

SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS:

IN CONVERSATION WITH JUAN CARLOS TORRES, CEO, VACHERON CONSTANTIN
BY WEI KOH



As Juan Carlos Torres reflects on his second year at the helm of the world's oldest continuously operating watch manufacture, it is interesting to observe a greater sense of serenity and confidence in his manner. And there's good reason for this. Because in the two short years that he's been the brand's leader, he's given it what it needed most: a stronger sense of identity. His aesthetic vision was first expressed in the 2006 Platinum Excellence collection, where a series of severely pure platinum watches with micro-blasted dials merged Vacheron Constantin's high craftsmanship with a severe austerity that resulted in some surprisingly sexy, modern timepieces. This was a new Vacheron Constantin — a more minimalist, yet somehow more thrilling vision of high watchmaking. This year, Torres continues on this theme of "Zen and the art of watchmaking" by creating a series of four Patrimony watches, each of which manages to be both wholly modern and supremely pure in design — a balance that has come to define Vacheron Constantin. At the same time, Torres has initiated a bespoke watch service that takes horology back to the thrilling days of yesteryear, when clients like Henry Graves Jr. and King Farouk challenged horological houses and each other to a game of supreme one-upmanship in the creation of high complications. And finally, Torres takes watchmaking back to the roots of human culture with his unexpectedly audacious Métiers d'Art Les Masques collection. We spoke to this dynamic leader to gain a consolidated view of his global vision for Vacheron Constantin.

WHAT'S THE VISION FOR VACHERON CONSTANTIN THIS YEAR? We have two focuses this year, which are at the heart of who we are. One, as expressed by our Patrimony collection, is about returning watchmaking to a place of serenity and calm — something that I thought was much needed in the noisy environment of today. The second is about reconnecting watchmaking with human culture, which is wonderfully expressed in our Métiers d'Art Les Masques collection.

TELL US WHY YOU CHOSE PRIMITIVE MASKS AS THE THEME FOR THE NEW MÉTIERS D'ART WATCHES... The imagery in these watches come from the roots of humanity. They come from the most ancient parts of the world: Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. There is something mythic to the ancient civilizations that existed here, which predate all of modern culture as we know it. When working on the design of the watch, it was fundamental that we created clear means of reading time, but that the mask had to be of primary importance on the dial. It is a clear statement that before the concept of time can exist, we first need mankind.

WE WERE REALLY IMPRESSED WITH THE NEW PATRIMONY TRADITIONELLE CALIBER 2755 — THE SOUND OF THE WATCH IS ON PAR WITH PATEK'S CATHEDRAL GONG REPEATERS AS THE BEST WE EVER HEARD.

HOW DID YOU MAKE IT SOUND SO RICH? This piece is incredible. We took a lot of what we'd learnt during the development of the Tour de L'Île and applied it to this watch. We created a new kind of regulator for the strike train of this watch. We didn't use the escapement/pallet type regulator, because this causes too much underlying noise when the watch strikes. At the same time, we didn't use a traditional flying regulator either. We developed a smaller regulator that we call the Centripetal regulator, which also uses inertia as the principal for regulating the strikes. This allows us to make a smaller regulator, which makes even less underlying noise than either a escapement type regulator or even a normal flying regulator, and at the same time allows us to lengthen out the space in between the strikes, so they do not sound hurried or rushed. Not only is the sound of the watch beautiful, but it develops a volume similar to that of a pocket watch.

SO WHAT YOU'VE LEARNT FROM CREATING THE WORLD'S MOST COMPLICATED WRISTWATCH — THE TOUR DE L'ÎLE — WAS APPLIED HERE. IS THAT THE PURPOSE OF MAKING SUCH A HIGH COMPLICATION? Part of the reason for the creation of a watch like Tour de L'Île was certainly to celebrate our over-250 years of continuous existence and our vast patrimony in high complications. But it was also to develop new technologies that can be applied to a wider range of our products. We took the perpetual calendar as well as the tourbillon that we developed for the Tour de L'Île, and used them here in a case that is very wearable at 44 mm in diameter. At the same time, using this larger case size allowed us to exploit the sound propagating qualities of the larger rose gold case. Finally, the copper content of this case also adds to its resonance.

IT ALSO FEATURES THE VERY PURE DESIGN AESTHETIC THAT WE SAW EMERGE WITH LAST YEAR'S PLATINUM EXCELLENCE COLLECTION, CORRECT? Yes, even this high complication exudes a design purity that is very

The Patrimony Traditionelle Caliber 2755 features a tourbillon, a perpetual calendar and an innovative minute repeater with a new Centripetal regulator. The result is one of the best-sounding striking watches we've ever heard!



much in keeping with our new Patrimony line. Together, these watches herald a return to discreet, understated elegance, which moves in an opposite direction from that of the rest of the market. Look at the dial and you'll first see a very pure, simple design. But when you look closely, you'll discover tiny, subtle details such as the "diamond" fillets guilloché applied within the perpetual calendar's subdials.

WE LIKE THE WAY YOU'VE GONE IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION OF THE OVER-THE-TOP DESIGNS DOMINATING THE MARKET TODAY... I think today's environment is one in which you have a lot of new novelties being launched, which I would categorize as fashion watches. Their sizes are getting larger and larger with extravagant designs incorporating industrial materials, rubber or alternative metals in different combinations. Even brands that are traditional in their roots have gone into this part of the business. And while I respect this sector of watchmaking, I want to stress that it is not Vacheron Constantin's identity to make these kind of watches. I want to reinforce that a Vacheron Constantin is like an oasis amid all this noise and fashion. It represents true watchmaking. It is always more difficult to create great simple watches, than flashy watches. I wanted to also bring watches back into a realm of wearable sizes.

HOW DO YOU STILL EXERT A CONTEMPORARY CREATIVE SPIRIT WHILE CREATING VERY PURE WATCHES? I think that there are ways to be modern while still asserting the substance of who we are. A good example of this is the new



Patrimony Skeleton Perpetual Calendar. Here, we have a very classic sized watch with a case that is 39 mm in diameter. It is characterized by one of our signature crafts, skeletonizing. At the same time, we wanted the watch to exude an Art Nouveau spirit. So, the engraver decided to use the motif expressed in the construction technique of Paris's Eiffel Tower. She developed an all-new design. At the same time, the dial utilizes sapphire elements to create a highly legible perpetual calendar that has a very modern emotion to it.

WHY DO YOU THINK YOUR NEO-CLASSICAL APPROACH TO WATCHMAKING IS IMPORTANT?

If you look at the history of art, you'll see that the baroque period was followed by the Rococo period that was totally over the top... and in reaction to this, the Neo-Classical age was born, which ascribed to the foundational guidelines found in classic Roman and Greek art and architecture. Similarly, today, we are in a period that is getting increasingly over the top or baroque, so there is a need for watches that reconnect to the classic era of watchmaking, but with an eye to the modern world. This is the spirit, the sense of Neo-Classicism, the aura of quiet grace that embodies our brand.

AS A RESULT OF THIS DESIGN AESTHETIC AND SEVERAL OTHER FACTORS, WE SENSE AN EVEN STRONGER BRAND IDENTITY FOR VACHERON CONSTANTIN. WOULD YOU AGREE? We have to be one of the references in the excellence of high watchmaking, but at the same time we had to assert a clearer sense of our identity. I think that our achievements in the past, our know-how and our craftsmanship are recognized. What we had to do was synergize all these elements inside a watch that has a clear and distinctive character — one that embodies understated, quiet elegance. For us, our two main focuses will be this kind of subtle watchmaking and connecting watchmaking to human culture. At Vacheron Constantin, we are not here just to take advantage of watchmaking's current success, but to contribute meaningfully to it. Some may like to say that we have the longest history of any brand, but I like to think that we simply have the longest tradition of transmitting the know-how of watchmaking to future generations. We are simply a link in the chain.

WE'VE HEARD ABOUT A NEW CHRONOMETER ROYAL — CAN YOU COMMENT? This year, we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Chronometer Royal, so we will present a new version of the watch with a grande feu enamel dial to commemorate this. It will have a movement with a new balance wheel, and receive the COSC certificate as a chronometer.

WHAT WAS THE MOTIVATION BEHIND CREATING THE BESPOKE WATCH SERVICE? The other thing that we've decided to do was to reconnect high watchmaking to its roots. In the beginning, high watchmaking was made in collaboration with an individual client. We wanted to give clients the opportunity to really personalize their timepiece by offering a bespoke service. This service has three internal tiers for us to help determine the amount of time and work commitment involved. The first is one in which we create a unique execution of existing references, based on dial or material choice. The second involves the combination of an existing movement and a new case design. The third is one in which we create an all-new case as well as an all-new movement. In this third realm, imagination is the only limit.



One of our favorite watches of 2007 is this remarkably pure Patrimony watch. At 38 mm in diameter, it marks a return to more wearable sized watches.

When the project was launched, we formed a committee comprising the head of our bespoke department, our designer, our production manager, our museum manager and me. We are simply there to ensure that the watches that are suggested are within the codes of our brand.

HAS IT BEEN WELL RECEIVED? Our ambition is that this opportunity will reignite the classic friendly competitions amongst collectors to create truly extraordinary timepieces — watches that may well become part of watchmaking's history. Already, we've had some incredible requests. We had one private customer tell us that he wanted a watch that was even more complicated than the Tour de L'Île. I agreed to the project under one condition. Both out of respect to the customer as well as to those who purchased the Tour de L'Île, we have to create a new watch that had nothing in common with the Tour de L'Île. That means a completely new project and movement started from scratch. It is impossible for this kind of project to be financially lucrative for us, considering the huge expense of creating a new movement. But we are doing it as a statement of our dedication to real watchmaking that is in contrast to an environment pervasive with marketing and fashion.

WHAT GUARANTEE IS THERE THAT WATCHES WILL BE KEPT UNIQUE? Our commitment to keeping the watches unique is very strict. If a customer commissions a watch that we end up falling in love with and want to include as our regular production, we would ask him if he would consider allowing us to do this. If he says yes, then we will proceed; but if he says, "It's only for me," then we would respect this 100 percent.

WE HEAR THE MANUFACTURE WILL ACTUALLY GO TO CUSTOMERS FOR CONSULTATION ON THESE WATCHES, IS THIS TRUE? The

bespoke service will be a traveling one, in which our head of this service and our designer, Vincent Kauffmann, can meet with customers and discuss watches directly with them. We can even render a quick sketch of the watch, so the customer has an immediate image of what it will look like. This is really in our DNA, because when Francois Constantin traveled to China, New York and even Brazil in the 1820s–1840s, it was always to meet new clients and communicate unique commissioned pieces. Today, watch brands create a product, then they send it out to the customer and say, "Buy this." For us, we want to give the customer the opportunity to participate in the story of the brand by creating a watch that may one day be recognized as something of immense importance to us.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BUY A HIGH COMPLICATION FROM A LEGITIMATE MANUFACTURE? One thing that people often forget is that when you buy a watch — especially a complicated timepiece — you are not just buying the watch, but investing in a relationship with a manufacture for the duration of that watch's life, which could theoretically be hundreds of years. I am sometimes concerned when I see the number of high complications today that are made by companies that may not exist in 50 years. My question is: who loses here? It is the customer. Our 250 years of unbroken existence is the best assurance we can give to anyone; that not only will we still be around to always fix your watch, but we will even hand-make parts for it should we need too.

Even with our bespoke watches, we don't simply manufacture one watch for you. We make, in addition, all the spare parts we would need to repair the watch should you need to. We have the experience to know which components are likely to wear out and we can determine what parts need to be made. ★



The manufacture's brilliant designer, Vincent Kauffmann, will actually come to you and render a sketch for your dream watch.