something unique and there's not that much choice. People often have an emotional attachment to their watch, so in some ways it

doesn't make sense to slap somebody else's brand on your wrist." But surely in creating his own brand, Valensi, Lassalle is merely falling into the same trap? And if he is determined not to do that, how will he maintain a signature style, so that his watches are even vaguely recognisable as being his work?

"Yes, there is an irony there," he smiles. "I do have a style of my own... which tends to be simplistically stylish with a dash of humour." Unsurprisingly, Lassalle says Gérald Genta's watch designs are an inspiration to him, as is the Vivianna bangle watch by Georg Jensen - a piece stunning in its simplicity. "But there is a lot of scope. For example, a recent client named William had 'William by Valensi' applied to the dial. I see myself as a design service to express other people's ideas. A blank canvas is frightening to many people." Admittedly, going to Aqua Studio to meet Valensi for a new watch does provide a truly unique experience. Lassalle is highly adept at teasing-out people's own personal inspirations and giving them a starting point and a language to create something indisputedly their own.

"It's about finding a person's USP, or unique selling point," says Lassalle, diverting momentarily into marketing speak. Here is possibly the world's first watch designer more interested in what makes *people* tick, rather than their watches... ○

Further information: Valensi at Aqua Studio 020 7493 9205