

Masterplan

The secrets of Maurice Lacroix and its Masterpieces' success

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Roger Federer's third Wimbledon victory (or his new haircut) may or may not have had anything to do with it, but Maurice Lacroix is celebrating its 30th birthday with some impressive sales figures. Here is a company that has undeniably upped the ante in the last five years, investing heavily in improvements to its workshops in the beautiful Jura mountains, expanding its high-end Masterpiece range, and earning a reputation as an industry leader in case production in the process. Not to mention rubbing shoulders with handsome tennis players. Whatever would the eponymous watchmaker think of it all?

(Right) This year's big release from Maurice Lacroix was the Masterpiece Tourbillon Rétrograde in platinum (€65,000). The price includes a trip to the factory, a chance to meet Roger Federer and the watch's first service (no pun intended).





But all was swiftly forgiven because celebrities certainly do sell watches, and as anyone who has met him knows, Federer is as charming as they come. "As soon as we signed Federer in June 2004, we secured premier window positions with retailers," says Mark Sutcliffe - UK Managing Director, and architect of June's wonderfully staged photo opportunity at Hampton Court's real tennis court; Federer's first ever encounter with his sport's roots. Sutcliffe also confirms that immediately after Wimbledon this year, 10 Roger Federer Maurice Lacroix Masterpiece Chronographs were snapped up, of which there were only 25 in the UK. Three had been sold in the seven months prior to Wimbledon and the final remaining 12 were bought within three months of the Championships. Maurice Lacroix has clearly garnered some serious respect in a relatively short amount of time. And this cannot have been hindered by this year's strong entry into today's vibrant tourbillon market.

Future investment

Today, the watches are available from more than 60 countries in over 4,000 retailers. Around 150,000 timepieces leave the firm's Saignelégier facility annually. Much of this growth can be attributed to a radical shake-up at Maurice Lacroix in recent years. The Swiss trading, marketing and wholesale firm Desco von Schulthess Holdings, better known for its raw-silk export/import business, founded an assembly facility in 1961, producing watches for various customer brands. Desco was also responsible for the distribution of a number of other luxury watch brands including Jaeger-LeCoultre. When a revered watchmaker named Maurice Lacroix retired from

When Roger Federer emerged on Centre Court moments after his Wimbledon win to collect his trophy this summer, the man did not stop running his fingers through his newly cropped brown hair. I could not help thinking that the marketing people at Maurice Lacroix loved him more and more every second for it - drawing the attention of the cameras so effectively to his Masterpiece Croneo-clad wrist, again and again.

A welcome contrast it was to Wimbledon 2004, when just weeks after signing a five-year deal as celebrity ambassador for the brand, Federer made the amusing (or not) *faux pas* of forgetting to wear his watch for the trophy presentation.

(Above) The Masterpiece Lune Rétrograde. Created to coincide with the company's 30th anniversary and the Masterpiece collection's 15th, this watch comes in platinum, yellow or white gold (yellow-gold model featured; £8,500). Featuring the unusual combination of moon phase and retrograde date indication along with a solid silver dial. In 2006, this watch will be released in a stainless steel version.

(Right) The Masterpiece Lune Rétrograde's hand-wound ML 104 movement, which features Côtes de Genève-decorated bridges that are manufactured in-house.



Desco, he was presented with a generous golden handshake that included naming the watch production company after him. The first model bearing the 'Maurice Lacroix' name was launched in Austria in 1975.

When the Jaeger-LeCoultre Far East distribution was sold to Richemont in 2000, it was time for Desco to invest in the future of Maurice Lacroix's position in the international marketplace. This prompted the recruitment in 2001 of the current CEO Philippe Merk, largely credited for professionalising the operation and in particular its marketing. Since October of that year, his brand - one of the few remaining independents in the watch world - has been an independent legal entity.

Serge Barabas, the factory's Manager and micromechanical engineer by trade, was brought in to update the Maurice Lacroix factories five years ago, having spent 14 years with the Swatch Group. "Maurice Lacroix is now on a par with other luxury Swiss watch brands. When I joined, I could not say this," Barabas confesses.

Just a short ride down the road from the main factory, is Queloz SA - the Maurice Lacroix-owned case factory. Acquired by the company in 1989, it is a particular source of pride for the company. As Barabas confirms, it is quite a rarity for watch brands to have their own case factory, let alone one of the most modern facilities

(Above) Maurice Lacroix's brand ambassador Roger Federer has turned out to be a canny investment for the Swiss brand, winning two Wimbledon titles, two US Opens, one Australian Open and 2005's Laureus Sportsman of the Year since signing on the dotted line in June 2004. Here, he wears the Roger Federer special edition Masterpiece Croneo (£1,995).

(Above left) Caseback view of the Masterpiece Croneo. Fitted with a refined version of the Valjoux 7750 calibre.

in the industry; a result of constant shrewd investment. Today, Queloz is routinely contracted to make elaborate watch cases for a handful of leading luxury Swiss brands - some of whom sell substantially more exclusive watches than Maurice Lacroix and who would be very reluctant to admit they are outsourcing this task. In fact, Barabas admits that companies may occasionally not even know that Queloz is responsible for their watch cases. "We have relationships with other local case factories and if they have more orders than they can manage, they pass the work on to us since they know they can rely on our reputation for quality work," he says. Indeed, completing a case at Queloz can involve up to 500 steps of work - just four of which are pictured here.

Well-oiled machine

Barabas has been instrumental to introducing many fundamental efficiency and quality improvements to the assembly factory. "Two years ago, we bought base movements and ready complications. Now we source every component individually and are committed to finding the very best suppliers for all our needs," he says. Barabas



(Far left) The limited edition 'Étoile de Mer' from the new Divina collection features a jewelled starfish pattern across the dial, composed of white and black diamonds, rubies and multicoloured sapphires. Each of the five different Étoile de Mer versions (rubies-and-diamonds dial variant pictured; £18,000) is limited to 30 pieces.

(Left) The purist Pontos line, first launched in 2004, was boosted by this year's addition of réserve de marche (pictured; £995) and chronograph models.

The Divina's 'twisted' case gives softly curved lugs and creates a small 'waist' - fluid shapes associated with the feminine 'hourglass' silhouette.

admits that the next step is for the company to manufacture its own full movement. Asked when this is likely to happen, Barabas says this can be expected to reach the market by 2007.

As far as standard mechanical movements are concerned, Maurice Lacroix has always been open and honest about its outsourced calibres, which famously include the classic Venus chronograph profiled in Issue 13. Despite ETA having declared that it will stop supplying movements to watch companies outside the Swatch Group after 2010, Maurice Lacroix had already secured the Unitas movement it already buys in, even beyond the announced deadline.

In the last two years, an entire third floor has been added to the factory, largely to accommodate the research and development team. An enormous automated moving storage system, weighing 25,000 tonnes and containing 25,000 different meticulously ordered components, is a Swiss watchmaker's dream jukebox.

Just tap in the parts you need and the 'Kardex' travels up and down the building answering requests. Other additions include machines that thoroughly remove dust not only from watch movements but also from the factory rooms themselves.

The introduction of CD ROMs in 2002 detailing watch components has dramatically cut down lead times needed to locate watch parts for repair. What used to be a department of seven people is now a department of two. The company prides itself on offering general mechanical watch repairs within eight to 15 working days and quartz watches within five to eight working days. Maurice Lacroix guarantees it can repair your quartz watch for up to 10 years after it has been phased out. For Maurice Lacroix's Masterpiece watches, this guarantee extends to 20 years after the watch has been discontinued.

Premier league

Maurice Lacroix's core business is based on the Masterpiece



collection, which celebrates its 15th anniversary alongside the brand's 30th this year. Classical timepieces with mechanical movements, they all feature sapphire crystal casebacks, hand decorated bridges, blued screws, sterling silver base dials and come with certification of extensive testing for water resistance and timekeeping in different positions.

The most exclusive piece in the Masterpiece collection is the new Masterpiece Tourbillon Rétrograde. Indeed, Maurice Lacroix watches are notably partial to retrograde complications. Launched at Baselworld this year, the Tourbillon Rétrograde is in a limited edition of 30 and has retrograde date and power reserve indicators balancing the curves of the tourbillon carriage below. At £65,000, this watch also buys you the opportunity to meet Roger Federer and to visit the Maurice Lacroix workshops in Saignelégier. Maurice Lacroix will also throw-in the watch's first service, said to amount to approximately £3,000.

Alongside the tourbillon, this year's other big launch from Maurice Lacroix commemorates its 30th anniversary, successfully combining what are probably its two favourite complications in one watch - the moonphase and retrograde indicators. The Masterpiece Lune Rétrograde, initially available in platinum, yellow or white gold, is limited to 30 pieces and interestingly features bridges made entirely by Maurice Lacroix - another hint towards the firm's impending independence.

Makeover

On top of these decidedly masculine offerings, Maurice Lacroix's other big launch in 2005 was the entirely new ladies collection, Divina. Its brand new watchcase was always supposed to be rectangular, but in no way boxy and overpowering. The designers' solution was to 'twist' the case once about its middle, to give softly curved lugs and to create a small 'waist' - fluid shapes associated with that desirable, feminine 'hourglass' silhouette.

The jewel of the Divina collection is the Étoile de Mer; a relative stunner from a brand known for its restrained design ethic.

Maurice Lacroix is a field leader in case production. Pictured are the four stages in the manufacture of the Phase de Lune tonneau case (left to right: stamping, heating, precision grinding and polishing) and the finished product (£2,600) (below).

Its dial, case and caseback sparkle with gems that wrap around the distinctive contours to form a starfish motif. It comes with white or black diamonds, rubies or multi-coloured sapphires and further limited editions on the ethereal themes of air, fire and earth are planned.

As far as brand ambassador Roger Federer is concerned, his new haircut (in case you had not noticed) is also part of an official full-blown makeover. Clearly not content with his own watch collection from a world-renowned maker, word has it he will soon be launching a collection of Roger Federer hair products. While Maurice Lacroix is commemorating its roots this year, it seems Federer is finally tending to his... 

