

# Born Again

Venerable Vacheron celebrates its quarter-millennium

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Vacheron Constantin has not disappointed. In fact, the master watchmaker marks two and a half centuries of continuous production this year in a manner that surpasses all expectations, even setting a few precedents along the way. *QP* was granted an exclusive audience with CEO Claude-Daniel Proellochs, who guides us through the commemorative collection; a collection that includes perhaps the most complicated wristwatch ever made. We ask how these eclectic pieces reflect Vacheron's heritage and, more pressingly, what significance they hold for Vacheron's future.



When set into motion, the pink-gold sphere of L'Esprit des Cabinotiers opens like a lotus flower via 16 connecting rods, tiny sapphire balls and articulations. As the eight 'petals' peel away, a central telescopic cylinder raises the timepiece nestling at its heart.

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The new self-winding Calibre 2475 driving the Jubilé 1755 model. The 22-carat gold oscillating weight is entirely decorated.

Closer to home, Maison Vacheron Constantin in Geneva reopened its doors in December, after extensive refurbishment. Home and emblematic soul of the marque since its foundation, the Maison is located on Geneva's Île – a small tongue of land overlooking the Rhone. It was to here that Vacheron moved in 1875, from the cramped premises on Tour de l'Île to the Rue des Moulins, where the Maison has been located to this day. With the administrative offices now decentralised to Plan-les-Ouates, the museum on the first floor could be expanded, balancing the ground-floor Boutique's dedication to the present with a tribute to the past.

### Testimony to the past

A building is just a building however, and it is the products that Vacheron Constantin has created for its jubilee that are both a genuine tribute to the house's past and a signpost to the horological activity we can expect in the future. The anniversary collection is simply breathtaking and there is even more to follow in April, as new pieces in the standard collection will be introduced.

In a private interview with the charming CEO of Vacheron Constantin, Claude-Daniel Proelochs, *QP* had an opportunity to view the just-completed anniversary collection in his office whilst enjoying the panoramic view over Plan-les-Ouates and the mountains behind it.

It is quite an event to be celebrating your 250<sup>th</sup> birthday. Few countries, let alone companies can claim an unbroken history of such length. Since Vacheron Constantin's foundation in 1755, empires both political and commercial have risen and fallen. Though it must be admitted that most other institutions have faced greater risks than those threatening the watch industry, establishments within more stable industries seem youthful by comparison. Geneva's oldest bank, Darier Hentsch & Cie is a mere 209 years old, for example. Vacheron Constantin are survivors and worthy of the respect accorded to the house, not least for exhibiting such rude health during this, its anniversary year.

### Planting the seed

A quarter of a millennium ago, master 'cabinotier' Jean-Marc Vacheron opened his workshop in St Gervais aged just 25. Bearing only quality in mind, his exceptionally crafted

watches earned a reputation that spread far beyond national borders. It remained a family business up until 1819, when seasoned salesman François Constantin teamed-up with Vacheron's heirs, lending tireless energy to the marketing side of business. 'Vacheron et Constantin' soon guaranteed its place in the history books when new Production Manager, Georges-Suguste Leschot came aboard in 1839. He revolutionised watch production by developing the first machines capable of making interchangeable parts.

It is the reputation for manufacture that persists to this day, ever-evolving. Last year saw the inauguration of Vacheron Constantin's space-age headquarters in Plan-les-Ouates on the outskirts of Geneva. With Rolex's new headquarters recently finished here and Patek Philippe, Piaget and others having been settled for some years now, Plan-les-Ouates has become the new St Gervais of the Genevan watchmaking industry.

Proelochs: "For us, every single watch represents the accumulation of the knowledge that Vacheron Constantin has built up from the past."

"But what really constitutes the past for us? To me it has three sections: the manufacture, the people who work here and the customers who have believed in us through the course of time. Without these three things, we would be nothing. So this anniversary collection is our way to say thank you to all the people who have been part of the Vacheron Constantin history and have retained their belief in us, as well as a testimonial to our past, which projects into the future. 2006 will mark the beginning of Vacheron Constantin's new beginning."

### L'Esprit des Cabinotiers

All five models produced in this anniversary series are limited editions, never to be repeated. They comprise the L'Esprit des Cabinotier, Tour de l'Île, St. Gervais, Métiers d'Art, and the Jubilé 1755.

The L'Esprit des Cabinotiers is a one-of-a-kind horological masterpiece. All the various disciplines that Vacheron Constantin has mastered throughout the centuries are united here and will form the centrepiece of Antiquorum's anniversary auction on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April (see p.18). A clock with 15 complications is revealed within an eight-sectioned gold sphere engraved with a sky chart designed by Louis XV's cartographer. Opening like a lotus flower via a secret release mechanism, it is a sight like no other. From where exactly does such an idea originate?

"One afternoon at lunch," explains Proelochs, "we were discussing plans for the unique piece. I had a kind of crazy idea involving a stone base with a sphere that would somehow open to reveal a special clock. But we put it aside as being too unrealistic until another day some weeks later: the engineers and technicians had the idea of the sphere opening up like the segments of an orange. That's when it finally began to take shape."



The caseback of the St Gervais, demonstrating Vacheron's typically assiduous attention to detail and finish. One can see straight through the tourbillon cage, to the other side.



### Tour de l'Île

The pink-gold Tour de l'Île is named after Jean-Marc Vacheron's original workshop site. The new calibre 2750 required more than 10,000 hours of R&D and contains more than 834 parts. It is also a record breaker, taking the title of World's Most Complicated Wristwatch. "I know, you won't believe me, but we had no desire to break records," professes Proellochs. "That was not the idea behind this watch. Our engineers and technicians were given free range to invent, discover and express themselves. When they were finished and we started counting the functions, this fact came out." To allow space for all these indicators, even the back of the watch is used – usually reserved for a showy glass caseback.

Most remarkable to me was that every indicator was perfectly legibly and elegantly laid out, despite the sheer density of features. In addition, the entire 47 mm-diameter watch still fits the wrist perfectly, without being the least bit bulky or uncomfortable. This is clearly a wristwatch made to be worn. Only seven people in the world will have that honour though – the first of which must battle it out at Antiquorum in April for Tour de l'Île number 1.

### St Gervais

We have already had 1 unique piece followed by 7, so you can probably guess that the St Gervais will be made in 55 pieces, making '1755'. After the power reserve wars a few years ago, we now have a new reason to compete: St Gervais' new tourbillon calibre 2250 provides a record-breaking 250 hours of power reserve.

"Actually, to tell you the truth, the power reserve is much more spacious than that – but 250 was the best

number for our celebrations," Proellochs says with a smile. The platinum case houses a perpetual calendar and dual power reserve indicators. Interestingly, like the Tour d'Île, the St Gervais functions with a beat-rate of 18,000 vph – much slower than the standard 28,800 vph used for most modern watches. Many fine watches from Vacheron's past used this slower but stable rate, and many of the older generation of watchmaker admit that they still prefer it...when they are off the record, of course!

### Last but not least

The watches in the Metiers d'Art series are a whole different kettle of fish. Using the four seasons as inspiration, Vacheron Constantin unites disciplines such as enamelling, jewel setting and engraving. Powered by the new Vacheron Constantin automatic calibre 2640, four analogue apertures at the outer perimeter encircle Apollo and his chariot to show the hour, minute, day and date. Each of the 12 collector's sets will comprise all four seasons, with set number 1 also joining the Antiquorum auction on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April.

The fifth and final part of the anniversary collection is the 'Jubilé 1755'. The 1,755 watches use the new calibre 2475, with power reserve of 40 hours and a decorated 22-ct yellow-gold rotor. The simplest of all the anniversary pieces, the Jubilé comes adorned with two subdials providing the day and date, a power reserve indicator and a sweep seconds hand. Five hundred yellow-, pink- and white-gold models and 250 platinum models will be made – one of each available to bid for at Antiquorum.

Though simple, the Jubilé watches still share certain unique characteristics that will never be repeated

(Top) The unique '250<sup>th</sup> anniversary' guilloché motif is nicely illustrated by this close-up of the Jubilé 1755's dial.

(Above) The Maison's reopening on Rue des Moulins, last December. Vacheron has been located here, *en l'Île*, since 1875.

beyond the anniversary collection. Most noticeable is a case shape with specially shaped lugs, curving gently to a point. An exceptionally complex guilloché pattern has also been specially designed and executed for the dials and the Poinçon de Genève seal has pride of place on the dial in the form of a small appliqué shield. There is also a 'secret signature' microscopically engraved on the dial at 12 o'clock. All of this will certainly heighten the interest of watch collectors worldwide, already set to fever pitch by these pieces.

### Sense of pride

In the watch market, defining and consolidating your position as a brand is not an easy task. There are many key questions to address concerning people's perception of the brand and its heritage. Although having a heritage is fantastic, it can also be a burden, hindering development should one remain too 'orthodox'. Yet go too far, and people will think you have lost touch with your roots. It is a balancing act requiring great delicacy. Vacheron Constantin seems to have hit upon the ideal formula.

Even more impressive than the anniversary collection is the energy and passion of the workforce. During my tour of the new workshops on a Friday night with Pascal Brand, head of public and press relations, I saw watchmakers still at work – unheard-of in the Francophone sector of the Swiss watch industry, where everyone leaves at 16:00 sharp on Fridays. Watchmakers in the spacious workshops were grabbing my arm, guiding me to their workbench to show what they were working on. Everyone there exuded a deeply felt sense of pride in what they were doing.

With such passionate morale combined with the Claude-Daniel Proellochs' intelligence and vision, one has to conclude that Vacheron is better positioned than ever. A complete rebirth has been realised. As Proellochs says, 2006 is the beginning of a new period in Vacheron Constantin's history. Tomorrow is the first day of the next quarter millennium. ◉



Each Metiers d'Art 'season' uses a different precious metal for the case; white gold for spring, summer in yellow gold, red gold for the autumn, and cool platinum for the winter.

Detail of the Tour de l'Île's rear display. The Northern Hemisphere star chart is capped by the dials of the perpetual calendar arranged in a triangle, a blued hand in the centre shows the equation of time (the running difference between solar time and mean time) and two segments at 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock give sunrise and sunset times.

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