

Swim or

Swim

QP talks to Jaeger-LeCoultre's new watch designer about her debut creation

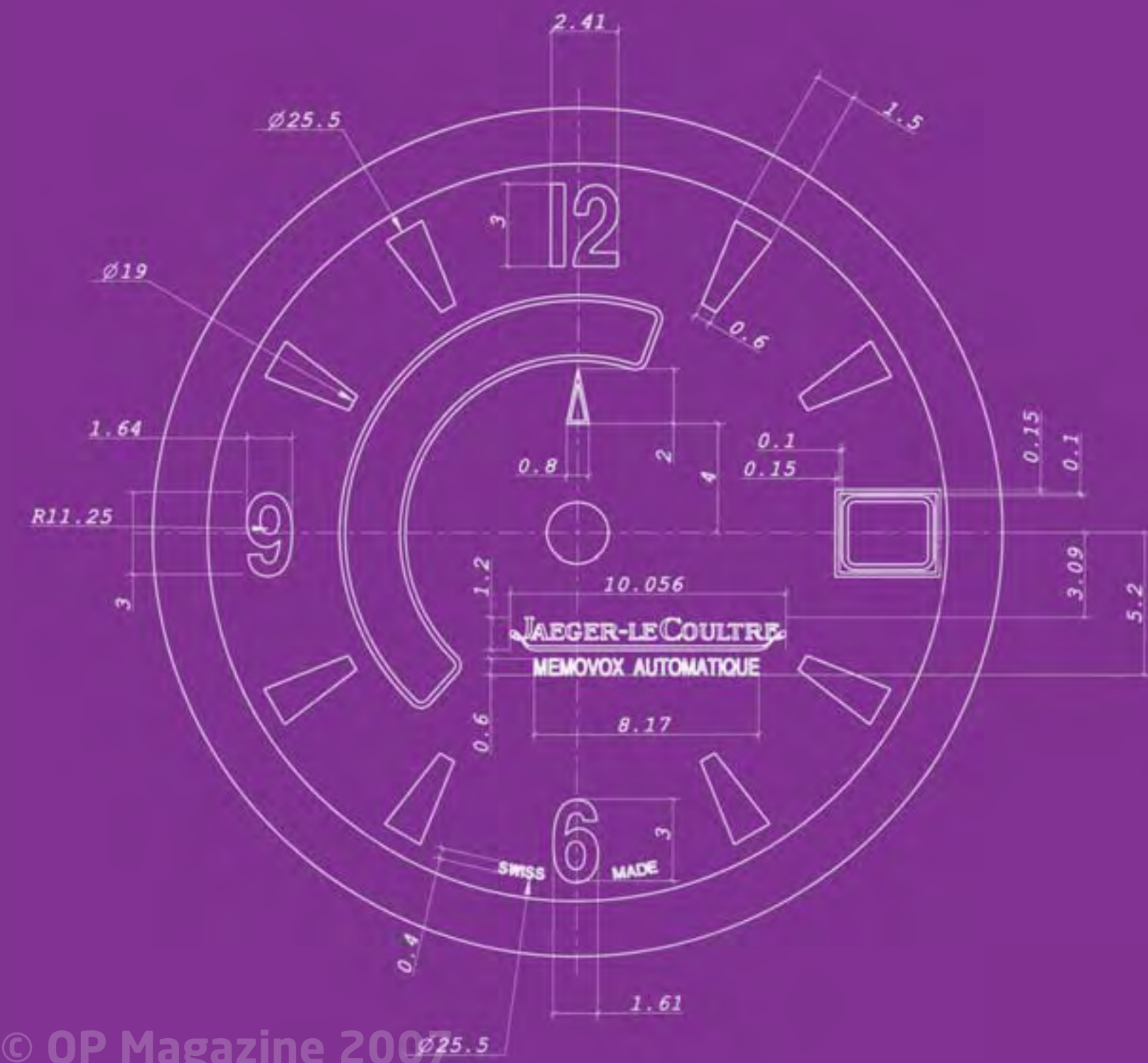


As you leave the little town of Le Sentier, writes Simon de Burton, to head east out of La Vallée de Joux, Switzerland's rural watchmaking haven, there is a prominent billboard advertising Jaeger-LeCoultre's manly sports watch, the Compressor. The few seconds it takes to approach, meet and pass the billboard are sufficient to register the chunky lines of the Compressor with its bold, dark dial and unusual compression-key crowns, but it is unlikely that many observers would give a second thought as to who came up with such a distinctive design.



Here, Jaeger might just be missing a trick. They should place beside the picture of the Compressor an equally prominent picture of its creator, who is not the archetypal grey-haired, bespectacled, possibly bearded gentleman whom the majority might associate with the making of a quality watch. Instead she – yes, *she* – is a tall, rangy, blonde-haired young woman blessed with the type of looks that advertising agencies universally believe can tempt men into parting with money.

It is probably fair to say that in the world of watch design, Magali Metrayer is unique. Just 26 years old, she is thought to be not only one of the youngest designers working in the Swiss watch industry, but also the only female in her field. She joined Jaeger almost 3 years ago, bringing with her a glowing report from Milan's Istituto Europeo di Design, one of the top design schools in Europe, and practical experience gained while working for a company where she created innovative new looks for everything from bottles to elevator interiors. Gradually drawn towards the watch world by her boyfriend, who comes





from a long line of Swiss horologists, Magali undertook an intensive month-long course in the subject and then began firing off her CV to as many companies as possible.

"Part of what drew me towards watches was the fact that I like drawing and designing small, complete objects that have a great deal of detail. You can do this with a watch, whereas with a car, for example, designers rarely have input into the whole form and usually work only on individual components."

Although several watch houses showed interest in having her on board, it was Jaeger-LeCoultre, and more specifically Henri John Belmont, a former director of the firm, who produced the most encouraging response.

"As soon as I arrived here I was totally impressed by his attitude to me and to the industry. I was impressed by the manufacture and impressed by the passion at every level of the company," recalls Magali. "There was no question – this was the place where I wanted to work."

Learning curve

There were, however, questions from some of the more traditionally minded at Jaeger, who may have been taken ever so slightly by surprise at the arrival of their new colleague.

"For one thing, they were not expecting the job of designer to be given to a woman, but what I think they were more worried about was my age. I was only 23 at the time and they thought I would know nothing about design and know nothing about watchmaking. But because I had studied architecture at the design institute I was able to understand technical drawings. When people could see that, they began to accept me."

For the first month, however, Magali did not so much as touch a pencil. Instead, she crammed up on the history of Jaeger and other significant watch brands that had developed alongside them in order to get under the skin of the business.

"I realised straight away that creating a new watch is not just a matter of drawing out a new design – it is all to do with making a new member of a family that must have its own identity and also have strong links with what came before it. It is, in a way, like renovating an old house that has obtained a character and feeling over the years as a result of the people who have lived in it and the things that have happened there," she says. "It needs sympathy."

Six months after taking up her new post, Magali began designing the Compressor, having been given a brief to come up with



a "macho" sports watch in a round case to house an automatic movement.

"I went back to the diver's Memovox of 1960, replicating the hour markers and the turning bezel housed inside the crystal. To these basic features I added the key system, used a disc beneath the dial for the alarm-setting function – I chose to do it that way because I liked the asymmetric design – and created the convex back with a design in relief, which was inspired by the Jaeger Geophysic of the '60s."

The first prototype emerged after a 20-month design gestation period. It immediately presented aesthetic problems that did not show up on the drawings – the hands, for example, had to be made fractionally longer to harmonise with the appearance of the dial – but the finished article was ready for unveiling at Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie (SIHH) in Geneva last year, where it went down a storm.

"It all made me very nervous, not knowing if people would like it, especially because it was so different to the rest of the Jaeger collection. I must admit that I was both surprised and relieved to see just how much people appreciated it," says Magali.

And how does she feel when she is walking down the street or eating in a restaurant and sees the watch she designed sitting snugly on an owner's wrist?

"If it seems that someone has just bought it for the sake of having another watch, bought it without a second thought in the same way as they would a loaf of bread in the morning, then it gives me no satisfaction at all. The really rewarding moment is when you realise that a person has bought the watch because they really like it and sees it as something extremely special. That makes me feel very proud indeed." ◉

A breath of fresh air: one of the youngest designers in the Swiss industry, Magali Mettray, with design drawings for the Master Compressor.

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