

# Visionary

Georges-Henri Meylan is catering for more than just AP's 'Offshore' playboy customers

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⌚ One of the greatest excitements for me at this year's SIHH fair was to be found at the Audemars Piguet stand. The big news there was the new 'manufacture' automatic movement created for the Royal Oak. But it was not the slightly beefier-looking update of AP's iconic piece that attracted my attention. Nor was it the latest from the perennially beefy Royal Oak Offshore range; nor the piano-shaped resonance box made of special wood sourced from trees felled by the light of a waning moon to be supplied with AP's minute repeaters from now on. In fact, you might well have missed the Audemars Piguet that got me excited this year, as it spent most of the SIHH shackled to the wrist of CEO Georges-Henri Meylan.



A bold departure for AP this year was the Edward Piguet Moss Agate Tourbillon (SFr.290,000) - a hardstone-dial piece reminiscent of the garish watches so popular with the 1960s and 1970s jet-set.





The watch in question is an Edward Piguet-cased, skeleton-movement watch, in which the main plate and bridges are made of moss agate. At this point I must admit that I am naturally predisposed towards liking such a watch. I long for a full-scale return to the hardstone dials that were so popular during the 1960s and 1970s. With this watch, Georges-Henri Meylan has not merely met my expectations but exceeded them. Using a semi-precious stone to decorate the dial is difficult enough, but to use such material in the construction of the watch is just inventing a whole new set of difficulties. Especially as it could hardly be termed an overly commercial timepiece. It is priced at SFr.290,000 and is so rarefied a piece, appealing to such a sophisticated and miniscule part of the market, that none have been ordered by AP's subsidiary in the US.

Still, a lack of mass appeal is unlikely to stop Meylan from giving the go-ahead to such an eccentric project. I am glad that that Swiss watch industry still has men like Georges-Henri Meylan - men of maturity and a certain quiet, understated Swiss vision, who are not obsessed by such short-term goals as personal publicity and quarterly sales figures, or the jockeying for position and internal power politics that attend life in a major conglomerate.

### Son of the Vallée

With his domed forehead, genial manner and imperturbable Swiss courtesy, Meylan is a gentleman. He has a respect and love for the values of the Vallée de Joux; qualities that, while not those of the model MBA-brandishing know-it-all spreadsheet jockey fresh out of INSEAD, nevertheless impart other attributes. I spent a day with him in the summer, under circumstances that would have infuriated more self-important watch bosses, but which he greeted with charm and tolerance. It was on a complicated photo-shoot involving getting a supermodel-turned-racing driver (Jodie Kidd) and a supercar (the Maserati MC12) plus support vehicles to drive from Modena to Le Brassus in one day while being photographed along the way. The idea was that the road trip would end up outside the Audemars Piguet Manufacture some time early in the afternoon allowing ample time for a fashion shoot.

The inspiration for this exercise was the link evinced by the new Millenary watch, made by AP to celebrate the Maserati's 90th birthday (see 'Three-Pronged Attack' in Issue 13). "It started with the head of AP Italia's relationship with the race department of Maserati, who asked if we were interested in being a partner of the Trofeo."

**"It took two years to gain the confidence to launch the Offshore, yet now we have to change our shirts all the time," he says, displaying his own cuff, shredded by the ziggurat-like watch.**

Audemars Piguet's headline development at this year Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie was the new automatic 3120 calibre inside 'bread-and-butter' model, the Royal Oak (stainless steel model with black dial pictured; SFr.12,500). Amongst other improvements, the 3120 features a direct-drive centre seconds. The enhanced performance of the going-train enables this hand to move without jumping.



(Left) Audemars Piguet sponsors Team Alinghi, defenders of the America's Cup 2003, accompanying them as they race towards 2007's edition. The manufacture has created the Royal Oak Offshore Alinghi Polaris chronograph (SFr. 26,500), equipped with a new movement featuring a 'regatta' flyback chronograph, suited to the complicated, staggered start procedure of the America's Cup. (Right) Georges-Henri Meylan - the genial CEO behind Audemars Piguet for the past 20 years. (Bottom) Platinum Dual Time Millenary (SFr.77,000), restricted to 90 pieces, commemorating Maserati's 90th. The three-dimensional dial is composed of four independent parts, two of which - the main hour-circle and the power-reserve display - are inclined at different angles and directed towards its centre zone, giving a raised effect.

This is a series of races which Meylan characterises as being for "guys that like to race. They pay €150,000, go to the circuit with a helmet and drive the car."

The chances are that if this is what you do at the weekend then you already have a Royal Oak or two. So instead Meylan took the opportunity to introduce these rich boy-racers to other aspects of AP. "We did not want to come with another Royal Oak," explains Meylan. What he did instead was put the oval-shaped Millenary on steroids. "We have really had a success; the demand is high and we had some very good feedback. It is a change for AP; we always show a lot of Royal Oak and showing something completely different is..." Here, Meylan pauses briefly, searching for the right term, before adding with epic understatement, "...quite nice." So "nice" in fact, that next year will see something of a re-launch of the Millenary, inspired by the Maserati model. "We try to reach people that have everything; they have the nicest boat, the new house, the nicest cars... So we need to make something that is different."

Time ticked on as we waited for our high speed supermodel and her escort. Hours passed. I had conducted a tour of the manufacture. I had spent a very pleasant hour at the museum. I had eaten lunch. I had toured AP's new Hotel des Horlogers. I had driven over to Le Sentier to drop in on Jerome Lambert at Jaeger-LeCoultre (he was out). However, instead of getting puffed up with corporate dignity and complaining about the wait, Meylan was relaxed, charming and even mildly amused by what turned out to be a four-hour wait followed by a few minutes of photo-shoot.

But then, after a professional lifetime in the watch industry, a couple more hours should not be much of a hardship. He started during his holidays as a student. After graduating, he went to work in Cheltenham to improve his English and in the early 1970s joined Jaeger-LeCoultre. Next, he put in a spell at Cartier and, after this, came to Audemars Piguet where, two decades later, he is running the company. "Perhaps I will get a watch for 20 years in the company," he speculates wryly. "I will ask the HR department."

### Two decades

"I would say that the most important thing I did this last 10 to 15 years was to focus on an image of the company that is more worldwide than before." Perhaps it is because Meylan makes so little fuss about his achievements that this comes as a surprise, but when you give it some thought, this statement does ring true. Meylan has been at the helm of Audemars Piguet







The first self-winding tourbillon wristwatch ever in production, AP's Tourbillon Automatique from 1986, is the thinnest ever made as well, at 4.8 mm.

The original Royal Oak, as conceived by Gérald Genta and Georges Golay in 1972 was almost never made. And yet it was, of course, the watch that put AP on every millionaire's list of must-have accessories – a sort of Rolex Oyster for rich people. A little over 20 years later, AP repeated the trick with the Offshore, and again it was slow to take off. "It took two years to gain the confidence to launch that watch," recalls Meylan, "and we were still before Panerai and the others. We thought that we were crazy to make it, yet now we have to change our shirts all the time, because..." Here, he displays his own shirt cuff; convincingly shredded by the impressive ziggurat-like profile of the Offshore.

Now, of course, everyone from the Governor of California, via Jay-Z, to the sun-tanned St Tropez smoothie in his Lamborghini roadster is required by law to own at least one of these mammoth timepieces. It seems that the yacht-hopping, Cristal-swilling classes cannot get enough of Le Brassus' finest. "Our customers are travelling so much that they need to see AP the same in every part of the world." And for the time being at least, Meylan has achieved his aim, from Miami to Macau and Puerto Banus to Punta del Est: wherever there are playboys and lounge lizards, nightclubs and sports cars, champagne and supermodels, there will be Royal Oak Offshores aplenty. And Offshore chic shows no sign of dying off. The Americas Cup is revving up and with

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throughout the period of its transformation from a niche *haute horloger*, to a respected and fashionable international watch brand. Indeed, it was on his watch (excuse the pun) that the Royal Oak Offshore appeared. Even today, he affects mild surprise at the success of this oversized octagonal timepiece.

it there is a new look Offshore, which I happened to spot sketches of whilst snooping round the factory.

Advertising has been tweaked too and it is rather clever; equally thought-provoking wherever you are. Apparently abstract, each ad is a sort visual cryptic crossword puzzle. For instance, the new Royal Oak is photographed with some gymnasium equipment to indicate, albeit subliminally, that it has been working out. The grande date is photographed next to a pair of baby shoes to show that a birth is a big date. And most esoteric of all is the cockerel and wristwatch: "You have two solutions to see the time in the morning," unravels Meylan. "You buy the bird and it sings, or you buy the watch," he says gnominically, adding helpfully, "The bird is cheaper."

### Life beyond the Oak

But, paradoxical as it might seem, in between the runaway success of the Royal Oak family, the slick advertising and the sailing sponsorship (which Meylan says has introduced the Oak to a generation not even born when Genta's masterpiece debuted) there is the sense that AP's identity as one of the great watch houses of Switzerland is being obscured. "We can see it as a strength and a weakness," says Meylan of the Royal Oak. The Royal Oak may be the best known and most easily recognised Audemars, but many cannot see beyond it.

At this point, it must not be forgotten that Audemars Piguet introduced a wristwatch tourbillon as long ago as 1986, in effect prefiguring a major trend by a couple decades. Not just any tourbillon, 'Tourbillon Automatique' was the world's first automatic wristwatch with tourbillon escapement, and the thinnest to boot; so slim that it used the caseback as the main plate, enabling it to carry-off a height of 4.8 mm. According to Audemars Piguet, this was also the first tourbillon to be made using titanium – one of the more fashion-forward metals in *haute horlogerie* today. Then in the early 1990s there was the



Starwheel – a watch that indicated the time using a trio of rotating crystal discs. It was a bizarre timepiece, but in a way prefigured the watches of Urwerk, and the technology in the most recent Harry Winston Opus piece, made in collaboration with Urwerk co-founder Felix Baumgartner.

However, Meylan is philosophical about the cycle of trends and is almost pleased that others follow-up and develop the pioneering work of his brand and a handful of others. "I think we brought back the perpetual calendar about 25 years ago. It was a tremendous success, and 10 years afterwards we had a hundred brands with perpetual calendars."

Well over 50% of the watches leaving the Le Brassus factory find themselves in the distinctive octagonal case – its bezel inspired by the portholes of the 17th century 'Royal Oak' naval vessels named after the oak tree in which King Charles II hid during the Civil War. But, with exceptions such as the spectacular Royal Oak from the Tradition d'Excellence series, the most compelling watches are to be found in other case shapes. Nevertheless, one of the most remarkable facts about the current watch market is the chronic undervaluation of many AP watches at auction. Few would disagree that they are the equal of corresponding Patek

Philippe pieces, but achieve nothing like the same prices at auction. Despite a current production of over 20,000 pieces per annum, there is not an oversupply, even if the number of Offshores at the Marbella Club and Caves du Roy in St Tropez might give the other impression.

But Meylan's personal vision is a world away from the nightclubs and super-yachts inhabited by many of his customers. "For me, it is about the best in the mechanical movement. That is what we try to do. We are always working on new things to bring on the market; new ways of showing time or date or other information. This year we did that with sunset and sunrise in the Equation of Time; that is all about mechanics and something that you don't need every day... After all, who really cares about the correct length of the day?" he asks rhetorically. The answer is not so much about "who cares" as the "special mechanism."

As far as Meylan is concerned, running Audemars Piguet is about writing further pages in the brand's history. "If a watch we make does not bring something to the history of our company, then that is not a good choice of product." ◉



(Left) This year's Jules Audemars Equation of Time (SFr.94,500), showing sunset and sunrise times, with perpetual calendar and astronomical moon. The difference between true 'solar' time and 'mean' time, corresponding to the locality specified by the flange (Le Brassus in this case), is shown by the serpent hand.

(Right) Another shirt-cuff-shredding Royal Oak Offshore chronograph, in rose gold with rubber strap (ref. 259400K.OO.D002CA.01; SFr.42,500).