

# Not Just a Pretty Face

Watch houses are finally waking up to the fact that there are women out there who want more than surface. Maria Douulton casts her eye over some real women's watches



The 2003 Basel and Geneva watch fairs revealed a surprising increase in the variety and quality of women's mechanical watches on offer. And they are not merely Lilliputian or gem-swathed versions of men's models, but are watches specifically made for women. The mechanics have not been scrimped on, either.



Of course, there have always been mechanical women's watches, but over the last three decades there has been a huge abyss dividing the offerings for women and men. While ever more complicated and astounding watches were being unveiled for men, women had little to look forward to. Women's watches have simply not developed at the same pace as men's. Such was the stagnation in the women's corner of the watch universe that the unveiling of any significant mechanical watch for women was virtually unheard of (an honourable exception being Audemars Piguet's ladies' carillon). Some marques traditionally held a hybrid midsize mechanical range – usually heavily jewelled – that would be brought out at the end of presentations, described as “for our Middle Eastern market or ladies.” Managing simultaneously to knock one of the watch world's most lucrative markets and potentially 50% of your customers is not, you would imagine, a wise commercial decision.

### Changing perceptions

Following the quartz revolution in the 1970s, a few of the prestigious watch companies continued to produce attractive mechanical women's watches. Sadly, many others thought that it was not an interesting market and only produced token offerings, while others decided that the cheaper quartz was the only option for smaller women's watches. Mass-produced quartz-driven

watches came to be the only choice for what was becoming a market dominated by disposable women's watches. The saturation of the women's market with quartz reached such a point that women became alienated from the concept that there was such a thing as a mechanical watch for them. Fuelled by a rosy economic outlook and countless stories of dizzy women taking their watches back to the jewellers because they had forgotten to wind them up, the watch houses let complacency set in. But these assumptions are now being challenged as women are finding that, like fine wines and cars, mechanical watches are a pleasure that do not require a degree in mechanical engineering to appreciate.

But this has not been an overnight sensation. Over the last 5 years, the way women perceive watches has been changing as they have realised that they were missing out in something. They too wanted to have a watch for every occasion without forsaking mechanical integrity along the way, and, in an age of empowerment, found that they were not overwhelmed by the task of winding up a watch. Faced with a limited selection of innovative mechanical timepieces, women took the matter into their own hands and started to strap on men's watches. Naomi Campbell, one of the first high-profile watch cross-dressers, caused a flutter of flashbulbs when she stepped out with a colourful Rolex Daytona on her wrist. Likewise, though adamantly masculine, IWC did not escape the female gaze. The Portuguese range, fully re-launched in 1998, owes much of its success in

Italy to women. The Portuguese became the non-plus ultra watch of fashion-savvy Italian women, who fell for its minimalist lines. When the Panerai-led gargantuan trend took off, women wanted a part in this new watch chapter too. Panerai Luminors, Breitlings and IWC Big Pilots were briskly whisked off unsuspecting husbands' and boyfriends' cuffs onto the wrists of the mechanically deprived fairer sex. However, though visually appealing and mechanically correct, these watches didn't sit quite right on women's wrists. Deployant buckles meant that the strap never fitted correctly, and what to do about the gap between wrist, lug and large case that inevitably caused the watch to bang against the wrist bone? Not a sufficient setback to put off the female watch stoics, but also not ideal.

In the meantime, watch companies quickly became aware of the wrist androgyny that was taking place but were slow in deliberating how to best reap the benefits of this phenomenon. The obvious solution was to take the lead from the women who had started this trend. And now, thanks to these pioneering women, horological liberation is underway. Girls can get their cogs and rotors without having to sacrifice comfort or style. Now that it is clear that women are interested in mechanical watches, the Swiss companies have reacted in two different ways. Specially sized versions of the men's classics have been adapted for women, and women's watches that previously were only available in quartz are now being fitted out with mechanical movements. The carving up of the luxury watch sector by LVMH, the Swatch Group, Richemont and the Bvlgari and Gucci groups has also been partly responsible for the changes afoot. The new management, bristling with savvy strategists and marketers willing to question accepted wisdom and looking to bolster sales during economic downturns, saw that an obvious choice was to tap the forgotten half of the mechanical watch market.

### Women's world

A glance around the top watch brands confirms that we are indeed entering a new era of women's watches. This year Rolex have been revising the design of their mid-sized Datejust

The newly adjusted mid-sized Datejust is good news for all those women who have ever wanted a large Rolex but found that it never quite felt right.



Women are now well catered for by many of the serious mechanical watch houses. Tourbillons, quick-change GMTs and large dials are no longer the sole domain of men.



watches to better fit onto women's wrists. Although Rolex have always had an impressive equal-opportunities approach in their male and female watch offerings, the girls have long had their collective eye on the larger-sized watches. The smoothing of the mid-sized Datejust range – including the fitting of a narrower bracelet – follows similar revisions made to the whole Datejust range, thereby opening up Rolex's offering to women with four different-sized watches. Another much-welcomed newcomer is Zenith's seductive women's ChronoMaster Star, the first women's watch from this house since their takeover by LVMH. The Star's curvaceous lines are proud to reveal its thoroughbred El Primero movement through the sapphire case-back. And to go with that Ferrari, Chopard can fit you out with a women's automatic Mille Miglia chronograph in a medium-sized case, on a spanking new red strap and with a restrained sprinkling of diamonds.

Those girls lusting after a top-of-the-range Master from Jaeger-LeCoultre can now have their very own Compressor chronograph in a specially sized 36.8-mm case complete with diamonds and pastel-coloured adaptable bracelets and straps. And showing that style and mechanics can live side by side, JeanRichard were bold in offering a full-sized Grand TV Screen for ladies in this season's hot colour – chocolate brown – offset by a modest surround of diamonds. Ulysse Nardin have created one of their classic Dual Time watches for women, with refined lines, coy mother-of-pearl dials and a matching crocodile strap, while Parmigiani Fleurier's Forma Piccola combines good looks with a Calibre PF 145 containing an oscillating platinum weight.

TAG Heuer's approach emphasises the brand's commitment to providing a broader watch portfolio to women. Aware of the popularity of the Classic range amongst women, with many a Monza and Monaco migrating across to the girls' camp, this year TAG presented the first women's version of the sporty Carrera chronograph with a specially fitting deployant buckle on a luscious creamy-coloured crocodile strap and an alluring mother-of-pearl dial. At the same time the Alter Ego line, TAG Heuer's most feminine range, was redesigned to become even daintier, though the movements are still quartz. Smaller cases, refined and reworked bracelets, and newly honed lines make this range streamlined and supple. This means that TAG can develop two distinctive angles of approaching watches for women, and, fingers crossed, we will be seeing more of the Classic range adapted for women.

### Renovations

At the same time, the more traditional women's watches are gearing up to meet the demands of discerning ladies. Smaller



It is a sign of the times that even established classics such as TAG Heuer's Carrera – one of the most desirable men's sports chronographs – are being redesigned specifically for women.

watches that before were only available in quartz are now being fitted with mechanical movements. This year Patek Philippe unveiled the first mechanical version of the Twenty-4, and Cartier presented a manual-winding petit Tortue from their prestigious Collection Privée. Vacheron Constantin, almost exclusively known for their men's watches, presented the Egérie, their very first women-only range. The deliciously indulgent curves of this new range have a pedigree movement bearing the prestigious Geneva hallmark. Breguet have long been associated with women, notably Marie-Antoinette and Queen Caroline of Naples, so it is no surprise that they have never overlooked the mechanical sensitivity of women. However, they are now more committed than ever to ladies' watches. The 2003 Breguet ladies' Grande Complication with the tourbillon visible through an opening in the dial is a clear signal that serious women's watches are here to stay.

Relieved of the burden of uncertainty over whether women are really interested in mechanical watches, watch marques can now concentrate on offering both complicated and technologically advanced watches for burgeoning watch anorak-ettes, as well upgrading their unabashedly feminine ranges to mechanical movements. Vive la revolution! ○