

Stepping Stones

Harry Winston's leap from diamonds to haute horlogerie

Claire Adler

 Now in its fifteenth year, Harry Winston Rare Timepieces has unveiled its latest, indisputably valuable contribution to *haute horlogerie*: the Opus 4 and the Avenue C Jumping Hours – watches of striking elegance and technical sophistication. But how did the King of Diamonds make the transition to rare and exceptional timepieces? The Managing Director of Harry Winston Rare Timepieces, Maximilian Büsser, explains how a fine balance was struck.

The stunningly elegant Avenue C Jumping Hours (approx. £15,050). There are only 50 in the world – 25 with a blue and silver dial and 25 with a ruthenium and silver dial.



Harry Winston's new Avenue C Chronograph (£25,030). Note the house's trademark arched bracelet attachments.

Since the firm's birth in 1920, Harry Winston has held more of the world's major diamonds than any individual, government or royalty.

It is not without reason that Marilyn Monroe quizzed Harry Winston on the subject of a girl's best friend. "Talk to me, Harry Winston," she sang. "Tell me about it." Since the firm's birth in 1920, Harry Winston has held more of the world's major diamonds than any individual, government or royalty. It has cut, shaped and polished some of the largest gemstones in history. Every year at the Oscars, Harry Winston lends celebrities more than \$200 million worth of diamonds, rubies and precious stones. But from where did this sparkling empire begin?

In the family

The young Harry Winston was unstoppably passionate about gems. Aged 12 he was charmed by a pretty green stone in a pawnshop window, buying it for 25 cents. His father Jacob, a Manhattan jeweller, cleaned the stone. To his astonishment he found it to be a two-carat emerald, which he later sold for \$800.

Just twelve years later, in 1920, Harry Winston set up his own diamond business on Fifth Avenue. By 1972, he had made philatelic history when he became the only jeweller to see his name published on a postage stamp. He had purchased the third largest diamond ever found, the Sierra Leone, weighing 970 carats. The rough diamond was cut into 17 gems (13 were flawless), at a total weight of 238.43 carats, and Sierra Leone issued a triangular stamp commemorating the event.

When Harry's son Ronald took over in 1978, he dreamed of producing a collection of beautiful and characteristically rare timepieces. An authority on precious, coloured diamonds, Ronald Winston is also a prize-winning engineer and technology enthusiast who holds numerous patents for innovations in precious metals. He longed to create watch movements and designs to match the superior quality of Harry Winston jewels. In 1989, Ronald Winston brought his first collection of time-

pieces to fruition; suitably coupling delicately set jewels with hand-crafted and hand-assembled movements. This first collection included the Biretrograde Perpetual Calendar. "The setting of a Harry Winston watch is recognisable by the minimum space between the stones and unequalled brilliance. This is achieved by the jewel setter turning the watch in his hand as he sets each diamond," says Maximilian Büsser, Managing Director of Harry Winston Rare Timepieces.

Forging ahead

With the launch of the Ultimate Timepiece collection in 1990 (which included the Bioretrograde Perpetual Calendar), Ronald Winston succeeded in launching his American firm as an innovator in the exclusive coterie of Swiss watchmakers. Harry Winston Rare Timepieces has created the world's first rhodium watch, Galatea, and the first platinum diver's watch, the Ocean.

Unusually for a firm of relatively modest size, and after just 10 years involvement in watches, Harry Winston acquired its own manufacturing facilities in 1999 – one for dials, the other for cases and bracelets. Harry Winston now conducts its own research and development, spanning product conception and design, and the entire manufacturing process, including quality control. Today, only the movements themselves are constructed out-of-house. Over 60 watchmakers in the Geneva workshops craft less than nine watches a day, according to Büsser.

Opus

In the year 2000, Harry Winston took its commitment to watchmaking to another level completely. In launching 'Opus', Harry Winston began a series of collaborations with some of Switzerland's most gifted independent master watchmakers. Each year, an exceptional, limited-edition timepiece is released, serving as inspiration for the current collection in years to follow. "Although fine watch brands have called on creators to contribute to their products before, none have worked together on an equal basis," says Ronald Winston. "With the Opus series, Harry Winston set out to rise above the issues of ego and competition to produce something unforgettable. It is the conjunction of separate DNA – the very essence of what each partner represents. The results have been timepieces that neither partner could have created alone," says Büsser.

One of the last masters in the art of chiming watches, Christophe Claret assembled each movement of Opus 4 – the latest in the series – from the first to the last of its 423 parts. Hailing from a family of musicians, Claret was more than qualified to create a musical watch. Opus 4 is a completely reversible minute repeater, which strikes on cathedral gongs. Only 20 are available in the world – 18 fashioned in platinum, one set with princess-cut stones, the other with baguettes. The 'technical' face reveals a tourbillon while the reverse 'romantic' face has a large moonphase indication with a date. The movement, which reverses the direction of the hands upon switching between each face, is housed in a platinum case set with 40 jewels. The 44-mm case is uncommonly large for a Harry Winston watch, but forms the ideal sound box for the gongs. "The Opus cannot just be a traditional watch," explains Büsser. "The very complex case construction enhances the sound and the case is crafted out of 950-points platinum. Retailers and clients have been pressurising us to craft more than the planned 20, but unfortunately (or fortunately for some), we will not. Opus pieces must remain very rare."



The Lady Premier Chronograph, which favours the current trend for white watches, combining a white-gold bezel, mother of pearl dial, diamonds and hand-stitched white crocodile or white rubber strap (£35,800).

“To enhance the sound, Opus’ case is highly complex and crafted out of 950-points platinum,” explains Büsser. “It can never be a traditional watch.”

The Opus 4, created in collaboration with master watchmaker and expert in the art of chiming watches, Christophe Claret. In this picture, one can see both the ‘romantic’ and ‘technical’ faces of the watch (approx. £223,500).



Up your avenue

And then there is the stunningly elegant Avenue C Jumping Hours chronograph, intended for men. Despite 75% of Harry Winston watches already being intended for ladies, there is no doubt there are women who will want to buy, borrow or steal one of these men’s timepieces. “In the past few years, fashion has led manufacturers to create some positively gigantic timepieces. The Avenue C Jumping Hours is a departure from this. It is an elegant man’s watch with a rare complication. The tonneau-shaped, hand-winding movement is a real beauty with its full bridges and its timelessly elegant case,” says Büsser. Without a diamond in sight, this watch is all aristocratic, understated elegance. It is crafted in platinum with a mechanical movement and curves to sit comfortably on the wrist.

Meanwhile, the Lady Premier Chronograph – part of the Avenue collection that originally launched in 2003 – sports just under 6 carats’ worth of 232 white diamonds. Elsewhere, the craftsmanship of 172 diamonds on the Avenue C Chronograph’s bezel, sides and particularly on the crown is utterly dazzling. In a frivolous nod to current watch trends, the case is voluptuously proportioned, with larger-sized stones adorning the bezel.

From the shadows

BASELWORLD also saw the launch of the remarkable Project Z1, which boasts three world firsts. This high-tech sports watch is an automatic chronograph with three off-centre retrograde indications – a radically different design that employs a material never seen before in the world of watchmaking.

Inspired by his studies in chemical engineering, Ronald Winston became intrigued by an alloy characterised by a distinctive leaden lustre. Its main component is zirconium – the 40th element, more common on the moon than on Earth. The other ingredients remain a secret. Winston named it ‘Zalium’, to denote zirconium and the allium lily.



The Project Z1 watch (approx. £11,460). As a Harvard-trained chemical engineer, Ronald Winston led a Massachusetts Institute of Technology research project into solid rock propellants, scooping two Grand Prix awards in the process. He later became intrigued by an alloy whose main component is zirconium, which provided the inspiration for Project Z1.

The Z1’s main component is zirconium – more common on the moon than on Earth.

Zalium is totally new to watches, although zirconium alloys remain common in jet engines and, given their non-toxic properties, in surgical instruments. The effect of the Project Z1’s dark, gleaming case, which retains the emblematic arches of Harry Winston’s New York showroom, is juxtaposed with a matt rubber strap. “I’ve been wearing a prototype for two years and I like its strength and lightness. It’s sure to find a place in the imaginations of watch enthusiasts and collectors the world over,” says Ronald Winston. Only 100 will be crafted.

In a manifestation of the growing trend for high-end craftsmanship in ladies’ timepieces, Büsser assures us that in the next five years we will be seeing more and more diamond-set timepieces integrating sophisticated mechanical movements. “Basically,” he says, “rare diamonds will adorn rare movements.” Which is what you could call serious luxury. ○

Further information: Marcus, 170 New Bond Street, London W1S 4RB. Tel: 020 7290 6500