

Audemars Piguet's one-off *haute joaillerie* 'Givrine' watch, ring and earrings set, named after the Swiss mountain pass - "an ode to purity and to silence." The watch bracelet alone is set with 918 baguette-cut diamonds (68.20 carats) and adorned with 18-carat white gold elements paved with 5,766 brilliant-cut diamonds (31.44 carats). Price upon request, naturally.

Dangling the Carats

Haute joaillerie is meeting haute horlogerie with ever more dazzling results. Is timekeeping becoming redundant?

Josh Sims

It looks like a more unusual find by some adventurous geologist, or something hauled from the reef of a tropical sea. It is an entire Beverley Hills jewellers on one wrist: one 15 ct pink diamond, one 12 ct blue diamond and an 11 ct white diamond, all set on a bracelet smothered with floral patterns of yellow and white diamonds. In total, there are some 163 carats of chunky stones on this piece from Chopard. It is yours for \$25m, making it the world's most expensive watch.

You read that right. Hard to tell, but this is a functional timepiece - be it one only passingly concerned with telling the time. The bracelet's three hearts open up to reveal, beneath all this dazzelry, a dial - unsurprisingly covered in yellow diamonds. If, back in 1996, Chopard launched the world's least expensive diamond watch collection, the following year it countered with this.

Fully loaded

Quite what sort of 'high net-worth individuals' - as companies call the seriously rich - buy a watch like this

remains a mystery, or at least the subject of client confidentiality. You can be sure of one thing though: they are not using it to time at the racetrack or calculate the air remaining in their scuba tank. Yet the demand for such 'shock and awe' jewellery watches - those typically one-off pieces that take bling to its logical conclusion - is rising.

"We sell enormously expensive pieces that you wouldn't necessarily know were watches - a lot to people from the Middle East and Russia. They go crazy for them, especially the women," says Dean Harding, Manager for the London watch and jewellery emporium Marcus. Harding recently sold a 'fully loaded', all-white Frank Muller to one woman for about £55,000. Her husband thought it was ridiculous: "You can't see the time," he said. She laughed at this comment. "Clearly telling the time is not that important to them. If you want to tell the time you buy a steel sports watch or a serious, handmade complication. It's hard to pin-point the jewellery



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Franck Muller's Double Mystery sells for £37,200.

echo of its famed Tutti Frutti art deco collection of the 1930s, with its inventive combination of different stones in different sizes. Cartier's latest watch takes a delicately engraved, 60 ct emerald and adds, as its marketing material puts it, "a tiny dial. We no longer know if this precious object is a bracelet or a watch." The tiny scale of the dial only serves to make this rock look even bigger.

Likewise, its new Haute Joaillerie Declaration watch is a bracelet of moving white-gold rings, each set with round and baguette-cut diamonds, which slide over the face of the hidden dial. Or there is the stunning Panther bracelet watch: a white gold, diamond-encrusted bangle with panther's head and a dial read through a rock crystal prism. Ironically, given the cost of all the stones, both have a quartz movement - one of the costs of making the watch component so small.



Indeed, from the brands' standpoint, they are masterworks that, perhaps not all that subtly, show off the brands' craftsmanship. For instance, the Chopardissimo, as the record-breaking megabucks monster is named, took some 2,000 hours to create. Although clearly a second thought to their wearers, these pieces of jewellery also have to be designed to incorporate the structural constraints of the timepiece mechanism and - I know it's here somewhere! - the dial.

British jeweller Stephen Webster, best known for making the Beckhams' wedding rings, thinks this functionality lends some much-needed sobriety to proceedings. "Compared with jewellery design which is more artistic," explains Webster, "most watches are much more about sophisticated, often high-tech product development." He is currently working on designs for his first timepiece: an opulent women's part-precious metal, part-leather bangle watch, set to launch later this year, with a more subdued offering for men out in 2006. "Subdued because although more men will wear heavily-jewelled pieces, generally a man's watch has to look like a man's watch, doesn't it? It always has to be more functional than fashionable."

Setting the tone

While many jewellery watches are standard models covered with gems, these 'timekeeping jewels', as many in the industry refer to them, allow the companies to push the envelope both on design - such that numerals or markers are considered extraneous - and prodigious indulgence. This is where watchmaking meets *haute couture*. Just as in the fashion world's *haute couture*, customers are few, but the necessary

(Above) Launched at Geneva's SIHH fair this year, Cartier's Haute Joaillerie Declaration Watch consists of an 18-ct white-gold case set with a 1-ct solitaire diamond, and mobile white-gold rings set with - you guessed it! - diamonds.

(Left) At \$25m, Chopard's 'Chopardissimo' is the most expensive wristwatch ever made. It took 2,000 man hours and 163 carats.

(Below) This Chopard 'Golden Diamonds' watch has a case in white gold, heart-shaped and set with 355 diamonds. The strap is navy blue satin with gold clasp set with 23 diamonds.



watch's appeal, but I don't think it's about status: these people are surrounded by people like themselves."

These pieces are not just for women or Elton John, though. This year, Chopard produced a £483,000 men's watch, with a tourbillon. Like that matters. Its hands are insignificant beneath the glare of over 60 carats of baguette diamonds. Nor is Chopard alone in creating such pieces. Many of the world's most prestigious watch companies see some value in providing pieces that blur the boundary between timepiece, artwork, Antwerp and Brinks Mat...

Two years ago, Audemars Piguet created its \$2.25m Springtime Charm watch and earrings set, which came with a written guarantee that the piece would never be reproduced. This year it offers its Givrine watch, ring and earrings set for one lucky, lucky lady. Bracelet: 18 ct white gold with 918 baguette-cut diamonds and (count 'em!) 5,766 brilliant-cut diamonds. Functions: hours, minutes... and impact.

Matter of identity

"These kinds of pieces are not really about time or quality of movement, but the way they look on the wrist. They're very expensive accessories," says Steve Ramsay, Managing Director of Corum UK and no stranger to statement watches. Corum's new Debutante bangle watch and the multi-coloured, multi-cut, multi-gemstone Pot Pourri (not just diamonds but amethysts, citrine peridots, rhodolites and pieces of polished topaz) are cases in point. "It's definitely a market that's set to get bigger. Women are unconcerned about brand and increasingly into the colour and

design of the pieces, to match their clothes and look. Even middle-value brands are starting to make more ostentatious pieces, with the high street imitating them in cut glass."

But for some top-end brands, jewellery watches are a question of maintaining tradition. Piaget has its \$337,000 Resille cuff watch - a reworking of its emblematic cuff watch of the 1970s. Cartier has been making jewellery watches for 150 years (it is at least a jeweller, first and foremost), and uses them as a reminder of its heritage. The Tutti Frutti watch of 2003, for instance, was an

Diamonds are a man's best friend, according to Chopard this year. This men's LUC Tourbillon costs £101,890. Another, fully-paved model was launched this year too, costing £483,000!



Prestige

But this still leaves a key question: why do they exist at all? Why not just wear either a watch or a piece of jewellery? There is clearly demand, as these pieces sell. Typically to men as important gifts for women; women who must have everything else, including little need to concern herself with the time of day. At their most blunt, in marrying the technicality of watchmaking and the artistry of jewellery design, they are simply an expression of wealth and prestige. Hence their being made in severely limited numbers, if not as unique pieces.



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(Above) Twenty-eight diamonds form the circumference of Corum's Pot Pourri watch case. The bracelet consists of an extensive variety of multi-coloured precious stones (£2,850).

(Right) This art deco-style Tutti Frutti watch from Cartier features a 60-ct emerald.

commitment and hassle involved affords the house a certain prestige that pays off in sales of lesser, more everyday items that cost mere thousands but still send the same messages to more people.

Ground-breaking methods and designs developed in the timekeeping jewellery department sometimes also trickle down to more everyday products - as with Cartier's Declaration, for example, or Chopard's Golden Diamonds, which saw the development of a technique to allow gold to be polished and faceted to mimic gemstones. Fitting its golden gem with a dial added more challenges to overcome. Finding it once fitted may

prove another challenge altogether. ○