

Venus

The classic column-wheel lives on

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For those in love with vintage chronographs, it is the most beautiful movement ever made – apt, considering its namesake is the Roman Goddess of Love and Beauty. Today, connoisseurs are rediscovering the calibre that best epitomises the classic column-wheel chronograph. *QP* traces the Venus movement's various incarnations since the 1930s and suggests where one can find it nowadays, despite the firm's discontinuation in 1966.

Developed in Switzerland, the two-button wrist chronograph was the magic product that restored the Swiss watch industry to health after its collapse in the early 1930s.

It was the essential accessory for the age of piston-driven speed. Tazio Nuvolari set the pace of the decade when he drove his supercharged six-cylinder Alfa Romeo to victory in the 1930 Mille Miglia, at a record-breaking average of one mile per minute. The following year, hundreds of thousands watched F/Lt George Stainforth roar over the Solent in his Supermarine floatplane at 407 mph

to become the fastest man on earth. The chronograph remained popular in the forties as the 'officer's watch' of World War II. But the jet age soon pushed speeds way off the tachometer scale, and in the sixties chronographs just didn't look cool with kaftans, beads and peace.

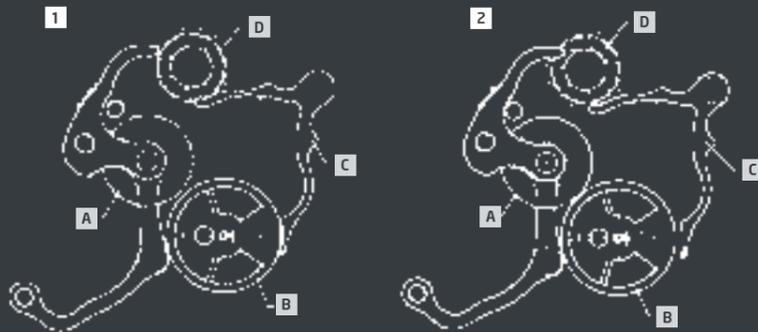
Today's chronographs are virtually all 28,800 vph cam-switched automatics. These were mostly developed in 1969, only to be immediately sidelined by quartz. It took until the nineties for them to come into their own as the young man's entry-level complication, remaining hugely popular up to the present day.

Maurice Lacroix's ML 36 calibre – an adaptation of the classic Venus 175 column-wheel movement, driving 2004's Masterpiece Vénus watches. The column wheel itself is visible at '11 o'clock'.



(Above) Line drawing of the Venus 175 movement, as adapted by Maurice Lacroix for its ML 36 calibre.

(Below) Stoppage (Fig. 1) and operation (Fig. 2) of the Venus 175 chronograph. When the chronograph is operated, the coupling wheel (A) couples with and drives the chrono wheel (B), while the brake (C) releases the chrono wheel. The column wheel (D) co-ordinates the stop, start and resetting of the chronograph mechanism.



Finest of them all

The golden age of the classic column-wheel chronograph was dominated by three Swiss movement manufacturers - Venus, Valjoux and Lémania (a fourth company, Landeron also made a large number of low-cost cam-switched chronographs). Watchmakers consider the Venus as superior to the Valjoux and Lémania chronographs, both in looks and function. The elegant 14-ligne Venus 175 series, introduced in the 1940s, epitomises the intricacy of the classic chronograph. The 178 version, with hours counter, has internal angles and pointed serifs on the distinctive Y-shaped chronograph bridge. Two watchmakers who work on Venus movements, Christophe Golay of Golay Spierer and Peter Ellis of La Joux Perret, agree that the Venus 179 split-seconds is the finest chronograph of them all.

You can tell a Venus from any other classic chronograph without looking at the movement. When you zero a Valjoux or Lémania chronograph with the lower button, you have to force the hammers down on the heart pieces. There is a definite click as the hands zero. With the Venus chronograph, a slight touch releases the action. This is because when you start a Venus chronograph with the top button, you also cock the hammer lever on a spring. The lower button triggers the sprung hammers, which fall smoothly onto the heart pieces.

Another noticeable difference with the Venus is that it has seven pillars on the column-wheel, while the other chronographs have nine. Fewer pillars mean greater leverage and more reliable operation.

The classic chronograph is the ideal display-caseback movement - everyone's image of complicated watchmaking. The turning column wheel lifts and drops levers to engage and disengage the clutch-wheel, while mysteriously shaped hammers reach across to touch hearts and send the chronograph hands flicking back to zero. It is also a decorator's dream: steelwork to profile with gleaming chamfers; points and sharp corners that can only be angled by hand; plenty of screws to blue; big jewels to set in

The guilloché-dial Masterpiece Vénus is available as two limited editions: 150 pieces in pink gold (pictured; £12,500) and 100 pieces in white gold (£12,950).

gold bushings ('chatons'). The Y-shaped chronograph bridge can be rhodiumed and Geneva-striped, gilt, polished or even engraved. The entire aspect of the movement can be dramatically altered by contrasting brushed or polished steelwork with blackened or even gilt bridges and baseplate.

Meeting the demand

But if you hanker after the traditional 18,000 vph, hand-wound, column-wheel chronograph that ticks off the fifths of a second directly to the beat of the escapement, only the Lémania CH-27 survives in production. To get it means buying a Patek Philippe or a Breguet.

The alternative is to look out for limited editions of the classic chronographs, notably from Maurice Lacroix and Panerai. Last year, Maurice Lacroix produced 150 Venus 175 chronographs in pink gold and 100 in white gold, as part of its Masterpiece collection. In 1999, Panerai turned out 20 special Radiomir watches with the Venus 179 split-seconds calibre, and in 2003 made a further 45 split-

seconds chronographs with the Venus 185. Dubey & Schaldenbrand and The British Masters have used traditional chronograph movements in a few pieces too.

Also meeting the demand for traditional column-wheel chronographs are firms like Golay Spierer of Carouge in Geneva, which makes up watches to customer order. "Watchmakers' stocks of old chronographs are going fast," warns the firm's partner, Christophe Golay. He recounts that he went to see his supplier two years ago and found his shelves bare. A German firm had bought the entire stock unseen - three tonnes of movements and parts - and had taken it away in a container. It planned to seal the container for 20 years and only then decide what to do with the contents. "Now you have to go to places like Argentina, India and Australia to dig out old calibres," Golay says.

"A Valjoux 71 or a Venus 175 kit cannot be had for under SFr.1,000 today," he continues. "Finished and adjusted, it sells for around SFr.6,500." A custom-made

chronograph with a display caseback will cost at least SFr.10,000 in steel - still a lot cheaper than the alternative from Patek or Breguet.

Many of the old Venus chronographs have gravitated towards Jaquet SA - a firm that manufactures complications and customises movements for brands. Following the arrest in 2003 of Jean-Pierre Jaquet (released in December 2004) the firm came under new ownership and has changed its name to La Joux Perret. The manager, Frédéric Wenger says his firm has been making an increasing number of components for the Venus chronograph as the original kits dried up. "We now make most of the ébauche, including the baseplates," he says.

Peter Ellis, an Australian watchmaker at La Joux Perret, says the Venus 175 calibre has been reverse engineered and is effectively in production, albeit at around 100 per year. He says he takes a day and a half to adjust and assemble a Venus movement. Unlike modern components produced on machines that



(Left) Based in Carouge, near Geneva, Golay Spierer is a partnership between watchmakers Christophe Golay and Emile Spierer, manufacturing watches to customers' specifications. This bicompa display chronograph from 2002 uses the Venus 175 movement. It has a silver-plated, engine-turned dial with appliqué time-markers. (Right) Its Venus 175 calibre has undergone a classical finish with circular-grained main plate, 'côtes de Genève' decoration, blued bridge screws and bevelled steel.



(Above) From 1999, a Panerai Radiomir Split Seconds chronograph in steel, featuring the Venus 179 movement, limited to 10 units.

(Right) A bare Venus 178 movement, ready for cleaning and decorating by Golay Spierer. Unlike the 175, the 178 also has an hours counter, giving a tri-subdial display, rather than bicompass.

work to micron tolerances, the parts of old chronographs do not simply drop into place. "You have to make the functions work as you go, touching up steel parts and adjusting the different tensions," says Golay. "They take a lot of time to assemble."

Heyday

The Venus factory was established in 1924, but filed its first chronograph patent in 1933. By then, it was part of the Ebauches SA holding company with rival brands Valjoux, Lémania and Landeron as the four designated chronograph manufacturers in the newly formed Swiss watchmaking cartel.

Venus made chronographs for scores of now-forgotten brands, but its biggest customer was Breitling. Most of the Premier and Navitimer models from the 1940s to the 1960s were fitted with calibre 175 and 178 movements. Heuer and Patek Philippe favoured the Valjoux movements and Lémania was Omega's supplier.

The best-known Venus chronographs include the 14-ligne calibre 175, introduced in 1940, and its derivatives, the 178 with hours counter and the

179 split-seconds. A scaled-down 13-ligne version, the 150 (152 with hours counter), was also popular as a rival to the Valjoux 88. Also in production between 1940 and 1952 was the 12.5-ligne 170 calibre.

One of the early Venus chronograph models is the calibre 140 'doctor's chronograph' with the hours and minutes off-centred at 12 o'clock and the minutes counter at 6. The company went on to make a 10-ligne chronograph, the calibre 75, but this was short-lived and is extremely rare today.

In 1948, the demand grew for cheaper chronographs and Venus responded with a series of cam-switched movements - the 188, the 200 and the 210 - alongside its column-wheel chronographs. But by the sixties, the chronograph boom had definitely had its day, and Venus closed its doors in 1966. Its assets were absorbed by Valjoux, which discontinued column-wheel production and concentrated on the Venus cam-switched movement, rebadged as the Valjoux 7730 series.

Not always the best survive. ○

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