



Le Printemps



L'été



L'automne



L'hiver

Vincent Bérard's 'Quatre Saisons' series of carriage watches, based on a quarter-repeating ébauche.

Man For All

As an independent watchmaker planning to start your own brand, possessing the technical genius of A-L Breguet will not get you far without a decent command of aesthetics. No matter how innovative the movement, a watch must look good to sell, and ideally stand out from the crowd. Large watch brands devote entire departments and divisions to movement, case and dial design, but the independent must be master of all three. Vincent Bérard is just that - an innovative watchmaker who brushes his watches with the deft touch of the artist.

Ian Skellern

Seasons

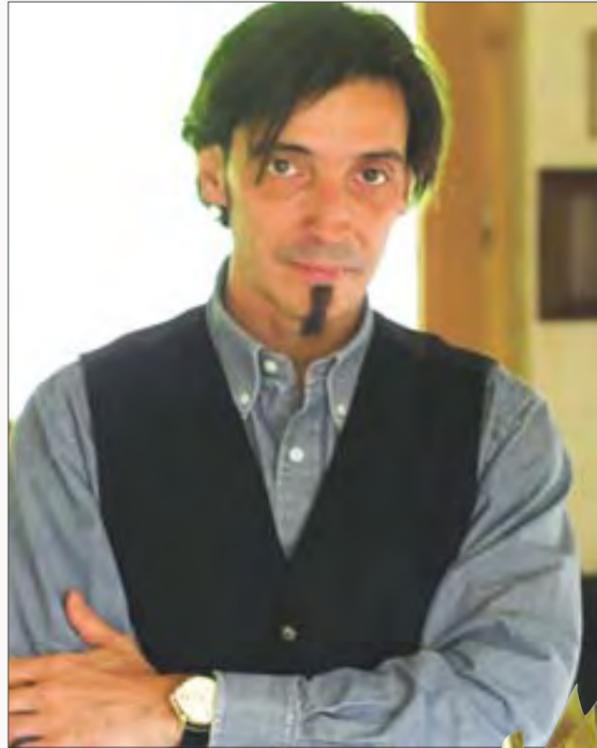
A native of Provence, Bérard fell in love with watchmaking after a visit to a local watch repairer. "When I was 16 years old, my mother returned from taking a family heirloom clock to a local restorer for repairs and said to me, 'Vincent you must go and see this shop - I am sure you will like it.' So I went, and it was love at first sight. I said to myself then and there that I want to do that."

This was not merely a transient infatuation; the following year saw him in the Vallée de Joux, enrolled at Le Sentier's Watchmaking School. Less than three decades later, Bérard presented at Baselworld for the first time last year, with the AHCI. His display contained four beautifully

finished carriage watches representing the 'Quatre Saisons' (Four Seasons). Keeping them company was a prototype from his upcoming contemporary wristwatch collection, 'Fuseau de l'infini' (Spindles of Infinity).

Bérard's journey

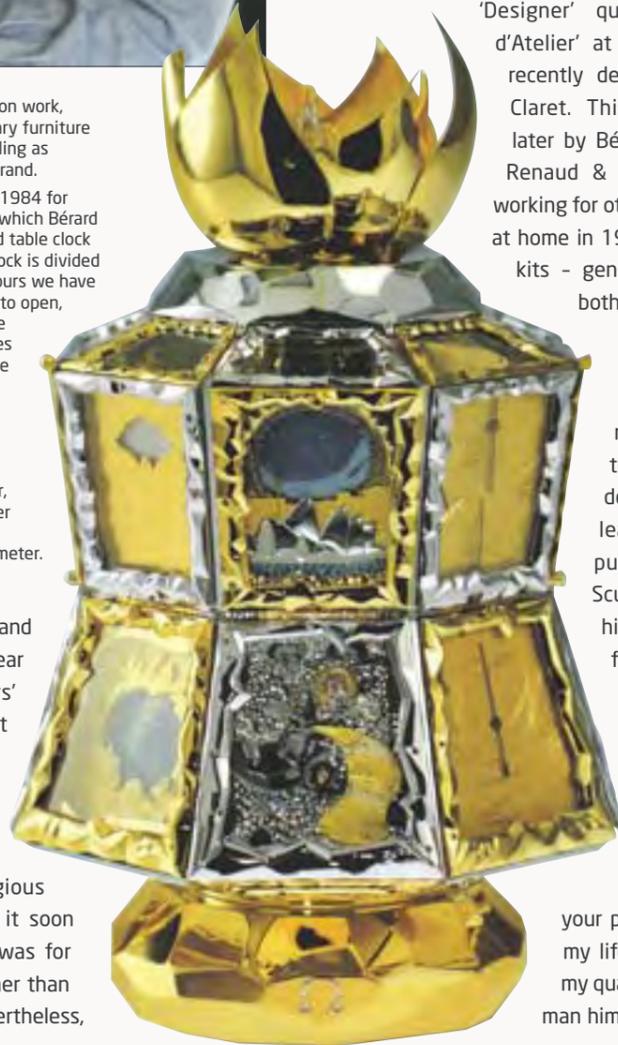
Over the intervening years, it has not just been watchmaking that has occupied Bérard's interest, but also drama and photography. In fact, in his final year at school, he very nearly gave up his watchmaking studies altogether, to concentrate solely on photography. "Fairly quickly - after just two or three years of study - I began to realise that I felt more artistic than technical," reveals Bérard.



(Above) Vincent Bérard dabbled in restoration work, movement assembly, sculpture, contemporary furniture design and photography, before finally settling as a watchmaker under his own, eponymous brand.

(Right) 'La Rose des Temps' was created in 1984 for Omega by Dominique Loiseau's atelier - of which Bérard was a member. It was the most complicated table clock in the world. With a height of 18 cm, the clock is divided into two parts. On top, rotating every 12 hours we have the rose itself. The petals take 30 minutes to open, revealing a totally asymmetrical one-minute flying tourbillon. The central section comprises the 16 complication modules and the principle mechanism which distributes power to the complications and the rose itself. The clock displays 32 functions, including the constellations over Bern, New York, Buenos Aires and Sydney, the signs of the zodiac, equation of time, perpetual calendar, moonphase, sunrise and sunset, the summer and winter solstices, hour signal, a six-bell chime, altimeter, hygrometer and a thermometer.

Thankfully for us, he stuck with it, and successfully completed the four-year course, plus a further two years' training in the restoration department at the MIH (Musée International d'Horlogerie) in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Bérard then finally realised his teenage dream by accepting an offer to work at a prestigious restoration atelier in Paris, where it soon became obvious that his passion was for creating something of his own, rather than restoring someone else's work. Nevertheless,



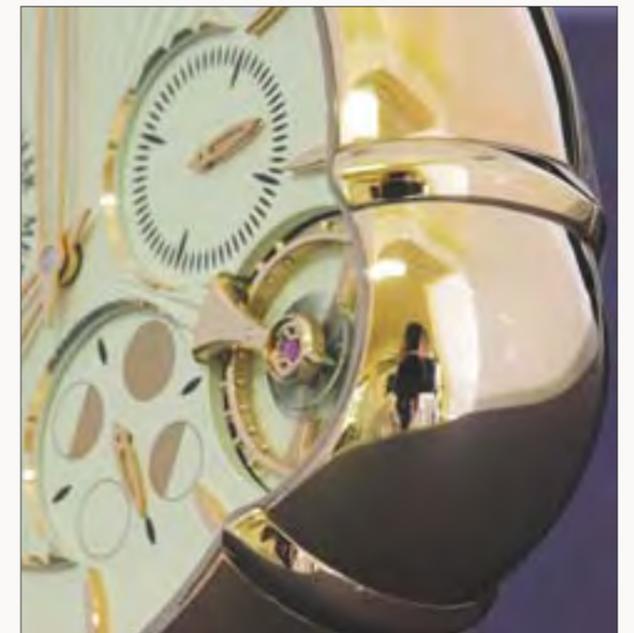
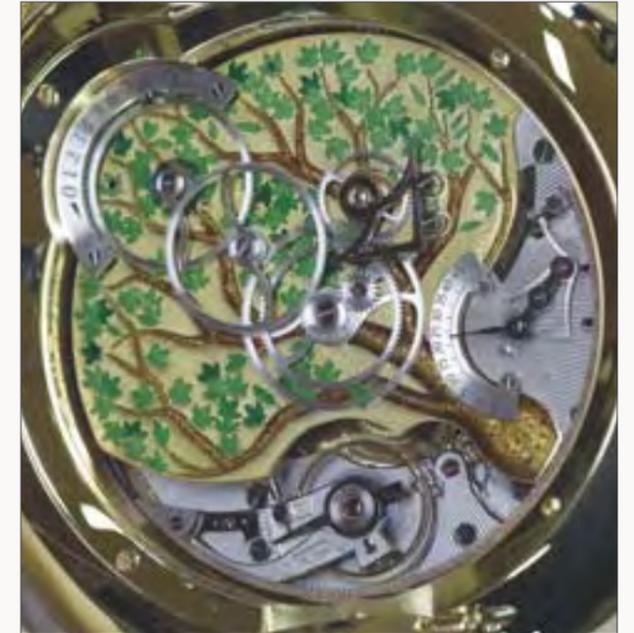
he persevered for 12 months, before upping sticks and travelling the world for two years. He then returned to Neuchâtel.

Here, Bérard joined a watchmaking 'dream team' led by Dominique Loiseau. A watchmaking genius, Loiseau had received a commission from Omega to construct a super-complication that he had designed. 'La Rose des Temps' had 32 complications, plus automations. Loiseau's atelier made virtually every one of the incredible 9,000 parts itself. The four years working for Loiseau's atelier had been "an incredible experience" for Bérard. But despite this, he opted to change direction yet again. Somewhat unexpectedly, the watchmaker chose to enter the contemporary furniture business! His father was an interior decorator and it was a world that Bérard had grown up in and enjoyed. Furniture allowed him to indulge in a spot of modern design; 'domestic sculpture' if you like - a more utilitarian vent for his passion for the three-dimensional arts. Thankfully, two years was sufficient before the restless Bérard once again returned to horology. A chance conversation had turned into a job offer as a watch designer for Sowind (the group behind Girard-Perregaux).

'Designer' quickly progressed to 'Chef d'Atelier' at Christophe Claret, who had recently departed from Renaud, Papi & Claret. This was followed two years' later by Bérard fulfilling a similar role at Renaud & Papi itself. Finally tiring of working for others, Bérard set up a workshop at home in 1992 and assembled movement kits - generally minute repeaters - for both R&P and Claret.

Watershed vision

His familiarity with assembling repeater kits allowed Bérard the rare luxury of earning a decent living working mornings, leaving afternoons free to pursue his passion for art. Sculpture, in particular, allowed him to design and create, free from the constraints imposed by working with pre-fabricated watches. Many - myself included - might have looked at Bérard's as a dream lifestyle, working part-time, earning good money, with time for indulging in your passion. "I have always tried in my life to strike a balance between my quality of life and my work," as the man himself puts it.



(Top left) Close-up of the Spring carriage watch's delicate enamel work and dial engraving. (Top right) The caseback of Spring reveals yet more stunning enamel work. (Bottom left) The first wristwatch model from Vincent Bérard is the Luvoréne 1, featuring the distinctive bulge first seen on his carriage watches. (Prices start from around SFr.50,000). (Bottom right) The case's bulge gives the Luvoréne 1 a very distinct identity. The escapement is cleverly hidden beneath a sundial under the balance. Bérard wanted the balance filling the bulge for aesthetic balance; however, did not wish to destroy the purity of the dial by revealing the movement or mechanics.

However, Bérard decided to abandon watchmaking after five years and concentrate on his sculpture full-time - to see if he could be successful as a professional artist. With a family to support, and having never sold any of his artwork, you can imagine how strong his drive must have been. Having nearly given up watch school for photography, the desire to create on his own terms had finally overwhelmed him.

With the last of his watchmaking obligations to clients finished, tools packed away and bench covered, Bérard settled down to begin the next phase of his life as an artist. Or so he thought. Not even two days had passed before a vision gripped him. "One morning, I saw this watch in my mind like I usually see my sculpture. I drew it, showed the sketch to my wife and told her, 'I am going to make this watch.'"



(Above) The five spindle-shaped bridges, which give the Fuseau de l'infini collection (of which the Luvoréne 1 is a part) its name.

Just creating an orthodox movement from scratch is difficult in itself, but what Bérard had in mind was anything but orthodox; it was a truly original concept that transformed the way a movement is laid out. Realising at the outset that he would need backing for a project of this scale, Bérard approached Corum, who agreed to fund the expected two- to three-year development, in return for the right of first refusal of a prototype.

Taking his working prototype back to Corum two and a half years later, Bérard was disappointed to learn that the new owner did not feel the watch complemented the direction in which he planned to take the company. So he next approached Parmigiani - a suitably prestigious company with the necessary manufacturing capabilities. After many years' development, Bérard's original vision finally became what we all know and love as the Type 370 Bugatti.

Parmigiani was already looking for a watch to tie-in with Bugatti's Veyron supercar project when Bérard came knocking, and had immediately seen the potential in the concept. His working prototype originally had a larger glassed area, with more of the transverse movement on show. However, this was too difficult to manufacture commercially and Vaucher Manufacture Fleurier (Parmigiani's industrial wing) gradually reworked the movement to ease the parts' production. Bérard worked with them as a consultant for 6 months.

Quatre Saisons

The success of the Bugatti project allowed Bérard to take a couple of years off from horology. However, 2003 saw new ideas for watch designs bubbling up in his fertile imagination, and this time he decided the watches would bear his own name. The son of Corum's founder, Jean-René Bannwart became Bérard's financial backer and business manager, and together they founded a new brand: Vincent Bérard - Compagnon du Temps.

Wishing to launch his brand and wristwatch collection with something truly spectacular, Bérard drew inspiration from four, 100-year-old, quarter-repeater ébauches he had been working on. What resulted was a unique, one-off set of 91 mm carriage watches based on the four seasons - each season represented by a case in a different gold, and each with its own *grand feu* enamelled automates on the dial. There is a lightness of touch that makes this quartet a joy to behold. The leaves of Autumn, flowers of Spring, snowflakes of Winter and swallows of Summer are all picked out delicately in enamel, adding a contemporary touch to a timepiece that might otherwise feel rather outdated. These perfectly executed decorations come to life thanks to the play of the quarter-repeater striking mechanism and the

automatons. Further dial adornments are judiciously sparse, and the stylised Roman indexes take the contemporary feel further. The overall feel is that of subtlety, and taste. So much so, that it's hard to believe Bérard has squeezed in a perpetual calendar with leap-year indicator, a 10-day power reserve with indicator and - in keeping with the seasonal theme - a thermometer.

Onto the wrist

For the Quatre Saisons clocks, and the first model in Bérard's new wristwatch line-up, the watchmaker has finally managed to channel his artistry as a sculptor towards his considerable skill as a watchmaker. "The superb craftsmanship and forms in the stonework of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Strasbourg have often inspired me," he says, when quizzed on how his two passions have fused. Indeed, his watch-cases all feature a trademark 'bulge', which is inspired by the shape of the cathedral's column bases. On his Luvoréne 1 wristwatch, this bulge encloses an open dial at three o'clock, which exposes the over-coil balance, while cleverly concealing the escapement and the pallet-wheel.



The wristwatch's completely new manual-winding caliber 441VB movement contains five of Bérard's signature spindle-shaped bridges - each on a higher level and evoking the steps of a spiral staircase; another design cue taken from the ancient French building. These spindles inspire the name of the collection, 'Fuseau de l'infini'. Bérard designed the movement to be a solid, reliable workhorse with a neat touch: additional complications can be fitted inside the existing movement, rather than on top, so that future models all share the same case size.

With a minute repeater already on the drawing board and an order book filling quickly, Vincent Bérard is off to an excellent start. It was just a question of directing his artistic talent *into* his watches rather than *apart* from them. ○

(Left) Variant of the Luvoréne 1 with red-gold case with brown enamel dial. The crown is on the left because when the user is observing the 10-day power reserve indicator on the back whilst winding the watch, it is actually positioned on the right.

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