

# Royal Flush

Audemars Piguet devotes this year's collection to the lady, including its manly mainstay, the Royal Oak

Maria Doultou



The watch world is aware that women are becoming serious consumers of high-end watches. This year, Audemars Piguet is wooing the ladies by dedicating 2004 to *les femmes*, with its Femmes du Monde collection. In the hope of offering something to please all female fancies – if such a thing could ever be possible – this watch house is leaving no stone unturned. From jewellery watches to mechanically indulgent Millenary and Jules Audemars chronographs, the array is impressive. But what stands out from this glittering collection is that one of the stalwarts of male watches, the Royal Oak, could well be a winner with the girls.



Two Deva timepieces, each set with 311 brilliant-cut diamonds (3.25 ct). Distinctive 'roller' lugs allow graceful 'fold-over' attachment of the leather straps (left, £14,920; right, £15,360).





Restyled and lavished with detail, these ladies-only Royal Oak-ettes are not so much shrunk, 33 mm-diameter versions of the men's classic as watches made exclusively for women.

Do not re-adjust your set: the notoriously macho Royal Oak, reinterpreted for the first time for the ladies' market. The 18-ct yellow-gold case still features the Royal Oak's characteristic octagonal bezel, but diamond-set in this model, surrounding a mother-of-pearl dial (£9,230).

At our early morning meeting at the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie in Geneva last spring, Audemars Piguet CEO Georges-Henri Meylan wasted no time in getting straight to the point. "We are convinced that we missed a big part of the cake. Why not take another direction? And I am not talking about complications. I am talking about making more products for women: both watches and jewellery. This is why we are dedicating 2004 to *les femmes*."

Struggling to keep up with his quick strides, I followed Meylan towards a forest of display cases offering a surprisingly wide range of timepieces for women. This area of the Audemars Piguet stand would usually be dedicated to the firm's big-selling lines. Rows of minute, goose-neck halogen lights would normally be poised above the macho Royal Oaks favoured by the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger; complications that draw hushed comments from the watch savvy; limited-edition marvels that have retailers scrabbling for their

cheque books. A smattering of women's watches would perhaps be positioned somewhere near the back.

### Femmes du Monde

True to Meylan's word, this year is different. Not that I was disinclined to believe him, but the words 'Audemars Piguet' and 'women' had somehow not quite settled comfortably together in my conscience. But, even with an open mind, I was not prepared for the high-voltage opulence of their one-of-a-kind jewellery and watches. The ruby-set 'Armful of Flowers' watch (with matching earrings) is about as gem-heavy as a watch can get and, if you look closely through the cascades of diamonds, you can distinguish a diamond-pavé watch face.

These audacious showstoppers play a role similar to that of *haute couture*. They are the canvases upon which the house displays its design brilliance, which subsequently permeates to more accessible

offerings. These have been grouped into three collections: Dream, Deva and Myriade. Together, they form 2004's Femmes du Monde line.

The Dream collection captures the exuberant spirit of the *Haute Joaillerie* pieces. It is the perfect way to mark cocktail hour, with sparkling diamonds set in white gold. The Deva collection has a contemporary look and is not shy of colour. Tangy pink tourmalines, rubellite and pink, cognac or champagne sapphires are some of the gem options. Myriade watches have cleverly curved backs on their bold square cases, with soft-hued mother-of-pearl dials in white, pink, blue, yellow or lavender, with matching coloured stones and moiré satin straps.

### Royal treatment

Audemars Piguet clearly understands that women will not settle for what they are given, even if that gift is an impressive selection of jewelled watches to choose from. And as this is, after all, the year of *les femmes*, the firm has gone all the way and restyled some of its classics – watches that were previously considered almost exclusively male bastions of horology: the Royal Oak, Millenary and Jules Audemars.

Take the Royal Oak, which you probably thought had been through all possible permutations in its thirty-odd years of existence. Although we have previously seen carbon-fibre dials, alacrite and titanium cases, orange rubber straps, platinum, brushed-gold and skeleton models, the Royal Oak has now been transformed again, with 13 all-new models.

Restyled and lavished with detail, these ladies-only Royal Oak-ettes are not so much shrunk, 33 mm-diameter versions of the men's classic as watches made exclusively for women. Back from the drawing board, they now are full of girl-pleasing details such as smoothed corners, curvaceous hands, rippling wave-textured dials, coloured leather straps and, in some cases, a sparkler or two.

Clearly drawing on the heritage of the house, this practical and robust range could well be a competitor to the few other ladies' sports watches. It could even give the mighty Rolex a run for its money. For the moment, all the new ladies' Royal Oaks have quartz movements, but, according to Meylan, this may well change in the future: "It is a big debate,

The extended sides of the Dream collection create a tonneau outline with ultra-feminine curves. A blue mother-of-pearl dial is complemented by a blue satin strap in this model (£7,280).





The Dream captures the exuberant spirit of the *Haute Joaillerie*; the perfect way to mark cocktail hour, with sparkling diamonds set in white gold.



From the Myriade collection, this variant's square, 18-ct white-gold case is set with diamonds and pink sapphires, framing a mother-of-pearl dial and complemented by a striking moiré satin strap (£12,680).

but things are changing. One must bear in mind, however, that this is not an objective industry."

### Strings to its bow

Proving that Audemars is not doing things by halves, the less well-known but highly respected Jules Audemars chronographs and Millenary watches are now available to the ladies too. Pastel colours and smoothly shaped cases house hardcore, manufacture-made movements. This uncompromising approach should appeal to the growing ranks of horologists who are looking for beauty in form as well as pedigree mechanics.

Is Audemars Piguet making a U-turn or – as Meylan suggests – merely taking another direction? Given that this privately owned company has enjoyed a rock-solid reputation for over 125 years, surely it can expand its range without upsetting the applecart? Meylan is realistic about the role of ladies' watches at Audemars Piguet: "Men's watches will always be a bigger part of our business because our men's watches are so successful. Last year, sales of the Royal Oak alone grew by 10% thanks to the success of the Alinghi sailing team [for whom Audemars Piguet are sponsors]. So it will be difficult for women's watches to catch up as we are projecting an average annual growth of 7–10%."

Perhaps ladies' watches will never overtake men's watches at this house, but they are certainly making their presence felt – and, for this year at least, all eyes are on the ladies. Would it not be ironic if the Royal Oak, one of the world's most male watches, turns out to be a bestseller with the girls? Perhaps, after all, you can have your cake and eat it. ○



Like the Lady Royal Oak, another men's model to get the female treatment is the Jules Audemars Chronograph. Unlike the other ladies' models pictured here, the Jules Audemars retains its automatic mechanical movement, the calibre 2226.2841, with 21-ct rotor (£13,540).