

THE INDEPENDENT

Tech and tradition

Christophe Claret's creations combine intricate mechanisms with a touch of whimsy

BY RACHEL GARRAHAN

During a watchmaking career that has spanned nearly 30 years, Christophe Claret has wasted little time.

As well as creating movements for some 65 companies, including Ulysse Nardin, Girard Perregaux and Harry Winston, he has made some of the world's most ambitious and complicated timepieces for his own brand. And whether designing for himself or for another company, "my specialty is always in innovation," the 54-year-old watchmaker said.

Mr. Claret is true to his word. While the hefty prices on his brand's creations mean they may be worn by only a few (the average price is 160,000 Swiss francs, or more than \$156,000), his marriage of technology-defying complexity and a satisfying touch of whimsy inspires envy in many.

Mr. Claret's Gaming watches turn the wrist into a miniature casino. The collection's Poker model, which took two Claret watchmakers more than two years to perfect, allows the wearer and two friends to play a game of Texas Hold'em with a dizzying 98,304 possible combinations. Then they can turn the watch over and test their luck on its tiny roulette wheel.

The Margot, in contrast, marks him as a die-hard romantic, as well as one of the rare watchmakers who has created a movement specifically for women. By pressing a pin, the wearer can play the age-old game of "He loves me; he loves me not," watching as the dial's daisy petals fall away to reveal the answer.

Mr. Claret was just 12 when he first discovered a passion for horology while visiting the local watch restorer in his hometown, Lyons, France. By the age of 16, he had moved to Switzerland to enroll at the École d'horlogerie de Genève and, at 19, opened his first workshop in the family home in Lyons.

Then, in 1987, during Mr. Claret's first trip to Baselworld, the luxury watch fair, he met with Rolf Schnyder, who was then the owner of Ulysse Nardin.

Mr. Schnyder placed an order for 20 minute-repeater movements with San Marco Jacquemarts, miniature automata that struck a bell in unison with the mechanism. "That's how I got my first order and that's how I started my business," Mr. Claret said in a telephone interview.



Christophe Claret and his dog Dolly at company headquarters in Le Locle, Switzerland. Right, the Maestro, introduced at the Salon de la Haute Horlogerie this week. Starting at \$66,700 for a titanium model, it is the lowest-price haute complication watch he has created.

Almost 30 years later, he and his 75 staff members, including 18 watchmakers, work in the 19th century Manoir du Soleil d'Or, in the hills outside Le Locle in the heart of Swiss watchmaking country. Asked why investing in such an impressive building was important to him, he explained: "We produce very complicated products and we wanted to have a beautiful environment and atmosphere for both our workers and our clients."

The building, like his watches, marries horological history with state-of-the-art technology. It was built by the Danish watchmaker Urban Jürgensen (1776-1830). While many of its original features have been retained, Mr. Claret has expanded it to house machines created by his own firm, Christophe Claret Engineering. One, for example, was used to create the complex dial of his X-Trem, a 2012 model that uses magnets — traditionally the enemies of mechanical

watches — to display the time. Mr. Claret estimates that the machine is 12 years ahead of the technology available elsewhere.

Unlike some others in the Swiss watchmaking industry, he said he was comfortable combining new technology with age-old horological traditions. "You have to have a crazy-sophisticated and complex machine to create our complex products," he said.

And, while machines may be used to create the highly precise elements he requires, his timepieces are finished by hand. "My first passion is the watch, not the machine," he noted. "The two elements work together, they complete each other."

While the industry continues to struggle — in the first half of 2016, the value of Swiss watch exports fell to \$9.6 billion, the lowest level since 2011 — Mr. Claret said he was feeling positive about his

company's position. Its sales rose, he said, by 15 percent in 2016, growth he attributed to his four collections' appeal to sophisticated and savvy collectors looking beyond mainstream brands for more exclusive, more cutting-edge timepieces.

Mr. Claret's own efforts may have helped. "I've traveled more than ever before this year," he said. "When I go to see a collector, wherever they may be in the world, it's a good decision. They can understand my passion and that's a big motive for them to buy."

It is one reason he invests in marketing and social media. Producing an animated film to accompany each watch introduction, he explained, helps bring a piece to life for a wide audience, even those not yet able to afford a Claret timepiece: "It helps you understand the emotion, the context, the uniqueness of the product. It's very important for now



and for the future."

His decision last year to leave Baselworld after many years and to exhibit instead at the Salon de la Haute Horlogerie, or SIHH, was worth the considerable cost of the change, he said, as the smaller event has put his brand in front of a more select audience of buyers and media. While Baselworld draws hundreds of brands, Claret timepieces will be shown among only 30 brands at SIHH this year — "it's great for our visibility," he said.

Mr. Claret's laser focus on creating a brand with a secure future explains, at least in part, the inspiration behind his latest creation, the Maestro, which is being introduced at SIHH. Starting at \$66,700 for a titanium model, it is the lowest-priced haute complication watch he has created yet and he hopes it will further broaden the brand's appeal.

The watch, which introduces a distinctive cone-shaped date function, also features a memo function that can be set to remind the wearer of a daily task, whether it be, suggests Mr. Claret, sending a romantic message or taking one's medicine.

Mr. Claret has long been known for both new complications and playful touches, always moving on to the next one. "When you're creative you always want to create something new," he said. "I don't work for the money. I work for my passion."