



Retro Appeal

Now nearing the end of its 175th year in the watch business, Baume & Mercier claims to be Switzerland's sixth oldest watch brand. Here is a company that has produced consistently classical and elegant watches for almost two centuries, but - with the exception of some big hitters in the '60s and '70s - never quite made the waves it deserved. *QP* goes in search of what sets this slow-burning marque apart from its rivals, and admires a crop of birthday pieces that cannot fail to catch the industry's attention.

Claire Adler

What springs to mind when you think of Baume & Mercier? The power of certain brand names means they have an ability to immediately trigger particular words and images in our mind. Words like sport, complications or accuracy. Or images of iconic watches or the ones we dream of affording.

Baume & Mercier is a bit tricky from this perspective. When probed about what marks the brand out, Chief Executive Michel Nieto mentions several epochal designs, such as the first ever ladies' bracelet watch, the Marquise, from 1948. "Then in 1968, we launched the Rotor Planetaire," he continues, "making it possible to create automatic watches with calendars that were the thinnest in its day. And 1971, Baume & Mercier was one of the first to enter into the electronic age, with an innovative collection of tuning-fork watches, the Tronosonic. Applying this creative, audacious spirit, we created the Vice Versa in 2004, where the importance of the jewel in many ways supersedes that of the watch," he enthuses. It could also be said that being part of the Richemont clan since the late 1980s has undoubtedly lent the brand additional cachet.

(Left) The Classima Executives Retro chronograph in pink gold, available with black or white dial, (£4,595). Along with the white-gold variant, the pieces are limited edition to 175 pieces each, to celebrate the Baume & Mercier's 175th anniversary.

(Right) The Riviera XXL Chronograph (£1,550) - a 43-mm monster reworking of Baume & Mercier's iconic dodecagonal watch from 1973, revived last year.



Re-birth

In 1973, Baume & Mercier's most iconic watch, the dodecagonal 'Riviera' was born; set for a re-birth this year, updated stylistically for the 21st century, but of course retaining its distinctive 12 sides. Sporting a 43 mm diameter dial, it is fashionably large. With 100m water resistance and a rubber strap just in case you fancy a dive, it has four black screws fastening the bezel to the case.

Indeed, for Baume & Mercier's 175th anniversary this year, retro styling and re-interpretation are firmly on the agenda. The brand's Classima Executives collection gets an overhaul, with another historical Baume & Mercier timepiece being introduced to the range - the mono-pusher chronograph, originally dating from 1948. The new Classima Executives Retro chronograph offers a nice balance between the vintage and contemporary: tachometer, oval-shaped push buttons, and an XL-size crown, just like the original version. The generously cambered Hesalite crystal is equally reminiscent of the era.

So where does this leave Baume & Mercier today? As demonstrated by these models, and Baume & Mercier's other pillar collection, the rectangular Hampton (in production since 1994), this stalwart of Swiss watchmaking has struck a careful balance throughout the modern era; a balance between providing the luxury it has always aspired to, and maintaining its highly competitive niche in the market. And as the sixth oldest Swiss watchmaker in the industry, Baume & Mercier's traditional approach to luxury still shows no sign of ageing. The watches are utterly wearable and always elegant - if not always cutting edge.

Nothing exemplifies Baume & Mercier's delicate positioning better than the brand's logo - the Greek letter 'phi'. Present on all dials and even engraved onto the caseback of the steel Classima Executive Retro, Baume & Mercier adopted the symbol in 1964. Representing the so-called 'golden ratio' of 1.618, it has inspired the Baume & Mercier designers for more than four decades. As Julius Caesar's architectural rule-of-thumb and da Vinci's 'divine proportion', it should not fail to inspire for many years to come. ○



This year, for the first time, the Classima Executives 42-mm 'XL' case houses a chronograph movement (£1,295).

The story so far...

The Baume brothers, Louis Victor and Pierre-Joseph-Celestin (pictured), were only teenagers in 1830 when, together, they registered a company called 'Frères Baume' in Les Bois - a Swiss village nestled in the Jura. From early on in their partnership, the Baume brothers had set their sights on London, while still maintaining their Geneva office. In 1847, they founded 'Baume Brothers' in the Clerkenwell area. Five years later, they were selling watches throughout Britain and in New Zealand, all the other British colonies and the Far East.

A meeting between William Baume, Louis-Victor's grandson, and Paul Mercier led to a prosperous partnership, cementing the 'Baume & Mercier' association, as we now know it, in 1918. The 'Baume & Mercier Genève' trademark was registered on 27th August 1920. In 1937, a Polish artist, Constantin de Gorski, took over and breathed a renewed spirit of modernity into the company.

In 1963, Baume & Mercier was acquired by the Piaget family, forming PBM International, which became part of Richemont in 1988. To this day, Baume & Mercier is one of 16 luxury brands belonging to the group, among luminaries such as Jaeger-LeCoultre, IWC and Vacheron Constantin.



Further information:

Tel: 020 7312 6885, www.baume-et-mercier.com