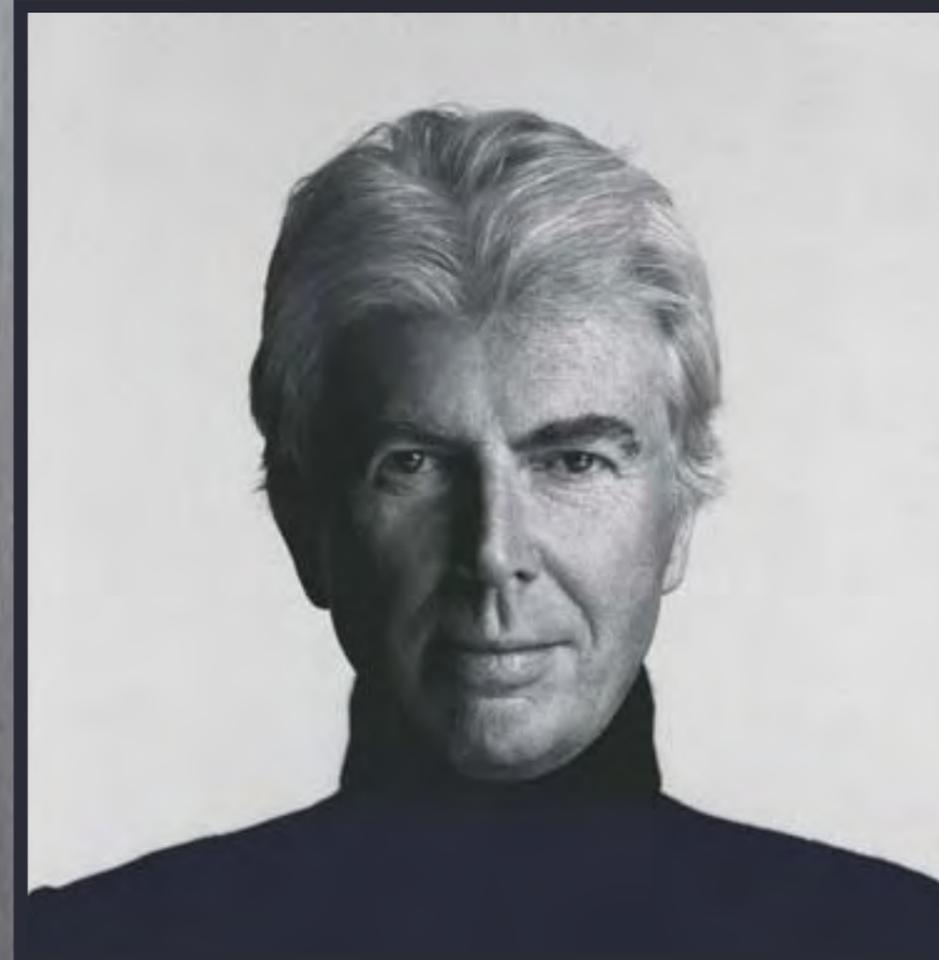
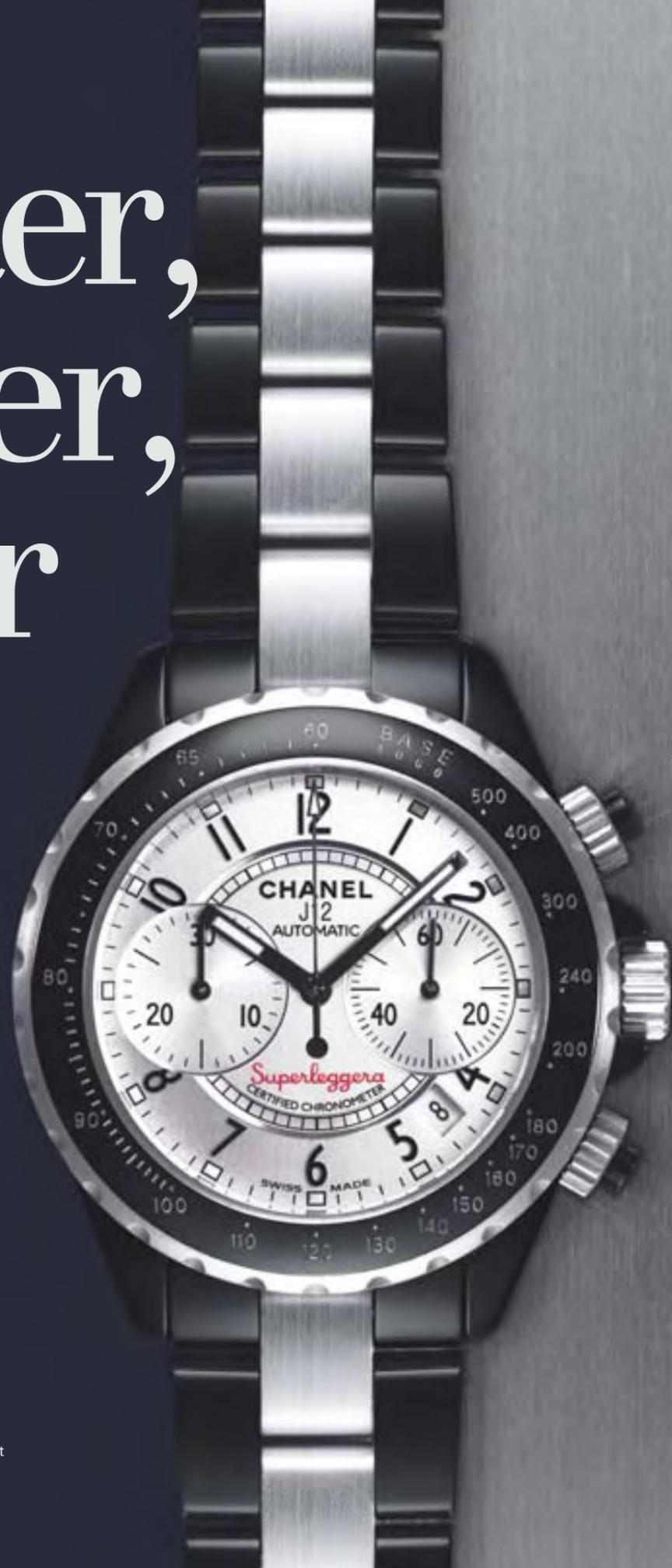


Lighter, Harder, Faster

Aluminium
meets ceramic
in Chanel's
Superleggera

Bill Prince



Father of the J12 range and Chanel's Artistic Director, Jacques Helleu, who has been with the brand since 1965.



Almost six years ago, Chanel was taking a risk when it launched Jacques Helleu's J12, banking on a sole 'hero' watch made of ceramic. They need not have worried at all. The J12 successfully spanned the yawning gap between the worlds of fashion and horology, earning high praise from both sides and giving birth to innumerable iterations. And no sooner had Helleu launched the surprisingly graceful J12 Tourbillon last year, had he defied expectations yet again, with a slick homage to a 1950s Italian bodyshop. Chanel's Artistic Director tells *QP* how the Superleggera was born.

The latest, rather more masculine interpretation of Chanel's successful J12 range is the Superleggera (£3,375), named after Touring's super-light aluminium car bodies of the 1950s, and partly made with aluminium.



“With the Superleggera, I wanted to do something with a little more ‘rudeness’ - to make it a little more masculine.”

The Superleggera chronograph is water resistant to 200m, 41 mm in diameter and COSC-certified. It is only produced in one size and version.

There are two things you don't ask Chanel's Artistic Director, Jacques Helleu. The first is his age (he has worked for the celebrated French fashion house since he was 18, taking charge of all its advertising since he was 18, taking charge of all its advertising for all packaging, advertising, marketing and communication). The second is whether he would care to name which of the five great Swiss manufactures produces the movements for his celebrated J12 watch.

“No I don't think I would like to do that,” he says with a chuckle that manages to convey the merest suggestion that the suave Mr Helleu is not a man to be trifled with. Anyway, he's happier talking about the J12's breakthrough ceramic case. Helleu will happily concede that Rado was first to market the material, but none of its watches share the J12's curvaceous styling - made possible only after Helleu had spent seven years developing a material that met his demands for a suitably shiny black watch. “It had been done by Porsche and Audemars Piguet,” he says, “but using a process that produced a very matt black, which was in fact sprayed onto an alloy and wore very badly. After six months you could see the metal through the finish.”

Finally, after employing the expertise of a bridge designer and investigating the brake linings on a fighter jet, Helleu came up with his ceramic case - ensuring the J12's credibility among observers

who traditionally sidelined the products of the great fashion houses as merely ornamental. “Some of the people who were involved on a commercial level early on told me it would never sell; that it was a big mistake and I shouldn't do it. They are not with us now,” he says darkly.

Since launching in 2000, the J12 has undergone a series of cosmetic changes, including a model in white ceramic, a chronograph, and a version encrusted in black diamonds. At Basel last year, Helleu even unveiled a tourbillon, which, he says, appears to fit the J12 case as if solely designed for what he considers the “most complex and beautiful movement.”

“It's a little miracle,” he beams.

Shedding the pounds

Perhaps the most impressive example of the J12's evolution comes in the shape of its latest iteration, the Superleggera. It is named after the grand design of legendary Italian coachbuilder Touring, who changed the face - and speed - of motor racing between the wars. Translating literally as ‘extra light’, Touring's ‘Superleggera’ bodies were fabricated from thin sheets of aluminium, which clad a tubular aluminium frame. These went on to grace some of the most beautiful sports cars of the post-war years, including Bond's most famous ride, the 1963 Aston Martin DB5. Touring closed in 1967,



but its name lives on thanks to Helleu's search for a sportier, lighter J12. “Ceramic is very heavy and I thought it would be interesting if we could make it lighter for a watch.”

The result, in watchmaking terms, is a piece that exploits aluminium - a relatively unheralded material in luxury terms - in an entirely convincing and practical way. (Although beaten to the punch by Bvlgari, Helleu insists his patented alloy is rather more scratch resistant). Furthermore, in a market awash with automotive associations, Chanel's is purer than most, eschewing the simple marketing initiative of teaming-up with an existing car brand, in favour of reinterpreting an automotive asset.

It has served a further function too: not only has the Superleggera maintained the J12's trajectory away from mere fashion foible to legitimate watchmaking excellence; it has given Helleu a watch he can wear himself. Originally envisioned as a man's watch - itself an unusual step for a company that does not yet produce a menswear collection - the Superleggera reclaims the J12 for those chaps who might have been put off by the number of women who have fallen in love with the original's shiny black case.

“I think it's true that women are interested in some products that have been created for men; it's happened with some fragrances too. So with the

Superleggera I wanted to do something with a little more ‘rudeness’ - to make it a little more masculine.”

From the heart

The Superleggera is a truly 21st-century luxury sports chronograph - albeit one that owes its genesis to a crowded breaker's yard of early 20th-century industrial icons: “I am fascinated by railways,” says its designer, “and one of my favourite machines was designed by Raymond Loewy in 1936 for the Pennsylvania Railroad. This extraordinary machine was entirely shiny-black and huge! But the fact that it was black made it a little more aggressive and masculine in terms of design, and I liked that.”

Other design cues for the Superleggera came from his passion for classic cars, yachts (including the legendary J12 racing vessels from which the watch takes its name) and early modernists such as Le Corbusier. All have been refracted through Helleu's unique claim on Chanel's long history. One, by dint of his long service, he knows by heart and can thus banish to an instinctual level.

It's a heartfelt, homespun approach (in the most elevated sense) that has overcome initial resistance from within Chanel. Apparently, convincing his

(Left and centre) Launched at Basel last year, two black-ceramic J12 chronographs with white-gold bezels set with 36 rubies (left) and blue sapphires (right) (POA). (Above) The J12 Tourbillon model from 2005 was the first ‘grande complication’ variant from Chanel. Only 12 examples of each white and black ceramic version were produced (£82,500).

colleagues to produce just one 'hero' model rather than a range of watches was only half the battle. Helleu then had to persuade the house of the legitimacy of ceramic as a luxury material. "It was kind of a dangerous decision," he says. "Because the Rado watch is just what I didn't want to do. I had to fight to convince people that through the design aspect, the material would become less important than the design statement itself."

The battle won, and the J12's success assured, Helleu is now currently working on a dual-time version, due to be unveiled in 2007.

Man of the brand

Clearly, Helleu's is a painstaking approach, all the while balancing his duties as the "eyes of Chanel" (which, he says, takes up roughly 50% of his time) with formulating a logical story for the evolution of the J12. Yet it is a task that sits neatly with his passion for design. Chanel, one quickly discovers, is not interested in merely branding a piece of designer product to further its own prestige in a particular market.

"That is a business process," he sniffs. "Look at Dior. For the last four years I've read that Dior is coming out with a watch, and the first one that I see has been drawn by Victoire de Castellane and it is in fact a Piaget watch. And I think, oh that's the Dior watch. And then comes the Rolex exercise by Hedi Slimane and I think that this must be the new Dior watch. And then comes a pale copy of the J12 and that's the John Galiano watch. So which is the defining Dior watch? I don't know."

But then, for a man responsible for such zeitgeist-defining moments as 2004's Chanel No. 5 mini-movie starring Nicole Kidman, for commissioning creative powerhouses such as Andy Warhol, Luc Besson and Richard Avedon, and art-directing the world's most beautiful women, from Catherine Deneuve to Estella Warren, Helleu's taste in watchmaking is surprisingly orthodox. "The last time I walked around the Basel fair, the only watch I saw that I wanted to buy for myself was a Patek Philippe. And they are hardly that adventurous." ◊

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The Superleggera watch combines aluminium with the J12's usual ceramic to create a lighter watch and - more importantly - a duo-tonal visual feast.

"I had to fight to convince people that through the design aspect, the [ceramic] material would become less important than the design statement itself."