



Following the Cross

Vacheron Constantin's sacred past

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⌚ Obtaining an interview with Claude-Daniel Proellochs is similar to being granted an audience with a religious leader or the ruler of a medium-sized country. There is palpable tension on the morning selected for our interview. On arrival at Vacheron Constantin's HQ, a charming, but clearly worried PR man apologises for the delay, takes me on a brief tour of the boutique, offers me coffee. But before its delivery we are finally ushered into the presence of the CEO: cheerful, cigar-smoking, bearded, relaxed, and in every way different from the austere figure I had expected, Mr. Proellochs is a delight...



(Above) Claude-Daniel Proellochs – CEO of Vacheron Constantin since 1988, before which he headed Eterna.

(Right) The new Patrimony Grand Taille (18 ct. white-gold model pictured; £5,900).

(Previous page) A fine view of the new Malte Chronograph's case back. The sapphire glass shows off the intricacies of the calibre 1141 hand-wound movement beautifully.



At the helm

I have been trying to meet Claude-Daniel Proellochs, for some time. He sounded an intriguing character: Almost ascetic, monk-like and yet passionate in his dedication to the cult of the Maltese cross. Fond of classical piano music – an accomplished pianist and organ player himself – he sounded almost too cultured to be a player in the cut and thrust world of 21st century horology. However, for a decade and a half he has steered Vacheron Constantin from the unsettled period that followed fifty years' stewardship by the Ketterer family, through the company's ownership by Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, until its acquisition by the Richemont Group in 1996.

Through that time, Proellochs has gently woken one of the sleeping giants of the Swiss watch

industry, reviving dormant product lines and even putting Vacheron onto the luxury sports watch market with the launch of the Overseas. Throughout this process, Proellochs has remained something of an enigma: a special case among the swirling tides of chief executives that come and go among Richemont's many brands.

Vacheron Constantin is of course more than a mere brand; it is one of those horological marques that excites passion and inspires loyalty well beyond the norm. In that respect, and in respect to the monomaniacal pedantry with which the components are polished, movements assembled then stripped down, reassembled and tested – not to mention its own rich seam of heritage – it can be justifiably compared to the likes of Patek Philippe.

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Debt to the past

My favourite Vacheron story has a rather more frivolous tone. Told to me by my father-in-law, it has the hedonistic jet set flavour of the 1970s. He was driving down to the country in his blue Ferrari 275 GTB arguing with his then wife, when she leant across, ripped his paper-thin, white-gold Vacheron Constantin from his wrist and hurled it out of the sunroof. He stopped at once to look for the watch, but so svelte was it that he was unable to locate. Back then, if you turned a watch like the Vacheron Constantin Ultra-Slim sideways it would disappear.

More than any other watch, the Ultra-Slim, for me, embodies the very spirit of Vacheron Constantin. It was introduced in 1955 as the company marked its bicentennial anniversary. Now on the eve of its quarter millennial celebrations, the Ultra-Slim is still powered by a movement 1.64 mm in height and still has a case diameter of 37 mm. Granted it may have benefited from improved sapphire crystal and is now water-resistant, but it is still the same watch.

But rather more significantly than being the watch at the heart of the marque, the Ultra-Slim is also the favourite of Proellochs – it is the watch that he finds most expressive of the spirit of Vacheron Constantin. He says that that over the years he has been tempted to tinker with this piece in some way and attempted to do such things as enlarge the diameter of the case. But as Palladio discovered with the Golden Section, the harmony of the form was such that no change has been needed; the watch remains as it was 50 years ago, and as it will be for at least the next 20 or 50 years.

However, it would be wrong to infer that Proellochs is nothing more than curator of a museum. "There is no future without a past; no past without a future," he says gnomically, adding: "Long-term history is nothing if we do not use it



every day. What we want to do is ensure that every model has a rôle to play and contributes to the harmonious whole. What we are trying to do is to use the past but not to rest on it."

The famed Vacheron Constantin building, which has sat on a Rhone river island, simply named L'île, since the manufacture's foundation in 1755.

Nevertheless, as it prepares to celebrate its 250th anniversary Vacheron Constantin is a house steeped in history; even the location of the boutique and head office is a point of tradition. "We have been on this island since 1755," says Proellochs of their HQ's unique position on a small tongue of land overlooking the Rhone. "Tradition has a very strong meaning and it is vital for the historical side that we stay here forever."

Proellochs' mission

But history is balanced by contemporaneity, as this summer's new factory opening in Plan Les Ouates will demonstrate. It is Proellochs' rôle to ensure that these two streams – the traditional and the modern – integrate successfully. But then throughout his tenure, it has been his practice to go back to Vacheron Constantin's future, or, if you prefer, forward to its roots.



(Above) The latest update on Vacheron's '1972' ladies range – the Grand Modèle Cambré, named after its cambered profile (18 ct. white-gold variant pictured, with 308 diamonds; £12,600).

(Right) The new manual winding Malte Chronograph model, 18 ct. white-gold (£15,400) case, also available in rose gold (£14,000).

It is with the skill of a practiced raconteur that he tells the story of how Sheikh Yamani, OPEC chairman and petrodollar plutocrat *par excellence*, persuaded him to run this most historic of Genevois watch marques.

Proellocks was running Eterna in 1988, when he was called by a headhunter. For some months, Proellocks and the headhunter sparred circuitously, until one day Proellocks was invited to meet the Sheikh himself. "I was suddenly at the Intercontinental, whisked past the bodyguards and into Yamani's presence. He came to me and said 'Welcome to the family'. I said, 'I am not in the family, I will not come to Vacheron, but I will just mention to you what to do.' He said, 'Your report is very interesting – I think you are more interested than you know.' I said, 'I am happily married with Eterna.' He said, 'Are you

protestant or catholic?' I said, 'Protestant'. He said, 'Divorce exists in your religion.'

"I had full peace to do the job; he never interfered with the strategy of Vacheron Constantin. He said 'In the oil business I know everything; so do not tell me anything about that. You know about watches.'"

Character

By the time that he assumed leadership of Vacheron Constantin, the popularity of big and complicated watches was beginning to be felt. Watches which, personally, I find extremely interesting – such as the exotic pieces with tiger's eye dials and woven gold bracelets of feathery lightness and silky consistency, all of which had sustained Vacheron Constantin throughout the 1970s – were no longer enjoying the vogue they

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once had. In a way, Vacheron Constantin had become a victim of its own success, widely identified with a style of horology that was going out of vogue.

Happily, Claude Proellocks arrived in time to bring Vacheron Constantin into line with more contemporary tastes. "In the past, Vacheron Constantin had a lot of complicated watches and we have relaunched the minute-repeater of the 1940s, relaunched the chrono and 'mid-complications' including the regulator, the perpetual, the skeleton and so on."

However, he strenuously refutes the charge that Vacheron Constantin is anything remotely like the sort of brand influenced by changing fashion and passing whims. "Fashion is a word that does not exist in Vacheron's language – fashion comes and goes. Instead, it is about design; an accumulation of thousands of details. After the purchase of a watch, the customer discovers the intricate touches, little by little."

Proellocks' contention is a valid one – a fashion watch is meant to last a season or a year, whereas a Vacheron owner requires many years to fully appreciate the felicities of design inherent in his timepiece. Proellocks epigrammatically defines tradition as the "the building up of emotion." Whether it is the 30 different colours on the dial of a Mercator that need to be baked successively to fix each pigment; the revelation that the dial of the Ultra-Slim is painted to save microns in depth; the perfect polishing of each component that, accord-

ing to Proellocks, actually closes up the molecules of the steel; either way, the horophile enters a relationship with a Vacheron Constantin that deepens with the years.

"That is why we see the prices for old Vacheron Constantin in the auctions," says Proellocks, adding quickly and cautiously: "But we never say it is investment, because you would have to prove it every day and we are not a stockmarket at Vacheron; emotions remain the priority."

Nevertheless his point is made eloquently enough by the figure of SFr.278,000 recently achieved at auction by a vintage Toledo – the distinctive curvilinear, square-cased moonphase watch launched in 1952 and relaunched at last year's SIHH. The purchaser of this particular piece was Vacheron Constantin itself, for the museum.

Things to come

Indeed this revelation hints at what might be in store for Vacheron next year, when it celebrates its 250th anniversary. Proellocks is reluctant to talk too much about the celebrations planned; not just because he is averse to spoiling the surprise. "What is significant about the 250th anniversary is the year afterwards," he says, emphasising his commitment that "out of 15,000 units, each has to be a work of art. This is not just a marketing gimmick; it is a reality." And Proellocks' self-imposed mission is to ensure that this reality is the same whether Vacheron is 249, 250 or even 251 years old. ◉

White-gold Ultra-Slim – the model said to embody Vacheron Constantin's unique spirit (£7,200).

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