

# Thierry Nataf's Balancing Act

Thierry Nataf, CEO and President of Zenith, tells Maria Doultou what he has brought to Zenith since he joined in June 2001, as well as his plans for the future

 Thierry Nataf is a man full of contradictions. Meeting the CEO and President of a Swiss manufacture, one would expect a fairly traditional businessman. Not Mr Nataf. Although a perfect Gallic gentleman, when he meets the press he sets the tone with funky background music, a sleek entourage of marketing girls and sips a "Coca Lite avec glaçon" as plasma screens ooze seductive images of azure atolls. He describes the El Primero Chronomaster Open as a "sex bomb" and likens mechanical movements to women who never age. Not traditional watch-speak.



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Born into a French family in Tunisia, Nataf speaks Arabic, French and English. He describes his birthplace as a melting pot, which could be a fitting description of Nataf himself. He is an engineer but also has a degree in management. He loves the buzz of the big city but lives on the quiet shores of lake Neuchâtel. His background has involved champagne, fashion, retail and electronics, but now he is fully immersed in the world of watchmaking.

A Nataf trademark is that he always wears the same watch on both wrists, but each with a different-coloured dial. “I have all my dials either in white or black, so there is a little bit of angel and devil.” Using this philosophy, Thierry Nataf has ushered in major changes at Zenith that set the agenda for the future. The most dramatic undertaking is the decision to convert Zenith back to its former glory of elite manufacture of finished watches. Although Zenith have never actually stopped producing finished watches, for the last three decades they have concentrated on providing high-quality movements – notably the El Primero chronograph – to other watch houses such as Rolex, Officine Panerai, Cartier and Parmigiani Fleurier, as well as producing quartz watches. Zenith continued offering faithful followers a limited range of mechanical watches, which though technically fluent, lacked a design edge to propel them into the new millennium. When the luxury group LVMH purchased Zenith in 1999, Bernard Arnault, the Chairman and CEO of LVMH, saw the potential Zenith had to reclaim their place as “la grande maison” of watchmaking. Four years on and in the hands of Thierry Nataf, Zenith are poised to become contenders amongst the handful of prestigious Swiss manufactures.

### Reborn

LVMH’s plans are becoming reality. June 2003 marks the date that Zenith delivered their last uncased movements. Nataf explains: “Out of courtesy to our colleagues in the industry, in June 2001 I gave our movement clients 2 years to find alternatives. Now I can finally dedicate the whole team to Zenith. Nevertheless, people still call me up and ask me to sell them movements, but I say no.”

BASELWORLD 2003 showed that Zenith have already dedicated much energy to their own projects: notably, the bold new El Primero Chronomaster Open, the Grande Chronomaster XXT Perpetual Calendar (in a fashion-conscious, oversized 44-mm case) and the very first ladies’ Chronomaster Star that twinkles seductively with diamonds. With these offerings, Zenith are entering a new arena, and one that LVMH expects Zenith to be at ease in, standing proud

alongside its iconic brand sisters such as Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior and Fendi. Nataf is proving that this can be done. From the dusty cocoon of Zenith is emerging a bright new butterfly.

The El Primero chronograph movement was an obvious starting point for Zenith’s evolution. Despite the success of the El Primero at its launch in 1969, the writing was on the wall for the movement only half a decade later. A change of ownership and the decision to pursue a quartz-based mass-production strategy meant that the El Primero was consigned to history. Quartz production at Zenith continued until the start of the new millennium, when LVMH bought Zenith and the production of mechanical watches was resumed. Though robbed of its limelight for nearly a decade, the El Primero never disappeared. By chance, or, according to Nataf, the sentiment of one of the watchmakers, the El Primero tools were never disposed of. These 60 original tools are now at the heart of the manufacture. Today, Zenith are proud to offer 17 different calibres: nine El Primero and eight Elite.

With this weighty legend as an antecedent, Nataf found the inspiration to create the El Primero Grande Chronomaster Open. “I can honestly say, without being arrogant, that the El Primero movement is the best chronograph in the world, because that is what other people have told me. But what I said is: ‘What is the point of hearing the ticking of the best chronograph in the world if we cannot see the escapement?’ From the back you really don’t see a lot of the 377 pieces. Then I understood why it was never done before – because it is so difficult to do.” In order to open up the watch and reveal the intricacies of the escapement through the dial, Zenith’s watchmakers had to overcome several challenges. Turning over the movement so that the escapement – which usually sits anchored at the bottom of the mechanism – could be posed at the top, meant that the balance was altered and caused vibrations to build up in the mechanism. Without a significant redesign, the first attempts failed, as Nataf explains: “All the pieces were under such pressure that they flew into the air like a helicopter rotor, because the balance



wheel moves at 36,000 oscillations per hour.” The solution involved creating seven bridges out of a single piece of metal to absorb the vibrations. It was Nataf’s determination that forced the project ahead. “I was told by my watchmakers that it was impossible. ‘Thierry you cannot do this,’ they said, because as traditional watchmakers they worked in two-dimensional space. But thanks to 3D computer technology that turns the pieces around in space, we created the El Primero Open

The Chronomaster Star, demonstrating a touch of Thierry Nataf-inspired glamour that has added a much-needed zest to what has always been a highly respected if not ultra-desirable brand.



“Just try it on your wrist and you will feel the emotion.”

and realised a dream. I am very proud of that, but technique alone does not sell. A watch has to create emotion.” And the Open does create emotion, a feeling that Nataf likens to other sensual pleasures: “It’s like great wine; you can hear hours of talk about it, but once you pop the cork and drink, you enjoy it. People say that you have to be a specialist to appreciate Zenith, but I say that this is not true at all. Just try it on your wrist and you will feel the emotion.”

Nataf explains how he found a balance between the Open’s stylised, oversized, double-rimmed case and the delicate beauty of the mechanics whirring away through the opening in the dial. “Fashion is not something superficial for me. More than fashion, what I try to put into my work is modernity. I also like a little bit of glamour – who doesn’t? It’s good, it’s fun, it’s like a champagne bubble, which was my previous life. So it is really a matter of dosage. It’s about trying to keep a balance.” In striking this vital balance, Nataf draws on his previous experience at Thomson Multimedia, where he learnt that the way products look is as important as how they perform. “There, I learnt to marry hi-tech with emotion. Hi-tech can be very sexy, though for the last 10–20 years people thought that the TV had to be ugly.” And likewise, with Zenith, Nataf is attempting to unite seemingly opposing forces and looks to find a middle ground where glamour and haute horlogerie fuse into one.

### The future

So what next? The El Primero Open points the direction in which Zenith are heading, but the watch world is wondering

just how far Nataf will go. The test will be to see if he can walk the fine line between haute horlogerie and the demands of the more fickle world of fashion. Zenith will have to find a firm foothold on which to build their future and re-assert their identity in the ever more competitive luxury-watch sector.

Obviously, Mr Nataf is not going to unveil his master plan, but he does give us a glimmer. This year saw the first Zenith perpetual calendar; can we hope to see a tourbillon or two? Nataf whets our appetite: “A combination of tradition with a twist of modernity and glamour. I will continue the Chronomaster, the Grande Class and the Port Royal, and will play with the vintage collection. There will be more complications in the Chronomaster line, but complications and modernity can work together so we may see new complications in the Class line and the Port Royal. We want to get to a point of fusion between art, technique and emotion. I will develop some complications that will surprise people and they will be in the much more modern lines.”

The key is the emphasis on complications. Zenith have increased their number of staff to beef up their ability to produce haute horlogerie movements that promise to be bristling with complications. Nataf explains: “What I have created that is new is bringing back watchmakers to create haute horlogerie, but I have also created a watch school to protect the future. We are one of the largest manufactures, with 250 employees. When I started there were 200.” And as to whether we will see any complications for women, Nataf is unusually concise in his reply: “Yes absolutely, but I can’t say any more.” And when asked whether we can expect to see a women’s Open, a smile warms his face: “Who knows, but we will see.”

The peal of bells from St Paul’s Church in Kensington announced that our hour was up. The impression I came away with was that Nataf appears to be winning in his bid to balance the opposing forces of yin and yang, of style and mechanical integrity. Expect to see more twists to the bold and evolving designs coming from Zenith, further development of complications across the product lines and a larger offer for women – perhaps even a Ladies’ Chronomaster Open – as well as re-editions of vintage pieces. But Nataf is not singing victory yet. In his view success is ongoing: “To be eternal you have to reinvent yourself, to have enough audacity and creativity to keep going up. You have to try to reach beyond the rainbow.” ●