



CREATING PERFECTION

*One of the greatest watchmakers of our time
teaches us watch-making perfection!*

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CONSTANTIN STIKAS: *What does watch-making mean to you?*

PHILIPPE DUFOUR: It's passion, it's madness but at the same time, it is also my hobby.



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In watch-making today, in which proportion do you find art, invention and marketing?

Very little art remains, a bit of invention and a lot of marketing...



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Do you think everything has already been invented in watch-making?

Well, not everything but almost everything. If you take all the complications that we have seen evolving over the last years, all are known principles that are today adapted to a different scale. If we take tourbillons, for example, and even some escapements that are given new staggering names, if you look at them closely, these are escapements dating back to 1750-1800.

But today, there is nothing truly new? Not even the Co-Axial?

The example of the Co-Axial is an invention. It is the exception which proves the rule, I have nothing truly new to add to the list.

Who are your ancestors from the watch-making family and who are your masters?

I had my masters at the Watch-making School but I mainly met a man called Gabriel Locatelli who was my first colleague in a company; I learned a lot with him at Jaeger-LeCoultre. My sources of inspiration for my products very often come from what used to be manufactured in the Vallée de Joux during 1850-1920: Frédéric Piguet, the Aubert brothers, LeCoultre himself created beautiful movements at that time. I get my inspiration from there.

Is watch-making in the Vallée de Joux different from the one in the rest of the world?



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Yes, because to start with, there is an aesthetic tradition for watches. If you consider most of the pocket watches dating from 1850-1920, of beautiful make, out of the ten Minute Repeaters that are sold in auction, seven originate from this region. Even if you consider a Lange & Söhne from 1890, the movement-blanc came from the Vallée de Joux. The same goes for Dent or J. W. Benson in London. In the Vallée de Joux, we used to manufacture three styles of complications: there was the Swiss style with separated bridges, the English style with the English $\frac{3}{4}$ plate movement and there was the German style with the German $\frac{3}{4}$ plate movement.

You have worked a lot in pocket watch restoration from that period. Which of these watches impressed you the most?

Yes, I worked many years and I came across many Minute Repeater pocket watches before starting to work independently. I did many restorations for an organisation that used to be called the "Galerie d'Horlogerie Ancienne", and eventually became the well-known Auction House Antiquorum which belonged to Osvaldo Patrizzi and Gabriel Tortella, both Italian. Among the watches I repaired I was very impressed by a pair of Grande Sonnerie that had been manufactured for the market of India and delivered to Bombay. These pieces were significant as far the case was concerned with pearls and emeralds. They were a true masterpiece.

After creating very complicated watches like the Grande Sonnerie or the Duality, you surprised us with a "simple" watch, with hour, minutes and seconds, but with an outstanding definition and which is considered to have no direct competitor, not even to be comparable to other watchmaking creations from the most prestigious companies in the world. How did you think of it?

After the Grande Sonnerie and Duality double regulator watch my friend and colleague, Antoine Prezioso who used to work a lot with Japan



- TOP -
Philippe Dufour
Simplicity

- BOTTOM -
Philippe Dufour





at that time (I had no links with Japan at that time), told me «You know, in Japan, people know your watches and there is even a Philippe Dufour fan club. A simple watch, but a perfect one, more than any other, could be a huge success.» It was very surprising because I had never sold any watches in Japan. In 2000, I presented the Simplicity, inspired by pocket watches from the Vallée de Joux and it was elected watch of the year in Geneva and it won a gold medal in Japan. It was therefore the starting point in Japan for me and it is now my main market. The basic model was at 34 and I upgraded it to 37mm.

You do not intend to present a bigger model?

It is not possible with the same movement. You have some aesthetic constraints associated with the movement, mainly regarding the position of the hand showing the seconds, the bigger the case is, the closer the hand showing the seconds gets to the centre, and aesthetically speaking, it is not good. If I were to do a 42mm watch at some point, I would have to redesign a movement.

Did you design the movement traditionally or with a computer?

I design in a modern way but bi-dimensional, I do not use the tri-dimensional application.

There is a comparative test on the Internet, where somebody took pictures of the Simplicity's finish with a microscope and of some of the best watches from the most prestigious brands. It is obvious that you are the only one according so much importance to finish.

Yes, we work in a traditional way, the finish is done manually. We emphasize that and that is the value of the product. It is an added value coming from the work realised manually when we manufacture a watch. To add the work done manually in the pure tradition of our region. It is true that brands do not do it, do not want to do it or cannot do it but I would say it is their problem, but it is a dangerous game. Because we see more and more that clients are well informed. When a client goes to a shop, he takes an eyeglass and he is able to assess a product, to judge what each company is doing. There is nowadays a universal knowledge, and that is very positive, because it shows that what we do, we do not do it for nothing; people acknowledge our work. Many connoisseurs understand now that I do many things that even the biggest names in the field do not do. Regarding finish, for example, we always think that we are the only ones, in Switzerland, but we have to open our eyes. I saw beautiful products manufactured in Japan, at Seiko, under the name of Crédor, watches that they made in an extraordinary way, manually. And they are beautiful products.

I would like to know, which brands, after you, really do finish work on their movements in your opinion? I think it is very interesting because today, more and more clients want a perfect watch (even more when the price is an issue) inside and outside.

Number 2 is the Germans with Lange. For industrial production, I would say they roughly manufacture 6,000 watches a year, they really offer added value to their products with manual work that is praiseworthy. I had the opportunity to visit their facilities twice

and it is really nice to see how people work and the pleasure they take in manufacturing an element of the movement; they do a beautiful work and they are proud to show what they do. Then, there is Chopard that is doing nicely. They have beautiful products. After those, I would say Audemars for some products. Patek, as well, has some nice products. I saw their last movement and it is nice to see a beautiful product and work done in a detailed manner. Seiko for Crédor are for me at the level of Audemars.

What about precision? In an article in 2009, the watch-making historian, Cécile Aguilhaume, explained that the emergence of quartz made chronometry competitions disappear and at the same time the Certificates from the Observatories are no longer the major criteria of success for a watch. Today no one talks about the precision of their watch!

No, because nobody buys a watch to tell the time! Everybody can get the time everywhere. Men buy a watch because it is the only piece of jewellery they can wear. Watches are objects that have culture, art and a tradition.

During my interview with Gérald Dubois for the 40 years since the establishment of Calibre 11, he told me that the best movement that will ever be manufactured by the greatest of the manufacturers of Haute Horlogerie could never reach the precision and stability of the "simple" Valjoux 7750. Do you agree?

Indeed, even if one went into the greatest possible detail in a chronograph manufactured, we would not necessarily improve precision, we agree on that. We can improve the finish or the aesthetics a lot. We can compare that to Formula 1. Your Ferrari will need adjustments more often than a Toyota!

You really like the hand winding watches. Are you never going to manufacture an automatic watch?

I have never received a request for an automatic watch because people who buy such objects - it is a bit like an artwork - they like living with it, caring for it and winding it once per day. On the other hand those who buy an automatic watch are those who simply want to wear a watch without having to think twice about it.

Every brand tries to add some elements of the "future" in their watches, whereas you seem to stick to tradition, the good old way...

It is a world that I like and I try to transmit this through my work, a future the practices, techniques and traditions of the past.

Do you think there are other elements or just something else that could give an exceptional characteristic to a watch nowadays?

Yes. A new escapement or new material. But it is necessary to make sure that the materials are better than the ones we have been using up until now in watch-making. We launched silicium, many other marvellous names for materials, but we have no knowledge of how they'll last. Whereas we know that a classical escapement wheel in steel still works after 100 years, if the watch has been maintained. These new technologies and new materials are used like marketing tools. If you take a movement that was manufactured 20 years ago,





— LEFT —
Philippe Dufour
Duality

— RIGHT —
Philippe Dufour
Grande Sonnerie

you give it a facelift with an escapement wheel in silicium and you achieve a world first!

Whereas you are considered by all to be one of the greatest watch-makers of our times, the cases of your watches are always designed very simply. Would you like to work with a “grand créateur”?

Maybe. I am not saying no, but when I see what is manufactured at the moment and that they dare call it a watch, it worries me...

Is there a contemporary watch that you would have liked to have manufactured?

Yes, the Tradition from Breguet. It is wonderful!

How many Simplicity watches do you manufacture per year?

In good years, 20. It is a limited edition of 200 watches. I started in 2000 and as of today (December 2009) I am at 152, 153. They have all been prepaid. The last one I delivered - it was a few days ago in France - and

it had been ordered 4 years ago! I haven't had any cancellations due to the crisis. On the other hand, I have about one new request per week!

How many magnificent Grande Sonnerie have you manufactured up to now?

6.

Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Yes, I want to tell you a story. Gabriel Locatelli left Jaeger-LeCoultre after 40 years of important creations, really disgusted by watch-making. He was the living memory of Jaeger-LeCoultre. Over the previous years, he had lost his enthusiasm. When I had the prototype elements of the Simplicity, I called him and asked him to drop by the workshop. I had prepared a workbench for him. He is the one that assembled the very first Simplicity that I still have here. He had recovered his enthusiasm for watch-making. Unfortunately he died 5 months after in a car accident.