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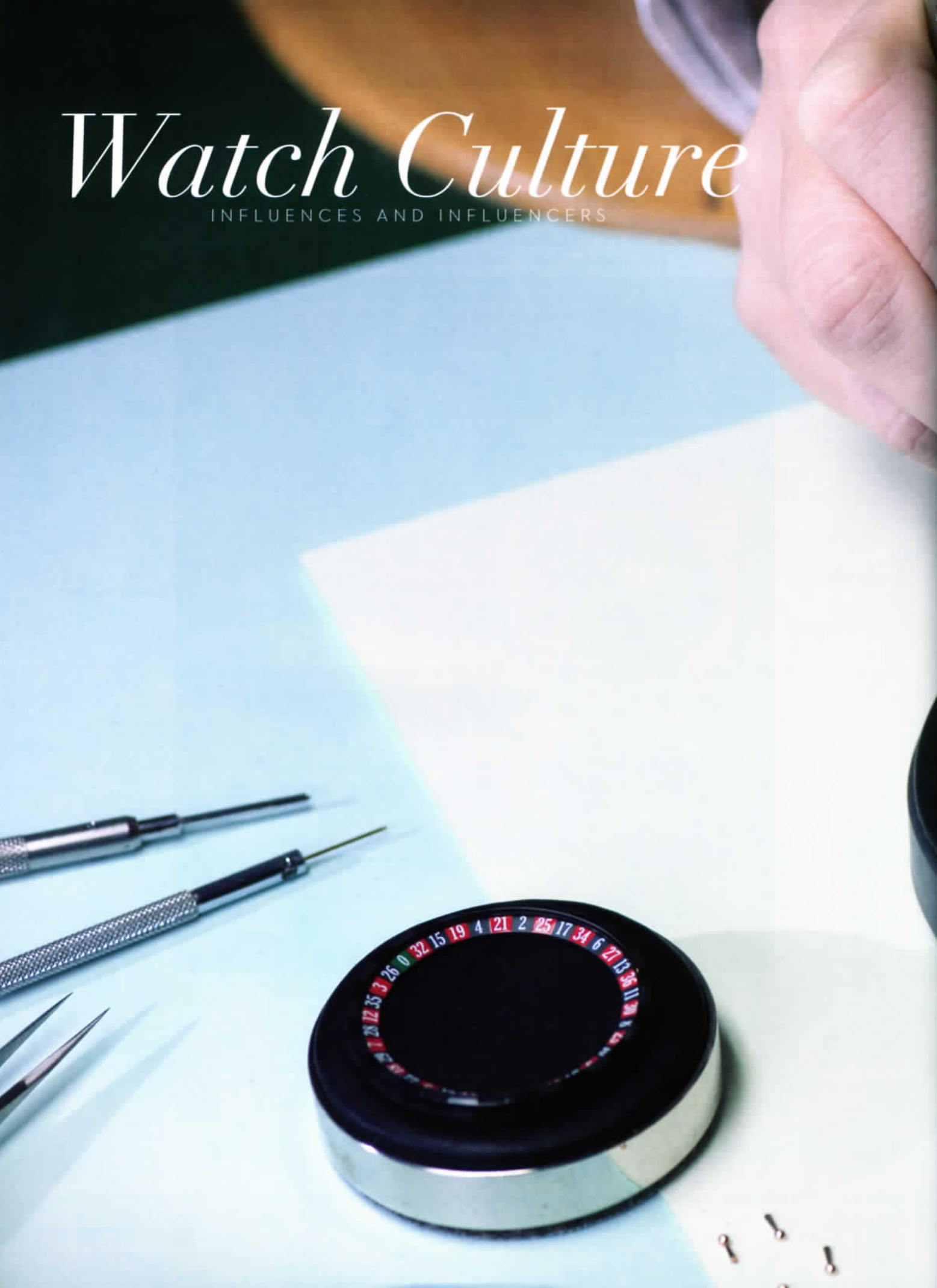
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Watch Culture

INFLUENCES AND INFLUENCERS





FASCINATIONS AND MACHINATIONS

Christophe Claret's comprehensive expertise and endless creativity are the reasons why its manufacture produces timepieces and movements that are not only fun and ingenious, but which also push the envelope in finding new ways to display time.

by **jeremy goplan**



The picturesque Christophe Claret manufacture in Le Locle.



The perlage finish on Christophe Claret watch movements is adeptly carried out by hand.

For over 20 years, the Christophe Claret *manufacture* has been an undisputed force and a key figure in the world of highly complicated watchmaking. But for a long time, it had remained under the radar simply because it mainly made and supplied many of the movements used by the high-end brands.

Specialized in tourbillon and minute-repeater movements, the *manufacture* has designed and created some of the most memorable and complex movements for numerous watch brands. And since then, Christophe Claret has indisputably built a reputation for himself and his eponymous *manufacture* as being one of the biggest innovators in watchmaking, especially in the development of avant-garde movements.

It was not until recent years that Claret decided to emerge from behind the curtain and create his own line of watches — yet within that short period of time, the man has garnered a reputation for coming up with first-of-its-kind and often incredible complications, such as the 21 Blackjack or the more-recent Poker (which literally do just what their names suggest — they allow the wearer to mechanically play games of blackjack or poker on their wrists), as well as more technical accomplishments like the X-TREM-1 or the chiming Kantharos chronograph from two years ago.

Indeed, having created some of the most astonishing movements for what could be considered some of the most memorable watches of our time has definitely helped Claret's *manufacture* become an industry leader in the conception and manufacturing of extraordinary haute-horlogerie movements.

Heart and Soul

Christophe Claret seems to have been born to be a watchmaker. The energetic man — who professes to have a passion for castles, ancient civilizations, and essentially all things of antiquity — has gone to great lengths to preserve the heritage of the early-20th-century manor that houses his *manufacture*.

In 2000, to cement his independence, he purchased the house in Le Locle, which is home to some of the most important watch manufactures in Swiss-watchmaking lore. The manor was known as *Le Soleil d'Or* (The Golden Sun), and was originally built by the legendary Danish watchmaker Urban Jürgensen. Situated at the hillside of Le Locle, just below the Château des Monts watch museum, it was a particularly breathtaking sight to behold in the month of January, draped as it were with a generous coating of snow, rendering it a fairytale-like allure. From its windows was an

undiluted view of the picturesque watch hub of Le Locle in the Neuchâtel area; anyone entering the manor would inevitably feel transposed to another time, given its creaky wood floorings and antiquated wall tapestries.

Since the acquisition, the facility has grown in size with Claret's addition of two modern production wings that today house one of the world's most advanced facilities for designing and creating complicated movements as well as cases, sapphire crystals, and other components. There's a certain paradox that such a historic building would house one of the most avant-garde *manufactures* within the industry, but such is the intrigue of the brand.

Claret himself shows off the manor with unabashed delight, sprinting from room to room and introducing the many wonders contained within them. And the man has good reason to be proud of this facility since, despite its compact space, it is one of the highest-performing complete *manufactures* around, and is also one of the most modern and innovative. In just a decade and a half, its team has created around 70 original in-house calibers, of which the simplest is a tourbillon.

Going back in time, figuratively, Claret reveals that his fascination with watches started from a young age. Growing up in Lyon, France, he enjoyed disassembling and reassembling watch movements, even as a child. "At the age of 14, when my parents took me to visit a watch restorer's workshop, the encounter proved to be a life-changing experience. Passionately interested in all things mechanical, I asked the craftsman if he would let me come and help him every Friday afternoon after school. The idea appealed to the watchmaker, who agreed. Every week from then on, I worked on taking apart watch mechanisms to clean, maintain, or restore them, until I began attending watchmaking school," he shares.

And at 16, he entered the Geneva Watchmaking School and counts Roger Dubuis — himself a founder of his own watchmaking company — as his contemporary and peer. After his graduation, he restored antique timepieces at his workshop, developing a deep understanding of the workings of a movement. His career officially rocketed at the 1987 Basel Fair, when the owner of a major Swiss watch company commissioned Claret to develop an exclusive minute-repeater movement. On the strength of that deal alone, Claret founded a company with two other talented watchmakers, Giulio Papi and Dominique Renaud. However, in 1991, driven by his need for independence, he bought his partners out and became the sole shareholder.



At the Christophe Claret *manufacture*, advanced technology and skilled craftsmanship go hand in hand in creating the brand's lauded movements.



Claim to Fame

On the day of our visit in the middle of winter, the ateliers were working on a multitude of calibers, all at the same time. In 2005, Claret's company had 35 employees — now he has nearly triple the number of staff on his payroll. The global luxury-watch boom, coupled with the desire by many brands to offer more complicated timepieces, drove Claret's expansion. Claret remains the sole shareholder, and in another display of defiant independence, he reportedly does not rely on any bank, instead funding operations entirely from the company's cash flow.



Chamfering of watch components.

Since its founding, Claret's company has created about 70 different movements, including more than 50 world firsts, a claim that cannot be made by many much more historic brands. For perspective on this achievement, consider that A. Lange & Söhne, a respected and prolific *manufacture*, has created about 35 new movements since its rebirth in 1994. Claret's dexterity with complexity also puts some larger brands to shame — at Claret, a tourbillon is the simplest watch they make.

Fast forward to now, at this state-of-the-art manufacturing facility, the company not only produces highly complicated calibers for external customers, but also for itself, ever since Claret launched his own eponymously named brand of timepieces.

It has to be said that only a handful of brands have the ability to design highly complicated movements, then manufacture the required components in-house. Even fewer design the machines that make the components. Claret does both, and more, placing him at the pinnacle of the *manufacture* hierarchy.

Claret says that from the start, he had set out to create one of the most vertically integrated *manufactures* possible to cater to the creation of high complications. This couldn't have been possible without wholly investing in the most cutting-edge manufacturing machinery — and not just to produce movement parts, but also entire cases, dials and even cut sapphire crystals, a feat that only a small number of manufacturers can honestly claim to achieve. In fact, Claret's collaborations with machinery suppliers have led to developments so great that they would later be adopted by the likes of Patek Philippe and Rolex.

For the most part, Claret is unable to reveal the true scope of his accomplishments due to confidentiality agreements with brands whose movements he designs and builds. But a partial list of this extensive accolade reads like a who's-who of the industry: Harry Winston, Maitres du Temps, Jorg Hysek, Ulysse Nardin, Bulgari, Guy Ellia and Ellicott.



A passion for state-of-the-art technology has seen the collaborative development of new machinery for the Christophe Claret manufacture, which are also used by an esteemed list of watch brands.

Machinations and Mechanizations

Just like the construction of the calibers, the construction of the cases involves a continuous search for innovation. To better equip and reinforce the cases department even more, the Claret manufacture has, over the years, collaborated in creating new machines. This includes a 17-axis CNC machine that is capable of working in pairs with two by five axes, which will not only reduce the operational time by 50 percent, but also increase tooling precision. This exclusive equipment is only one example, among many, of machinery that has been specifically developed for the Claret manufacture. In fact, Christophe Claret speaks of his machines with the same passionate and almost childlike enthusiasm that he speaks of his movements.

Indeed, within the industry, Claret (who must be nothing short of a genius) is as well known for designing the complex machines used to make components as he is for his finished movements. Some Claret machines work to tolerances of one micron. An impressive list of clients stands as a testament to Claret's skills in this area, and companies using his machines include Rolex, Patek Philippe, Breguet, Audemars Piguet, Vacheron Constantin, Greubel Forsey and Frédérique Constant.

"I always want to have a very progressive vision of the modes of production," explains Claret, "and to be as innovative in the domain of equipment as in the realm of watchmaking." Other motivations also push him: besides providing autonomy, a mastery of the fabrication processes lets the company be much more in control of its deadlines and permits it to conduct research and innovation more conveniently, thus also being more economically sound.

All this has led to Claret having one of the most advanced research departments where calibers are created with the latest 3D software. Naturally, the man also insists on rigorous and accelerated product development, and this has led Claret to create his own "Office of Computer Graphics", which employs experts in the field of imaging. Claret is quick to point out, however: "We don't create images in order to sell products that don't yet exist, but rather to show off the beauty and complexity of our work as well as to share and demonstrate the sophistication of our movements in which we can delve virtually."

But machinery can only get you so far. Claret puts a big emphasis on overall finish and superlative quality, and the decorations department shows the extent of this. Everything from angling and polishing of the edges of components to circular-grained perlage and Côtes de Genève stripes are manually applied by some of the most skilled hands to be found in the industry. Even processes like electroplating — which gives movements and components their coated color — which is usually subcontracted to external specialists, are done at the manufacture's own *galvanoplastie* laboratory.



Fascination and Genius

Claret is a perfectionist — there is no doubt about that. In this respect, he loves to repeat a quote by Leonardo da Vinci: "Details make perfection, and perfection is not a detail". Yet, perfection aside, it is the dichotomy of the watchmaker's fascination with tradition and heritage, and genius with technology and innovation, that constitutes the heart of the company, and which leads him to continually offer new forms of expression for the most classic of grand complications. Sometimes playful, often spectacular, the timepieces by Christophe Claret are infused with the emotion of discovery, discipline and intuition, and represent the processes, the *savoir-faire* and the innovations in all the various products he creates. ★

