

# If You've Got It...

Van Cleef & Arpels proves that a gentleman's watch can be both complicated *and* fabulous

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"We considered the tourbillon to be like a flawless diamond and we created a beautiful setting around it," says Nicholas Bos of Van Cleef & Arpels, from his Place Vendôme office in Paris. This is what makes the Monsieur Arpels Tourbillon different, according to the Head of Watches and Jewellery, who is well aware of the recent democratisation of "the complication of kings."

Do not be fooled by the florid language though; Van Cleef & Arpels has done something very different with its tourbillon and its growing collection of watches for men. It has pulled off the tricky task of creating a men's watch using high-quality movements, precious metals and the finest materials without falling into the gem-set trap of tasteless over-indulgence. These watches ooze sophistication and *savoir-faire*. Rather than applying another layer of bling, they fuse the audacity and delicate skills of fine jewellery-making with the rigours of mechanics and useful complications.

## Manly opulence

"Our aim is to create useful and beautiful watches that are wearable and enhanced by our high jewellery spirit," explains Bos. "We are continuing what we started in 2004. Since the start of Richemont Group's gradual purchase of Van Cleef & Arpels in 1999 [completed last year], we have made a choice to return to our house's rich history of creativity and revive Van Cleef after a sleepy time in the 1990s. Up until then, watches were developed separately [for this, read 'licensed out'] so our classic, round PA49 model for men had not evolved much since the 1950s."

The result of this strategy is a family of alarm, dual-time and tourbillon watches enhanced with the 'high-jewellery spirit' of the house. Details such as creamy mother-of-pearl



Last year's tourbillon model launched under Van Cleef & Arpels' young but well-respected 'Monsieur Arpels' range (£56,400). The flying tourbillon cage is styled to evoke the VCA logo, which features the Place Vendôme column. The model is restricted to 22 pieces - the atelier's number on Place Vendôme.

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(Above left) Monsieur Arpels Réveil GMT in steel, with lacquered mother-of-pearl dial, self-winding movement, alarm, GMT time-zone, and retrograde date subdials for each half of the month (£6,300). Besides its three new additions to the Monsieur Arpels range, Van Cleef also unveiled new ladies watches at last year's SIHH: (Above) This yellow-gold Alhambra Vintage (£3,000) evokes the spirit of VCA's classic four-leaf clover 'Alhambra' shape from 1974; (left) a gentle tug on a VCA logo pendant reveals the Secret watch's hidden mother-of-pearl dial (£18,200).

dials, lovingly worked gold and discreet diamonds are the ultimate retort to that oft-heard phrase that a watch is just for telling the time. They are simply gorgeous - yet useful and wearable.

Take the Monsieur Arpels Tourbillon: its unveiling last April at Geneva's Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie brought sighs of admiration from both the non-watch anorak and the high-heel contingency, who rarely agree on anything. Both camps felt the instinctive pull of the tourbillon cage's technical mastery - or "poetry" if we are to use the house lingo - so cleverly crafted to evoke the famous Vendôme column, found in the VCA logo. The flying one-minute tourbillon set in an ultra-flat case speaks of a sophistication and attention to detail reminiscent of pre-war luxurious indulgence. And if you can, well why not? It is a deliciously undemocratic attitude that sets these watches apart.

The dial is set with mother-of-pearl, gold and diamonds and through the sapphire caseback the bridges gleam with the soft lustre of yet more mother-of-pearl and diamonds. Only 22 will be made of this rose-gold watch - the unusual number referring to the VCA's address on Place Vendôme, *bien sur*.

With the arrival of the tourbillon, is this *grande dame of haute joaillerie* (who has only made a serious return to men's watches in the last two years) looking to position herself as a creator of complicated mechanical movements? "We are not aiming to be the ultimate watchmakers, nor to compete with the latest technical developments," states Bos. "So the tourbillon should not be seen as a strategic move for us. As the tourbillon is becoming a standard of the market and, in the mind of the customer, 'the ultimate' we want to be able to offer it. In the way we are the ultimate jewellers who offer the best stones, we want to offer the best quality of movements. But we are not going to go further on the technical front."

Although Bos was not forthcoming about who provided the tourbillon and movement, he made it clear that it was a "Swiss landmark watchmaker." We could hazard



(Left) The updated Monsieur Arpels Double Fuseaux with slate and onyx dial (£5,900). Its power reserve, second time-zone and 88-year 'generational' calendar (displayed on the caseback) are all powered by Jaeger-LeCoultre's JLC 939 calibre. (Right) The dapper caseback of the Monsieur Arpels Tourbillon, showing-off the diamond-set tourbillon cage and bridges set with white mother-of-pearl.

a guess at who it might be, but this would be splitting hairs, as the firm is open about its use of third-party suppliers from within the Richemont Group - most significantly Jaeger-LeCoultre, who supplies the nuts and bolts of the PA49 and Monsieur Arpels Alarm and Double Fuseaux models.

### The co-stars

Not to overshadow the other two men's watches launched last year, it must be made clear that the Double Fuseaux is not completely new but an improvement on 2004's model (featured amongst others in Issue 10) with the same features - a power reserve, dual time-zone and generational calendar on the back - further enhanced with a slate, metal and onyx dial.

Meanwhile, the surprisingly modern-looking automatic Réveil GMT is the ideal watch for the traveller, with its dual time-zone and buzzing alarm. The double-retrograde date arcs provide a

satisfying aesthetic symmetry - one for each half of the month, not to mention the maquetery ivory work on the dial. Like the previous model, the inner workings of this trusty time servant are on view through two horizontal openings in the side of the case, between the crowns.

However, what lies ahead proves to be even more interesting. While previously, with women's watches, Van Cleef has limited its dictate to "jewels that tell the time," based on icons such as the Cadenas and Ludo bracelets, expect to see some serious horology *pour mademoiselle* next year. Did I hear Mr Bos say diamond-set tourbillons in round cases? No, he actually said "refined mechanical watches in a poetic universe," but I think I know what he is hinting at. Watch this space, as 2006 will be a big year for Van Cleef & Arpels - its centenary no less, to be marked by some serious horological fireworks. Of a refined sort, of course. ○

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