

# Bipolar

Ying and yang, black and white, old and new – the world of Montblanc Montre operates on the theory that opposites attract. QP visits its art nouveau yet ultra-modern villa.

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The first impression upon arriving at the headquarters of Montblanc Montre SA in Le Locle is that you have walked into someone's meticulously restored period house to find that most of the family have gone out for the day.

Firstly, it is practically deserted. Secondly, the waxed parquet floors, delicately moulded ceilings and sweeping granite and iron ornamental staircase are completely at odds with the idea that this is supposed to be the heart of a business producing significant numbers of wristwatches. Little do you realise, however, what is going on in the basement. Maison Montblanc, you see, is a cunningly designed

combination of ancient and modern, of which any James Bond Villain – particularly Ernst Blofeld, I think – would be proud.

You see, the substantial, gravel-covered terrace at the rear of the property actually roofs a highly contemporary, glass-sided building, in which the 50-or-so staff carry out their daily business in a largely open-plan environment. Even as you walk across the driveway to the villa's entrance, you are oblivious to the fact that you are stepping across the top of an elevator designed for the easy transit of watch components from delivery truck to workshop floor.



And, in one of those coincidences that young watch companies like to point out when searching for ways to establish links with the past, the Montblanc villa was built in 1906 – exactly the year, would you believe, that the Montblanc pen business was set up in Hamburg.

## Confused identities

What no one discovered during the course of this historical research, however, was that a watch company called Mont-Blanc had already been established in 1889, long before the Richemont-owned watch brand was launched in 1997.

Only when Hamdi Chatti, formerly with Cartier but now Montblanc Montre's 'Directeur General', started to receive Mont-Blanc watches for repair within months of the new company being established did he realise that, unsurprisingly, the name of the highest peak in the Alps had already appeared on a watch dial, albeit written with a hyphen.

"Once people discovered we were making watches, they assumed Montblanc was the same company which was founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet we had no idea such a business existed," explains Chatti.

Star Chronograph GMT in platinum (£1,700). Montblanc's Star collection was the first – inspired by the brand's Meisterstück pen.



## Maison Montblanc is a cunning combination of ancient and modern, of which any James Bond villain would be proud.

"The fact that the name was already registered meant we had to buy it, which we did for very little money as Mont-Blanc went out of business some time before 1930. When a few old Mont-Blanc watches were mistakenly sent in for repair, I contacted the owners and asked if we could have them for the company in exchange for a new watch. Some agreed, so we now have a small display of 'original' Mont-Blancs."

By a further act of serendipity, the style of Arabic numerals used on one of the early

Mont-Blanc models donated to the display is identical to that chosen for the first new Montblancs of 1997.

### Stellar cast

Five years ago, production of Montblanc watches stood at a respectable 20,000 units. Now, however, the number of watchmakers employed by the firm has grown from three to 14 and around 100,000 pieces are produced each year with an ambitious target of 200,000 already set for 2010. The range comprises the round-cased

Summit, Timewalker, Sport and Star collections and the rectangular-cased Profile. In terms of design however, Montblanc's watches owe much to the marque's principal product: Timewalker is said to have been inspired by the style of Montblanc's popular Star Walker pen; the latest diamond-encrusted Profile is based on the Bohème pen; and the original Star took its look from the legendary Meisterstück writing instrument. The craftsmanship, quality and feel of Montblanc's pens are world-renowned and this was certainly not

forgotten when it came to the watches. You would be hard-pressed to find a better example of brand essence and philosophy translated so faithfully across a luxury label.

All watches assembled down in the light-flooded basement workshops, although Montblanc Montre is not, of course, a manufacture in the true sense of the word. Being under the auspices of the giant Richemont group means the company can call upon its resources for parts and technical help. And although there is a dedicated team of Montblanc watch designers, some of the original aquarelle drawings of future models are the work of talented Richemont art directors, such as Panerai's Gianpiero Bodino.

Movements are supplied by ETA, Jaquet or Dubois Deprez to ensure a suitably high level of engineering and reliability, but Montblanc does not add any fancy detailing, finishing or decoration as the Le Locle workshops are not equipped for the so-called 'dirty work' of milling, drilling and filing.

### High standards

What the firm lacks in flash, however, it makes up for with meticulous quality control.

"If a component does not come up to standard it is returned to source, regardless of whether or not that means we are going to fall behind with our orders," says Chatti. "I trust my staff completely about that – to the point where they know I will never allow a single second-rate component to be used merely to maintain production levels. That is central to our philosophy of combining contemporary design with traditional values."

Although only top-of-the-range models such as the gold-cased Sport GMT Automatic are sent for COSC certification, all other pieces produced by Montblanc are position tested and checked for water resistance as part of a 25-point, pre-shipping examination.

Walking around the workshop, one gets the distinct impression that this is a small and intimate firm whose staff are fully committed to its future. Young apprentice watchmakers mix with old-stagers and the Montblanc philosophy of openness (hence the glass walls and lack of room dividers) contributes to the family atmosphere.

It was, in fact, refreshing to visit a watch company which is so honest about the fact that it does not make any of its own components. In this way, the Montblanc staff can concentrate fully on creating imaginative new designs and ensuring assembly is carried out to the highest possible standards.

In little more than seven years of production, Montblanc's watch range already accounts for 20% of the brand's overall output. But my guess is that it will soon be approaching the 50% share enjoyed by the company's core pen manufacturing arm. It probably deserves to be, too. ○

The headquarters of Montblanc Montre SA in Le Locle – an art nouveau villa built in 1906. In summer 2003, a modern atrium-style building was built underneath, carefully integrated into the landscape, reflecting the Montblanc philosophy of combining traditional values with modern ideas.

Featured prominently in Montblanc's marketing campaigns this year, the black-dialled TimeWalker Chronograph with black alligator strap (£1,925).



(Left) With its 'Sport Lady Jewels', Montblanc presented feminine sports watches for the first time – available in the brand's contrasting signature colours of black or white (both £4,250). In total, 136 diamonds (1.10 ct) decorate the bezel, while 11 additional diamonds mark the hours. (Centre) Montblanc launched its TimeWalker Chronographs at SIHH fair in Geneva last year – inspired by the design of the Star Walker pen. This silver dial model with brown alligator strap is a typically discreet variant (£1,925). (Right) The Lady Profile Royal Pink – 18-ct white-gold case set with light pink precious gems (£22,500).



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