



A computer rendition of the Chronomètre Souverain – FP Journe's new launch for 2005. Images of the forthcoming steel sonnerie are under wraps until the autumn

Pure & Simple

FP Journe's very personal pursuit of understated and unrivalled refinement

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i François-Paul Journe is a man of few words. But that is perhaps expected of a self-confessed “purist chronometer maker” and arguably one of the most capable master watchmakers of our times, who created his first tourbillon at the tender age of 25. Add to this an “approximatic” command of English and the fact he has had the builders in for several months and his economy of expression becomes understandable, on the grey Monday morning in January that *QP* chose to visit the Genevan atelier.

“What is new about the Chronomètre is that nothing is new. It returns to the functional simplicity of 18th century chronometry.”



(Top) François-Paul Journe in a rare moment away from the workbench.

(Above) The Octa Lune - winner of 2003's men's category at the Geneva Watchmaking Grand Prix (€28,560).

François-Paul Journe's watches speak for themselves. Like his personality, they are without artifice; true to his dedication to mechanical precision. We sit down shortly after lunch, a pen in my hand, the first ever FP Journe watch in his: a tourbillon pocket watch made in 1982, inspired by the work of Breguet. Not one to adorn with flourishes or overload with complications, he likes simple, efficient solutions to that eternal enigma: the perfect chronometer. From his first pocket watch to last year's tourbillon wristwatch with remontoir and dead seconds, his pursuit continues to that end, and not without considerable success: this watchmaker's watchmaker has clocked-up prestigious prizes from the past three consecutive years' Geneva Grand Prix awards, among many others.

Formative years

French born, Journe graduated from l'Ecole d'horlogerie de Paris in 1976 and after creating his tourbillon pocket watch at just 25, started to accept special commissions from the likes of Cartier, Breguet and Asprey, also creating one-offs signed 'FP Journe à Paris'. In 1989 he created TIM SA in Geneva - a partnership devoted to developing exclusive calibres for other houses. While a technically productive period for Journe, it was less successful business-wise and TIM dissolved a few years later. In 1991 however, Journe had already created his first 'Souverain' tourbillon wristwatch with remontoir, which would set the tone for all his future creations.

In 1994, while at a restaurant with a friend, he sketched ideas for four of his future models on a napkin - now framed and hanging in Journe's boardroom. Five

years later, his own watch company was up and running in the heart of the Art Nouveau industrial area of Geneva, under the banner, 'Invenit et Fecit'. Literally meaning 'invented and made', this remains the heartfelt philosophy at the core of his entire collection. The final designs for the Octa Power Reserve, Resonance, Calendrier and Chronograph have all stuck amazingly faithfully to those napkin sketches and all remain in production.

Resounding success

FP Journe was the first ever watchmaker to put a resonance system into a wristwatch (whereby two adjacent escapements naturally synchronise with each other, like two hearts beating as one) and also the first to combine a controlled energy release 'remontoir' system with a tourbillon. But despite these iconic novelties, no other purpose was in Journe's mind than improving accuracy. He compares his chronometers' performance to "bad quartz", which is fairly spectacular. "I felt that the resonance system was particularly well suited to the wrist movements that subject watch mechanisms to repeated jarring, which is detrimental to their smooth running." No gimmickry intended here then - just pure dedication to pure timekeeping.

This is not achieved through convoluted complications, but by virtue of an absolute appreciation of the elegant solutions reached by 18th century watchmakers Antide Janvier and Abraham-Louis Breguet, the influence of masters such as George Daniels and a love of simplicity gained through his travels in the Far East. Turn over an FP Journe watch and the sapphire crystal reveals clean, simple lines, uncluttered by unnec-

essary embellishments. As of this year, all his movements, or at least the plates and some of the larger pieces are made of gold as Journe considers the noble metal to be more worthy than mere brass and, in the case of rose gold, more resilient.

It goes without saying that 'COSC' certification is nowhere to be found on his chronometers. Confident in his role of precision watchmaker, Journe shuns the label. "A chronometer is a precise watch, and I don't need COSC to tell me that." So self-assured of uniqueness is Journe, that he has not even bothered patenting his resonance system, stating: "If anyone were capable of creating another one, he would be my best friend!"

Belt and braces

FP Journe has been requisitioning what was formerly the headquarters of Simba - a belt and braces manufacturer. The steady expansion is tribute to Journe's success, single-mindedly creating perhaps the perfect watch company: independent, manageably sized (43 staff and 45 sales points around the globe), with most of the 700 watches he produces each year sold before even leaving the workbench.

But it is more than workbenches filling up the building. Large, blue machines are being unpacked in the basement, which is still decorated with stencilled images of swirling couples; a memento of the building's former use as a dance academy. These machines will enable Journe to produce components in-house. Head of Communications, Natalia Signoroni, explains: "Today, our components are designed by us but created by third parties such as Jaquet Droz or Nivarox for spirals. In the future we aim to be more independent and not have to rely on anyone else, even for our spirals."

Back to basics

"Complications or precision?" I ask Journe over lunch, testing his dogma. "Precision," he replies, without hesitation. "Complications are like a man on a bicycle: load him up too much and he slows down." And this is from a man who knows a thing or two about cycling, as he pedals to work every morning on his own navy-blue 'velo' - propped up in the atelier's tiled foyer.



Back at the workshops, Journe stacks up a column of four 'Octa' variants, including a chronograph, moon-phase and annual calendar. With a stare that could bore holes through a mature oak, he asks: "What is special about them?" Adopting the Journe approach to conversation, I leave a long pause and allow him to explain. "They are all the same size. Whatever the complication - and I think two complications are enough for a watch - they must fit into this case. I permit only 1 mm for each function I put into my watches. We are the antithesis of what I call "club sandwich" watches that are now so popular in the current fever of *haute horlogerie*, stacking complication upon complication to no end."

What's new?

A chronometer and a steel-cased sonnerie are Journe's offerings for 2005. Though Journe has two watch lines - the auto-winding Octa range and manual-wind Souverain - this is the year of the Souverain. The 'Chronomètre Souverain' departs from his usual ex-centric dials but the trademark, blued compass hands, gold dial, stylised numerals, gold movement and platinum case are all there. This watch takes FP Journe into a lower entry point (previously around £7,000 for an Octa) to approximately £5,000.

"What is new about this watch," explains Journe enigmatically, "is that nothing is new. It returns to the simplicity of 18th century chronometer watchmaking." But as we all know, simplicity is often the most difficult target to reach. All chronometers in the Souverain and Octa collections house an exclusive, large four-arm

The two movements in the Chronomètre à Resonance model (€45,960) are visible through the caseback. Each oscillating balance emits vibrations, alternately serving as exciter and resonator. Both balances reach a state of 'sympathy' and beat naturally in opposing directions. A disturbance accelerates and slows the other. The two balances regain the state of sympathy, eliminating the disturbance.



Chronomètre Souverain - Technical Specs

Platinum case with 18-ct pink-gold mechanism and silver dial

Central hands, with power reserve and small seconds

32 mm diameter and 3.70 mm thickness

FP Journe calibre 1304

Straight-line lever escapement

Dedicated 4-arm balance with inertial adjustment; 21,600 vph

143 parts excluding the exterior

21 jewels

55-hour power reserve

A view through the caseback of the new Chronomètre, showing Journe's typically clean and uncluttered approach to bridge design. The double-barrel arrangement is visible, as well as the typically large balance adjusted by four turning weights. The latter's size allows greater inertial stability.

In platinum, last year's multi-award-winning Tourbillon Souverain with remontoir (a constant force delivery system) and 'dead seconds' (ticking, rather than sweeping seconds hand). Priced at €96,480.

balance. The free-sprung chronometer balance is adjusted by four turning weights to vibrate with greater inertia and stability at a steady 21,600 times per hour. The Chronomètre's double barrel provides the straight-line escapement with a substantial 55-hour power reserve, indicated on the dial along with small seconds and nothing else. As an item of pure functionality, this watch turns simplicity into an artform.

Disappearing into his office, Journe reappears with 1991's tourbillon wristwatch. Despite a lack of dial, with indicators simply screwed onto the top plate, it bears remarkable similarity to his current designs, which have lost the old-fashioned look but echo the style along cleaner lines. Journe waves his hand dismissively, describing it as "brutale", referring to its antique air and hand-made finishes. Despite having already shown three

tourbillon timepieces, he is quick to justify that "tourbillons are not my objective in chronometry. They are pretty to look at, but I have only sought to improve it; my remontoir is useful because it improved the mechanism's precision."

With heartfelt simplicity, he finally concedes, "I only make what I want to." ("Bling-bling' diamond-set Octa Divine aside - created in response to requests from the Far East for a women's watch). "I am like an old English watchmaker, who will never produce tonnes of watches." Even with the new workshops and machinery up and running, a desire to make more desk and pendulum clocks, special commissions and of course his two new models, Journe's aim is to grow to just 100 staff. By 2006, production will plateau at no more than 1,500 pieces a year; an enviable position to find oneself and, no doubt, music to the ears of collectors. ○

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