

# Maurice Lacroix

## Masterpiece in progress

by Theodore Diehl

Having visited many watch-making companies in Switzerland over the past few years, I presupposed my visit to ML to be like any other. But the viewing of the new ML releases for Basel had aroused my curiosity – a reaction befitting any watch lover – and my visit turned out to be a very pleasant surprise and a valuable learning experience. ML's Masterpiece Collection is maturing and developing with each passing year, becoming more and more impressive as time goes by. It is clear that ML have long-term plans to enter more deeply into the higher end of the market, and they offer fantastic value for money in today's small and highly overpopulated mechanical wristwatch market.

The workshops are located in Saignelégier, directly on route 18 – a secondary, scenic road that runs between Basel and Chaux-Fond. My first surprise was the design and layout of the workshops themselves; these were the best-looking, best laid-out, and most architecturally interesting spaces for watchmaking I had ever seen. The elevators, made of glass, as well as the massive glass sliding-doors and security systems are all geared towards ease of movement through departments and to allow light to flow throughout the building, with the high ceilings and special roof vaulting supports in the watchmakers' department providing fantastic views and working conditions. Despite this Star Trek modernity, the building still retained a warm character and friendly atmosphere.

But the building itself is only a part of the story. The watchmakers have at their disposal the most modern and efficient tools and organization imaginable. This is perhaps the inner secret to ML's success story. To make good mechanical watches in reasonable quantities, and to retain

competitive pricing, you must work very efficiently. The computerized internal parts elevator, two stories high in the midst of the workshops, is amazing. The watchmaker simply types in a part number and the elevator, filled with separate trays, zooms up or down to the right section and stops in front of you with the necessary part. This device alone saves many thousands of hours that would otherwise be spent searching for minuscule parts in dark drawers, and is especially important when considering the numerous models and varieties of watches that ML offer the public. Other machines that allow the batch-testing of watches for water resistance utilize special computerized hydraulics to speed-up quality control. These, and dozens of other machines, ensure the high quality and finish that ML promise their clients.

Despite all of this technology, hand-work traditions are still held in high esteem, and computerized machines for making movement ornamentation are not allowed on the ML premises. In addition, ML are virtually the only watch company in



Switzerland who produce, own and run their own case-manufacturing facility. This allows them the freedom and ability to create models in a vast array of shapes and sizes, as well as reducing their dependence on outside sources.

#### **Masterpiece Phase de Lune Dame**

The ladies also are receiving some well-deserved attention this year, with the release of the first Masterpiece for ladies only. In accordance with the traditions of this collection, the watch is driven not by quartz, but by an automatic calibre. The diamond version proves that automatic watches don't have to lack elegance. With the dial in mother-of-pearl, four small inset diamonds at 12, 3, 6 and 9 o'clock, and 50 Top Wesselton diamonds around the circumference, this is an attractive and sophisticated piece for women who appreciate things mechanical encased in elegance.

#### **Masterpiece Phase de Lune Tonneau**

The useful ability to conceive and manufacture cases in-house could not be more beautifully demonstrated than in the new release of the Masterpiece Phase de Lune Tonneau. This is the most complicated case that ML have manufactured to date. The complex arched case gently

follows the wrist, and bears the visually strong contrast of polished and brushed steel. It appears large at first sight, but nestles against the curvatures of even the smallest wrist with ease and perfect proportions.

The movement is visible through an aperture in the sapphire back. Like its counterparts in the Masterpiece line, its dial is made of solid silver with art deco-inspired Roman numerals surrounding an inner calendar ring and moon phase. Particularly noteworthy are the hands, which perfectly complement the case design. For those interested in manufacturing techniques, the back of the watch is a wonder. A very complicated procedure was needed to enable this steel case-back to follow the lugs, arching and shape, including the see-through centre; it is a technical *tour de force*.

#### **Masterpiece Double Retrograde**

Extending the direction set out by the Masterpiece Retrograde Calendar, ML's newest creation is a double retrograde, but with a slightly different approach. The additional retrograde at 12 o'clock is used to show the time zone on a 24-hr display – a type of retrograde that can be considered quite rare. The dial layout is well balanced, with the two retrogrades at 12 and 6



counterbalanced by the power reserve at 3 and seconds at 9. The power reserve and retrograde functions have been beautifully designed in-house by ML and engage ingenious solutions to these complications.

In the power reserve for instance, the mainspring's energy level is 'read' off the central gear to an internally geared ring via a satellite gear, allowing for a simple, smooth, yet highly accurate translation of the mainspring's power supply level to the power reserve dial. This is an elegant and simple solution that lowers the usual inaccuracies inherent in power reserve indicators.

Both the retrograde calendar and time-zone functions utilize an ingenious circular-shaped spring with one 'tooth' at its end. This spring continuously tightens until it is wound enough to overcome resistance and turn the program wheel one notch. When that happens, the corresponding hand moves one position. In addition, the delicate 0.04 mm helical resetting spring gets literally wound in the fashion of a mainspring. This occurs with each progression of the program wheel. Look carefully, and you can see that the program wheel has three teeth missing. By the time these have gone full circle, the helical spring is at its maximum wind, there are no teeth in the way to limit the

hands' movement, and *voilà*, the hands return to 1 and the springs are fully relaxed again.

## Owning and running their own case-manufacturing facility allows Maurice Lacroix the freedom and ability to create a vast array of models

This very attractive watch will be available in either a limited edition of 99 pieces in platinum with intricate guilloché bezel, or in a numbered 18 ct. rose-gold edition. The ML 100 movement, based on the tried and true Uitas 6497-1, with 50 jewels, blued steel screws, polished escapement and Nivaflex-1 and Nivarox-1 main and balance springs, is perfectly finished and beautiful to see.

#### **More to come**

One thing is for sure: ML are working hard to produce fine products with special qualities and functions to attract the attention of the watch lover – and it is clear that they are succeeding in their goals. Keep your eyes on the Masterpiece Collection in coming years – there's a lot more to come from ML! ◊