

Starting Over

A reinvented Ebel sets its sights with renewed vigour

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Observers of the watch world may be forgiven for losing the plot over what exactly Ebel has been up to over recent years. It is hardly surprising, as the brand has changed hands three times in the last decade, baffling the most stalwart of followers with ever-changing strategies – sports brand, watch jewellery brand, purveyor of avant-garde designs...not to mention a canoe-load of unpronounceable Polynesian names. But now, under the ownership of the Movado Group, Ebel is once again back on track.





The lady-size Classic Wave in steel and gold, with bezel set with diamonds and a guilloché, mother-of-pearl dial (SFr.2,900). Completely re-designed in 2002 by the Italian duo Renato and Marco Scarinzi, this line is based on the 1977 Sport Classic. Its ergonomic, wrist-hugging design is iconic to the house and comes in many guises – from robust sports models to elegant, diamond-set ladies’ pieces.

(Below) The Tonneau variant of the Beluga line (SFr.9,600) – an elegant ladies’ line created in 1985 by designer Ben Chodat.



March 1st 2004 saw the completion of the sale of Ebel SA for SFr.62 million, by LVMH Môt Hennessy Louis Vuitton to the Movado Group Inc. Ebel had been bought from Investcorp – along with Chaumet – just four years before, for more than SFr.300 million. But it soon became apparent that the brand did not sit comfortably with LVMH’s watch and jewellery portfolio, comprising Zenith, TAG Heuer, Dior and FRED.

From the start of the new millennium, the management was hard at work in the valleys of La Chaux-de-Fonds, shaping Ebel to LVMH criteria: the product offer was slashed from 1,000 to 250 models; the iconic Wave watch was completely re-designed and the remaining models were revamped. New stars were launched to an unsuspecting public (including the dramatic triple-domed Tarawa and the *haute joaillerie* Gems of the Ocean range), while behind the scenes, accounts department-pleasing production synergies with sister brands Dior and Louis Vuitton were implemented.

But despite these efforts, Ebel was still failing to convince the top men at LVMH in Paris.

Identity crisis

In an interview with Europastar in April 2004, Philippe Pascal, CEO of LVMH, explained the motives behind the hasty sale of Ebel: “Our goal is to concentrate on existing brands and strengthen their complementary aspects. With this in mind, Ebel did not seem to fit in... We want all our brands to attain the summit of their class... In everything we touch, LVMH is the leader, whether it is in champagne, cognac, fashion or perfume.” Exactly which class Ebel was meant to dominate was not entirely clear; wherein, perhaps, lay the problem.

According to Jason Yorke-Edgell of Ebel UK, the house is in the “female luxury watch segment” – exactly the same positioning as LVMH’s Chaumet. As any parent knows, the best way to deal with sibling rivalry is separation, and Ebel was the one to go. Luckily, the Movado Group saw the potential of this underachieving misfit, smoothed her ruffled feathers and is now grooming her for far greater things. From the misunderstood little sister of LVMH’s high-glamour watch brand stable, Ebel has now become the grande dame of the Movado Group’s watch empire.

The nonagenarian Swiss watch house with a \$1,000 entry price, will sit above her new sister brands Tommy Hilfiger, Coach, ESQ, Movado and Concord, projected to account for 20% of the group’s sales, with annual turnover currently up by 10% to

The new Sportwave model, to be launched this October (SFr.1,950).



\$330.2 million during 2003. The Movado Group has long had its eye on this Swiss gem and by looking to Europe should further strengthen its global influence, currently firmly rooted in the US.

Fresh direction

So what greater things await Ebel? Marc Michel-Amadry, International Marketing Director, is clear about where Ebel is heading: back to its former glory; back to the heady power-suited and shoulder-padded days of the 1980s, when Ebel enjoyed huge success with its Classic – one of the ‘status’ watches of its time.

“Ebel was the first brand to be involved in sports sponsorship,” explains Michel-Amadry. “We were the first to have our own network of boutiques and our design was distinctive. In the 1990s, after the sale of Ebel to Investcorp, the perception of our brand among consumers became diluted. Investcorp geared the brand up to profitable sale by increasing the number of models and sales points. But then, under LVMH, it was one of 50 brands. Our current objective is to compete with leading watch houses such as Cartier and go back to where we used to be, returning to our heritage. The Classic line and the Beluga best represent this.”

One of the first steps taken under the new ownership was to reinstate the ‘architect of time’ strapline that was scrapped by LVMH along with their traditional ochre colour scheme. The most high-profile manifestation of the new strategy, however, is the global advertising campaign about to hit the glossies, featuring newly appointed brand ambassador, Claudia Schiffer. “We developed a very powerful new campaign, as we want to be perceived as a luxury brand. Maybe not the biggest, but certainly one of the most sophisticated and inspiring.”

A rose-gold variant of the 1911 chronograph (SFr.22,000). Created in 1986 to celebrate the firm’s 75th anniversary, this line of watches echoes design features of the Classic family with emblematic screws on a hexagonal case.



As well as promoting the Classic and Beluga lines, Ebel is committed to returning to its roots with an outstanding *haute joaillerie* collection. Gems of the Ocean occupied centre stage at its BASELWORLD watch stand. Founded in 1911 by the husband and wife duo Eugene Blum and Alice Levy, Ebel was officially recognised for sensational jewelled ladies’ watches from 1929, when Blum and Levy were awarded a Diplome de Honour at the Barcelona World Expo. Gems of the Ocean acts much like *haute couture* for fashion houses by elevating the tone to aspirational standards. Sigh at the sight of an amethyst and 2270-diamond-set Hiva Oa, but do not despair; Ebel can re-adjust your aspirations with a more modest gem-set Tarawa from their core collection. Not that men have been forgotten, but they will have to wait until 2005 after the initial pre-Christmas thrust, when Ebel will be “bringing the man back to the brand.”

Crest of the wave

In the UK, the brand enjoys a strong position: according to Yorke-Edgell, Ebel is among the top 10 brands with 70% of sales accounted for by women. Ebel is aiming to re-establish its presence in its core markets (USA, the Middle East and Europe), but – more significantly – develop further two other key markets: Japan and the UK.

Perhaps Michel-Amadry has a soft spot for London, home to Claudia Schiffer and another brand that he likens to Ebel: “We are a bit like Burberry, which lost its appeal and went in too many directions. But it returned to its roots, coming back with such a simple but amazing concept; a sexy, fresh new product, based entirely on their heritage, eliciting wonderful success.” Whether Ebel will emulate the success of the Burberry plaid is another matter, but as an initial gesture, having Ms Schiffer purring over its elegant line of watches will doubtless attract a wave of attention. ○