

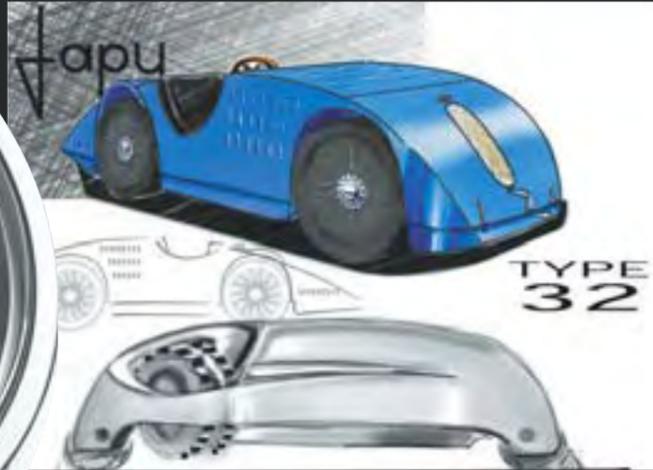
Going the Distance

Japy's crown may be quirkily offset, but will never be toppled for sheer longevity

Ken Kessler

⌚ If you are fascinated by the current obsession for linking watches to cars, Japy's story has more to offer than most. Better still, if you are infuriated by those who revive ancient horological names with absolutely no direct lineal connection, this will make your heart skip a beat. For not only is Japy one of the oldest of all watch brands – 'Depuis 1771', as it says on the ads and the watch backs – the current incarnation can trace itself directly back to Japy with no breaks during peace-time, war-time or any other time.





(Above) Early design sketches for the Type 32 case, demonstrating how its profile was modelled on Bugatti's T32 'Tank' racing car.

(Left) Changing the module of the Type 32 case.



(Left) The Modèle 08 Chronograph with silver dial. There are four other modules available for the Modèle 08: Terrestre, EoX, Alarm and Aquatique. (Right) The chronograph variant of Japy's T 08 model.

Depuis 1771

In 1768, Frédéric Japy moved to Le Locle to study the art of watchmaking with Abraham Louis Perrelet. Two years later, he learned about watchmaking machinery from Gris, opening his own workshop in 1771. By 1776, he had purchased all of Gris' machines and invented 10 more. In 1777, he opened the actual 'manufacture', thus joining pioneers like Daniel JeanRichard in creating the Swiss watch industry, capable of producing watches in serious numbers. Thanks to Japy's inventions, manufacturing was streamlined from 150 workers needed to produce a single watch down to 60.

For another century and a half, Japy remained a family-owned firm, diversifying into numerous other areas including cameras, phonographs and typewriters, eventually reaching the point where Japy Manufacture employed 6,000 people in 13 factories. The French watch brand Jaz purchased the company in 1954, but it soon felt the impact of the late 1970s' industrial changes. Jaz merged with a number of other small, family-owned French watch firms to build a bigger conglomerate. But the threat of quartz was such that the French government stepped in to find a way of preventing a crisis in Frenche Comte on the Swiss border, where most of the country's watch industry was concentrated. They asked Matra – automobile link no. 1 – to help modernise the companies.

Modern era

Jean-Paul Suchel, now the Président-Directeur Général of Japy Horlogerie et Instrumentation, joined the Matra group in early 1983, in charge of private label marketing for Northern Europe. When Matra took over Jaz, Suchel became the latter's Export Manager. Matra made the necessary investment, but by 1987 had lost interest in watch and clock manufacture, so the company was sold to Seiko, which was then acquiring historical brands. When Seiko too lost interest, discontinuing the use of the Japy name in the late 1980s, the company asked Suchel if he wanted to become President of one of its subsidiary brands. He said no, but would Seiko let him buy the rights to Japy? Which brings us to the 21st century re-birth.

The heart of the renaissance is, according to Suchel, the concept of interchangeability. "When developing the Japy watch concept, our goal was to make an instrument capable of enduring rough conditions. Here we were thinking of the toughest sport or professional activities."

Under pressure

"The watch has to be as strong as possible. The sensitive parts must be well protected: movement, crown, pushers, crystal. Material and construction must resist shocks, water, corrosion, vibrations." This heralds another car link, beyond the stint under the aegis of Matra. Japy now sponsors a number of racing drivers at Le Mans, Sebring and other endurance races, including Jean-Philippe Belloc – World Champion of the GT-FIA racing car category. Another arena in which Suchel tests the

Japy watches is deep-sea diving, with personnel from the Paris Fire and Rescue Brigade and other professional diving teams sporting the tough timepieces on the job.

Suchel says that Japy's solutions include positioning the crown in a less exposed place, protecting it behind a 'bridge' – directly cut into the case, rather than added as with other brands. A locking nut on the top of the crown avoids stress on gaskets, as with screw-down crowns and Japy fits a thick sapphire crystal slightly recessed into the bezel. For the chronographs, Japy moved the pushers to the left so they enjoy more protection against accidental shocks. Their large size and 'paddle' mount allows them to be operated easily when wearing gloves. Because the watch movements are fitted into interchangeable modules, there is a double shell of stainless steel around the movement – the outer shell filtering the shock, scratches and vibrations.

Interchangeability

Which brings us to Japy's main selling point. By making a range of watches – quartz or automatic, chronographs and alarms – in easy-to-swap modules with a selection of cases, Suchel feels that the watches become "an active part of its user's gear. Put a diving module in and you control your safety

underwater. Put a chronograph module in if you decide to focus on speed performance. And if you decide to keep the same module, you can protect it with either the Modèle 08 outer case with rubber strap when you go diving, the T08 case with leather band when you give your motorbike an airing, or the Type 32 case – designed to commemorate the T32 Bugatti racing car – for the evening. Just by 'playing around' with your watch, you take more personalised control of your perception of time. I like the idea of the Japy watch concept helping people 'relativise' about time."

Unique niche

Japy's range is an intriguing addition to the flood of massive sport watches we have been treated to over the past decade. What Japy adds to the recipe is keen pricing (a basic automatic 08 Terrestre Automatic on a strap costs only €1,230) and flexibility. Also, somewhat enticingly, Japy plans to make just 850 watches this year, so you gain exclusivity with your watch too.

Finally, should the Matra involvement, a model dedicated to Bugatti and genuine race car sponsorship still leaving you craving more of an automotive link, then try this one for size: in 1797 and 1818, two of the founder's daughters married two brothers named Peugeot. Yes, *that* Peugeot. ●

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