

TIME FOR ART

Switzerland is often considered to be the home of watch-making. But there are a select few who elevate timepieces to works of art. This is a feat Jaeger-LeCoultre has achieved with its Hybris Artistica collection

THE WINDING ROAD THROUGH THE JURA MOUNTAINS IN

Switzerland bisects several quaint villages, where picture-perfect winter cottages wear glistening caps of snow that threaten to tumble down in miniature avalanches. It's only a short drive from Geneva, but the folds between the ridges keep the city hidden throughout most of the journey, glimpses of Lake Geneva the only reminder of the lurking metropolis. In one of these mountain-creases sits Vallée de Joux, a small enclave housing a disproportionately large number of skilled horologists, people who quite literally make time.

Many question why this diminutive village is known as the centre of haute-horlogerie manufacturing. The days are short here in winter. The green hills that feed cattle in summer are tucked away under deep banks of snow, creating a beautiful but bleak environs, almost inhospitable when the wind howls through the valley, bringing its biting chill. And howl it does. The valley's orientation and 1,000m altitude combine to make for an especially harsh winter climate, giving it the nickname "Vaud Siberia". Yet this Swiss Siberia is the production site of many of the world's finest timepieces.

It's said that the weather holds the key. Before becoming the centre of time, the Vallée de Joux was known for its precision instruments and tools. In the 17th century, the area became a refuge for Huguenots fleeing persecution in France. Throughout the bitter winters, these farmers retreated to their lofts and employed their artisan skills in the creation of music boxes, jewellery, and watch parts for the jewellers of Geneva and Paris, secluded behind the mountain barrier. From necessity, they also created the tools they used. In 1844, Antoine LeCoultre invented the millionometer, the first instrument capable of measuring in microns (0.001mm). He, and many others in the valley, developed *savoir faire* in watch-making and a fledgling industry was born. ▽



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: A sketch of the Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso; precision assembly at Jaeger-LeCoultre; detail of the Hybris Artistica Duomètre Sphérotourbillon the snow-coated landscape in the Jura mountains of Switzerland.

IN ONE OF THESE MOUNTAIN-CREASES SITS VALLÉE DE JOUX, A SMALL ENCLAVE HOUSING A LARGE NUMBER OF SKILLED HOROLOGERS, PEOPLE WHO QUITE LITERALLY MAKE TIME





It was in fact Antoine LeCoultre, along with his son, Elie, who directed the valley's horological destiny. In 1866 the LeCoultres founded *la grande maison* – the first fully fledged manufacturing centre to bring the families specialising in specific watch parts into a co-operative pool of expertise under one roof. This led to what can now be considered a breakthrough in watch-making – in 1870 the maison developed the first partially mechanised production processes for complicated movements.

“Complications” are features in a timepiece beyond simple time-telling. These range from perpetual calendars, which automatically display leap years, to minute-repeaters, which report the time through melodic chimes. A “grand complication” – combining multiple complications in one watch – is the pinnacle of haute horlogerie.

By 1900, the LeCoultre maison had created over 350 different calibres (movements) and they were soon partnering with high-end makers such as Patek Philippe of Geneva. In 1903, Paris-based watchmaker Edmond Jaeger challenged Swiss manufacturers to develop and produce the ultra-thin movements he had invented. This move led to a collection of ultra-thin pocket watches – including the thinnest in the world created in 1907 – and collaboration between Jaeger and LeCoultre. The company was officially renamed Jaeger-LeCoultre in 1937 and has continually maintained its leading-edge developments in the field of haute horlogerie.

Today, Vallée de Joux has a population of 6,000, but its watch industry is reported to employ 6,500 – many of whom commute to this centre of time. Jaeger-LeCoultre is the region's largest employer, with 1,300 employees. Blancpain relocated to the Joux Valley in the 1980s and many other watchmakers have since followed suit, including Breguet, Patek Philippe and Vacheron Constantin.

ABOVE & BELOW: The stunning Duomètre Sphérotourbillon Pocket Watch from the Hybris Artistica collection; the Hybris Artistica Grande Reverso Tourbillon Squelette, from sketch to reality.



It is perhaps a leap from farming to the creation of fantastic jewel-encrusted timepieces worth thousands of dollars. But there is something fitting in the image of a farmer in his loft, doused in a beam of weak winter light and hunched over an intricate mechanical piece, his calloused hands grasping home-made tools while outside the snow drifts down to pile higher around the chimney. This dedication and passion for the intricacies of time is evident in the weathered faces of the Vallée de Joux.

Time has moved on as complications become more complicated and timepieces become more precise. But some things don't change. Since 1833, every watch crafted by Jaeger-LeCoultre has been imbued with the same attention to detail in an ongoing quest for technical perfection. Each masterpiece, the legacy of more than 180 years of expertise, benefits from the latest cutting-edge technology, while often reviving historical design elements.

This applies to the recently released Hybris Artistica collection, which highlights the intersection of time and art. “They express our long-established capacity to develop the *métiers d'art* [craft]. High precision is joined by the emotion that is unique to Jaeger-LeCoultre, which brings new life to genuinely original techniques, not just on complication watches but on more classic timepieces too,” says CEO Daniel Riedo. The maison divides its affections evenly between technical and artistic watchmaking, proving with this collection that it is more than capable of excelling at both.

The 12 models in the Hybris Artistica collection represent an amalgamation of design, technical construction, watch-making art and exquisite craftsmanship, with many of the designs drawing attention to rare arts such as enameling, gem-setting and skeletonisation to justify their price tags. “There is no reason to create the Hybris Artistica except to enhance the complication factor of the masterpieces. These are 12 pieces that fully express what Jaeger-LeCoultre is capable of today,” says Stéphane Belmont, product and technical marketing director.



Each piece is dazzling, starting with the superbly feminine Reverso Cordonnet Neva, which reinterprets a model from the 1930s, encompassing the aesthetic glory of the Art Deco movement. Encrusted with hand-set diamonds, which festoon the white-gold surface, the shimmering pattern wraps around the curves of the articulated watch, encircling the wrist in shimmering effervescence.

The masculine equivalent is the Duomètre Sphérotourbillon Pocket Watch, taking the avant-garde style of visible grand complications into the pocket-watch format. Although this piece is inspired by a 1928 model, it brings a new element – the first Sphérotourbillon included in a pocket watch, apparent through the notched opening at six o'clock, proving that innovation is still a matter of course for master watch-makers.

For a wrist-mounted work of art, the Master Grande Tradition Tourbillon Céleste, equipped with an orbital flying tourbillon, is captivating. Not content to simply be a piece of superb engineering, the dial displays a full chart of the sky as seen from the northern hemisphere. The sun completes one revolution around its rim once every 24 hours, indicating not only the time but also the signs of the zodiac, the days and the months, on a circular scale on the edge of the dial. The timepiece is so mesmerising that rather than star-gazing you may find yourself looking down at the sky.

“I have good taste, thanks to my parents,” says international artistic and design director Janek Deleskiewicz with a twinkle in his eye. “I've dedicated a good part of my life to Jaeger-LeCoultre, to the design of these watches. We are different from every other manufacturer – we are innovative, precise, we provide a lot of value and we are always moving,” he adds on a more serious note. Just like the exquisite timepieces, Jaeger-LeCoultre pride themselves on never stopping. “We constantly have new developments,” Deleskiewicz confirms. “We decided to challenge exceptional components and make these calibres [the Hybris Artistica collection] with new discoveries in watch development.”

IMAGES: JAEGER-LECOULTRE

IN 1844, ANTOINE LECOULTRE INVENTED THE MILLIONOMETER, THE FIRST INSTRUMENT CAPABLE OF MEASURING IN MICRONS (0.001MM). HE, AND MANY OTHERS IN THE VALLEY, DEVELOPED SAVOIR FAIRE IN WATCHMAKING AND A FLEDGLING INDUSTRY WAS BORN



LEFT TO RIGHT: The Hybris Artistica Master Gyrotourbillon and a peek into the inner workings of the Hybris Artistica Duomètre Sphérotourbillon; Antoine LeCoultre.

Deleskiewicz is a superbly skilled watch designer, sketching each design by hand before it is brought to life. Even so, the Hybris Artistica has been a long time in the making, with development of the series starting back in 2003. “We do a lot of sketches to visualise the future timepiece while shaping the idea. After discussions, we present a proposal to the technical people, to see what can be done,” he confirms as he plucks sketches from a portfolio, holding them up for inspection. The sketches are almost as intricate as the final product and would not be out of place framed and hung in a gallery. Deleskiewicz's love for his art is clear. He has been involved with Jaeger-LeCoultre's design side for more than 20 years, and he shows no signs of slowing down.

This is true of many of the employees here, including the two watchmakers capable of assembling the Hybris Mechanica à Grande Sonnerie, a minute-repeater comprising more than 1,400 parts, which is generally accepted as the world's most complicated watch. The complex timepiece somewhat whimsically indicates the time by sounding out the crystal-clear tones of a Westminster chime, a feature that helps bump it into million-plus price range. That, and its exclusivity. Buying the Jaeger-LeCoultre Hybris Mechanica à Grande Sonnerie is a serious investment, but place the timepiece on your wrist for just a moment and you will understand why. This is the horological equivalent of a limited-edition Andy Warhol print.

Since Jaeger-LeCoultre's founding, the company has produced over 1,242 different calibres, registered approximately 400 patents and hundreds of horological inventions. The Hybris Mechanica à Grande Sonnerie and the Hybris Artistica collection continue this prestigious lineage. One thing seems certain: gem-set watches, complications, and new creations are works of art with a sparkling future. 🌟

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