

{STYLE}

On Your Own Time

Vacheron Constantin's Atelier Cabinotiers lets you create the perfect timepiece. | By Laurie Kahle



A Royal Design

One of the most intricate pocket watches ever sold by Vacheron is this one commissioned by King Farouk of Egypt.

"EVENTUALLY, YOU REACH A POINT WHEN YOU WANT WHAT others don't have," says Dominique Bernaz, director of Vacheron Constantin's Atelier Cabinotiers special-order division. The watchmaker established the department at the start of 2007 to cater to growing demand for unique timepieces.

Sitting at his desk in the Maison—the landmark Geneva building on the Quai de L'Ile, where the company moved in 1875—Bernaz studies pages awash in old-world calligraphy. As he deciphers the words, he flips through several leather-bound books, some dating to the 18th century. The archival volumes detail every aspect of the manufacture of individual Vacheron watches.

Personalised manufacturing was customary in the pre-industrialised age when every timepiece was handmade for a particular client. Vacheron has always produced custom watches for elite collectors, such as King Fuad I of Egypt. In 1929, the Swiss community in Egypt commissioned Vacheron to produce a timepiece to present to the king. The yellow gold chronograph included several technologically advanced complications including a split-seconds chronograph, a *petite sonnerie* (a musical watch that chimes the quarter hours), a *grande sonnerie à minutes* (which chimes hours, quarters and minutes with three-note gongs), a perpetual calendar and moon phase display. Vacheron's top enameller embellished the case with the royal arms.

"Historically, the watches that companies made for kings and queens were very different from even their best production models—they were pieces of art," explains Osvaldo Patrizzi, president and chief executive officer of Patrizzi & Co. auctioneers. "Today, it's much the same—the things they make for powerful customers are still works of art."

Demand for custom pieces started to wane in the 1960s and '70s, when the quartz crisis decimated mechanical watchmaking. Remarkably, there was a resurrection, and as the industry experienced explosive growth at the turn of the 21st century, top-tier manufacturers observed a surge in custom requests. "It's really a return to the roots of luxury," says Bernaz.

Bernaz meets with clients in the Maison, but custom service counsel is also available through Vacheron's international boutiques and dealer network. A team of specialists is dedicated to fulfilling client requests, which range from simple alterations to existing models to very technical projects with original movements,

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some of which are so complex they can require years of dedicated research and development.

Though Vacheron maintains a policy of strict confidentiality, it has been reported that a European tycoon has commissioned a \$6.5 million watch that will exceed even Vacheron's benchmark \$1.5 million Tour de l'Île. Produced to mark the brand's 250th anniversary in 2005, the Tour de l'Île is the most complicated wristwatch that Vacheron has ever made.

"Ideally, they want to do something spectacular for very prestigious customers," says Patrizzi, who notes that Vacheron can employ the Tour de l'Île's base movement to create multimillion-dollar unique pieces for collectors.

"Our job is to come up with the proposition," says Bernaz. "First we talk, then we sketch, then we move to 3-D computer designs, after which we set up the cost model and progress to the manufacturing phase." But do note that a wait time of one to two years for simple pieces and up to six years for projects that involve designing and developing a movement may be involved.

A tour of Vacheron's *manufacture* on the outskirts of Geneva offers a glimpse into the time-consuming process. Here, the watches are assembled, tested and finished. According to Rudolf Bull, Vacheron's expert master watchmaker, every movement is checked at least five times before it leaves the factory, and complicated movements require up to two months of testing before being released to the market. The watchmaker who seals the mechanism in its case is personally responsible for any problems that occur within the first two years.

Set apart from the technical departments is a ground-floor workshop dedicated to *métiers d'art*, the intricate decorative



Waiting for Time

The world's most complex watch, Tour de l'Île, required more than 10,000 hours of research and development.

techniques that include enameling, engraving and gem-setting. Vacheron has a long legacy in these disciplines, which are frequently applied to custom commissions. As an example, Bernaz presents an early 1920s pocket watch commissioned by then-technical director Mr. Grandjean. The watch is embellished with an enamel painting on the case back depicting *Les Bergers d'Arcadie*, a painting by Nicolas Poussin. The double back cover is engraved with a pastoral symphony theme, and the fully decorated movement includes a barrel-bar engraved with angels and a dedication on the casing ring.

Though watchmaking's *métiers* are centuries old, they have been experiencing a renaissance in recent years. Last year, Vacheron added to its limited-edition Mercator collection, which pays homage to famous explorers with enamel-painted dials depicting colourful maps. It also recently unveiled its final set of Masques, a limited series that faithfully replicates tribal masks from Geneva's Barbier-Mueller Museum on the dials.

Watch enthusiasts covet such esoteric models because of their rarity. "In an era where we have witnessed a saturation of limited editions, a unique piece made just for you is very appealing to collectors," says William Lind, the Boston-area moderator of the Vacheron Constantin forum for PuristSPro (www.watchprosite.com), who at one time owned more than 30 Vacheron watches. "It's the ultimate expression of a limited edition—it's a limited edition of one." www.vacheron-constantin.com
4MORE go to FourSeasonsMagazine.com and search "custom watches" for custom programmes at other watchmakers.

Laurie Kahle is a Boston-based writer and editor with a particular fascination for mechanical watchmaking and its complications.