

Tour de Force

Breguet's triumphant return to St Petersburg

James Gurney



This summer, the Hermitage plays host to the most remarkable collection of Breguet timepieces ever assembled. Over 100 exhibits are displayed in the opulent surroundings of the Winter Palace's Blue Bedroom, accumulated from all corners of the horological world. The Louvre, the Musée des Arts et Métiers, the British Museum, private collections and, for the first time, the Kremlin Museum have all loaned to the exhibition. QP treads the hallowed halls of the spectacular Russian complex and pays homage to a master of horology and his astounding legacy.

(Left) A major highlight of the exhibition, the Breguet No.5 pocket watch; a self-winding quarter repeater (a dumb repeater, striking against the gold guilloché case instead of gongs), with 60-hour power reserve and phases of the moon. Most of the first series of the famous *'perpétuelles'* were completed with a white enamel dial. This watch (sold to Monsieur le Comte Journiac Saint Méard in 1794 for FFr.3,600) was certainly among the few that were sold with a silver dial. (*The Breguet Museum*)

The whirlwind of activity surrounding Breguet since this most famous of Maisons Horlogeres was acquired by The Swatch Group swept into St Petersburg this summer in a style typical of the energy and passion that embodies Nicholas Hayek. In concert with the State Hermitage Museum of St Petersburg, to give it its full title, Breguet have put together a collection of watches and clocks that is simply a must-see for anyone with any claim to a fascination with horology.

The exhibition encompasses virtually the entire range of Breguet's work, from basic subscription watches to elaborate complications via repeaters, marine chronometers, tourbillons and even artillery timers commissioned by Tsar Alexander I. There are exceptional watches, such as the No.45 lent by the Kremlin collection, and Sympathique clocks, such as that made for Alexander.



The Swatch Group President Nicolas Hayek (left) and Hermitage Director Mikhail Piotrovski cut the ribbon at the exhibition's opening ceremony.

A new dawn

That such an exceptional collection should be shown first in St Petersburg does naturally require explanation. Having just celebrated the 300th anniversary of its foundation, the city has yet to assume its natural position in the order of world cities, as it sloughs off the dustiness of the Soviet era. There is currently a palpable sense that St Petersburg aims to retrieve its status as one of the great imperial cities. At every corner there is yet another palace being restored, while the Nevsky Prospekt is beginning to acquire the air of a destination to rival the Oxford Streets and Champs Elysées of this world – and it is not just the wives and girlfriends of the new oligarchy who come to shop.

Admittedly, the vast majority of visitors arrive via the Baltic cruises, but the underlying glamour of the city built to rival Paris and Rome is clearly apparent, as an emerging class of urban professionals finds its feet both economically and aspirationally. So it is fitting that an exhibition that celebrates, at least in part, St Petersburg's golden age should be staged now. There is also, of course, the attraction of the up-and-coming Russian oligarchs themselves, who have all been assiduously courted by the main Swiss watch houses.

The Russian Connection

Breguet has a special claim to the affections of Russian buyers. The great achievement of Abraham-Louis Breguet was to combine an indisputable genius for watchmaking with astuteness and vision in business. It is a mark of his particular ability that he was the preferred supplier for Marie-Antoinette, the 'Directory' of the revolutionary government that followed (after a short sojourn in his native Switzerland to allow temperatures in Paris to cool) and the court of Bonaparte subsequent to that. The friendship Breguet had with both Marat and Talleyrand was the key to this remarkable achievement, and it was mostly through Talleyrand that Breguet made contacts abroad. The charm that worked in Paris also worked in other courts around Europe – a process made easier by the

access that Talleyrand granted Breguet to the diplomatic pouches. The Hermitage exhibition includes pieces made for Charles V of Spain, the Empress Marie-Louise of Austria and William IV of Britain. Beyond Paris, however, there was one court that particularly attracted Breguet's attentions. This was St Petersburg.

When the Maison Breguet was granted a warrant to the Imperial Court of Alexander I, the city was riding a wave of prosperity bequeathed by Catherine the Great. Under Catherine's reign, St Petersburg came of age as power and influence was wrested away from Moscow; a process facilitated by the addition of some 200,000 square miles to the Russian Empire during her lifetime. In typical style, Breguet's watches were introduced to the Russian court by no lesser luminary than the French Ambassador, one General Hédouville. The success of these further contacts illustrates both the willingness of people to support Breguet and the quality of the watches that were produced under his name.

Reputation

There followed a long and fruitful presence of Breguet in Russia which was formalised with the establishment of a fully fledged subsidiary in St Petersburg with a clientele that included the scions of such powerful families as the Orlovs, Obolenskys, Galitzines and Demidovs. The extent of Breguet's dominance in Russia is all too apparent in the natural way that Pushkin equips the dandy of Eugene Onegin with a Breguet as part of his essential wardrobe.

Bonaparte's ill-fated sally against the Russian Empire meant that Breguet watches were embargoed – a situation that would have been hard to recover from, particularly given the post-war backlash in St Petersburg society for all things French. The reputation Breguet enjoyed was such that not only did trade quickly pick up following the lifting of restrictions, but that this was caused in part by the personal call made on Breguet by Tsar Alexander I, who was in Paris and staying at the residence of none other than Talleyrand.



The No.449 Pendule Pyramidale – one of only four made by Breguet. From a technical point of view, the clock is unusual for its escapement – a reliable constant force escapement giving an impulse every second. Breguet was granted a patent for this mechanism for clocks on 9th March 1798. The bronzework was done by Philippe Thomire and Nicholas Delafontaine. (*The Breguet Museum*)



An 18 ct. white-gold, limited edition of three series of 100 timepieces created for the 300th anniversary of St Petersburg, individually numbered from 1/100 to 100/100 and bearing the effigy of Peter The Great on the back (ref. 5933BB/12/986). Also available in yellow or pink gold

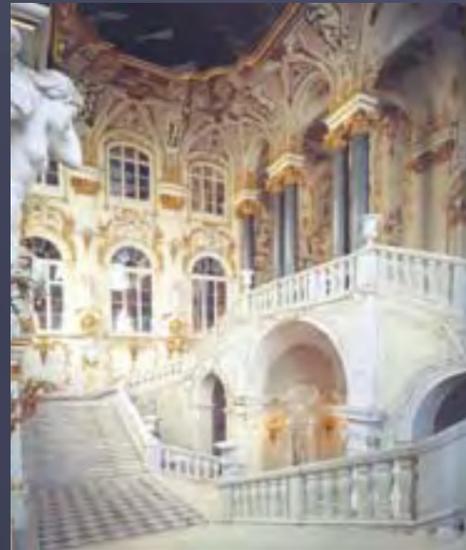


Breguet's four-minute tourbillon, the No.1188, with oil-free, natural-impulse escapement and a free-sprung compensation balance on a Breguet spring. Initially delivered with a gold engine-turned dial, this watch was fitted with an enamel dial with Turkish numerals in 1841 at the request of its owner at the time. Today it is among the Breguet Museum's most fascinating pieces, bought for almost SFr.2,150,000 (hammer price SFr.1,950,000) at the Antiquorum sale of 20th October 2002 in Geneva. Fewer than 10 of Breguet's 35 tourbillons are known to survive.

A fitting end to proceedings: Breguet caps the launch of its exhibition with spectacular fireworks over the Peterhof Gardens.



The Jordan Staircase in the Winter Palace – designed by Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli in the middle of the 18th century. The Jordan Gallery – on the first-floor of the Palace – and Jordan staircase were renamed as such in the 19th century, after the procession occurring every Epiphany Day, when the so-called 'Jordan' – a tabernacle for consecration of water and for religious services – was erected over an ice-hole in the Neva River.



The most complicated Breguet known to exist after the Marie-Antoinette watch, and the highlight of the exhibition: the No.92 'Duc de Praslin' watch. A minute-repeating pocket watch with perpetual calendar, moonphases, equation of time and dead beat independent seconds, encased in gold with gold and enamel double faces. (Musée des Arts et Metiers)



On show

Of the 150-plus watches that were sold by Breguet in Russia during his lifetime, an exceptional selection is displayed as part of the exhibition, including clocks belonging to the Tsar Alexander I, a Sympathique clock made for the Grand Duke Constantine, carriage clocks made for Bonaparte and Prince Demidoff and an imperial presentation watch engraved with a map of Russia and of St Petersburg. The undoubted highlight, however, is the No.92 watch – more commonly known as the 'Duc de Praslin' watch. This is perhaps the most complicated of Breguet's timepieces known to exist, after the Marie-Antoinette watch, which vanished in the robbery of a Tel-Aviv museum in 1983. Made in 1783 or 1765 and sold to the Duke Praslin, the No.92 watch is a minute-repeating pocket watch with perpetual calendar, moon-phases, equation of time and dead beat independent seconds, encased in gold with gold and enamel double faces: literally the stuff of dreams for any watch enthusiast.

The importance that Hayek attaches to Breguet's Russian connection was made evident in the scale of the events that surrounded the opening of the exhibition. Major launches typically involve flying journalists in from around the world in numbers depending on budget. Breguet's approach here was different, however, and reflected the company's self-image as a name apart. Breguet invited senior directors from The Swatch Group's management and brands, alongside some of the brand's more dedicated collectors (some of whom had loaned pieces for the exhibition that they had outbid the Breguet Museum for!), plus a sizeable Russian contingent and the obligatory clutch of journalists. And the sheer scale of proceedings was predictably extravagant. The grand opening was followed by a ballet performance in the Hermitage Theatre, with guests then being whisked by hydrofoil to the Peterhof Palace some 20 miles up the Gulf of Finland for dinner. Breguet's return to St Petersburg was nothing short of triumphant. ○

Further information:

The exhibition will run at the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg until 26th September and is planned to tour Europe subsequently. www.hermitagemuseum.org, www.breguet.com