



Vacheron Constantin calls its new Tour de l'Île watch, part of its 250th anniversary collection, "the most complex watch ever made."

# Vacheron Constantin's BIG YEAR

In 2005, the elite Geneva firm celebrates a milestone unique in the watch world: 250 years of continuous operation. CEO Claude-Daniel Proellochs talks with WatchTime about the firm's quarter-millennium.

BY JOE THOMPSON

In 1755, 24-year-old Jean-Marc Vacheron, recently accepted into the Geneva Watchmaking Guild as a master watchmaker, opened a small workshop in Geneva's St. Gervais watchmaking district.

The firm, which became Vacheron Constantin in 1819, has been in Geneva ever since. This year, it celebrates its 250th anniversary. It is the first and only watch company to reach the quarter-millennial milestone.

Vacheron is marking the occasion with a slew of new initiatives, some of which began last year: an ultra-modern new headquarters and *manufacture* in Geneva's Plan-les-Ouates district; a newly restored boutique/museum/historical center at its long-time headquarters in the center of Geneva; the unveiling of a collection of new ultra-complicated 250th anniversary watches; an auction devoted entirely to Vacheron Constantin watches conducted by Geneva's Antiquorum Auctioneers; a new book on the company; a traveling museum exhibition, and more.

To discuss the anniversary, *WatchTime* senior writer Joe Thompson met with long-time Vacheron Constantin CEO Claude-Daniel Proellochs in his office in the new Manufacture Vacheron Constantin in Plan-les-Ouates. What follows are excerpts from the interview.



Vacheron Constantin CEO  
Claude-Daniel Proellochs

**WT: Let's talk about the anniversary events. You and your team have a lot on your plate.**

CDP: We have spent four years preparing for this anniversary. Four years ago we said we have to express the values of Vacheron Constantin, so we have created special products for the 250th anniversary. The 250th anniversary collection testifies to what we have done with this great history of Vacheron Constantin and what we do today. It shows that today we have master watchmakers who are as capable as in the past, and who make new milestones for the future.

We have produced a unique piece, which will be sold on April 3 at a special Antiquorum auction devoted to Vacheron Constantin. This piece is the quintessence of the *métier d'arts* of Vacheron Constantin. I tell you it is crazy stuff. (See sidebar.) The anniversary celebration officially begins in February

when the top journalists in the world will gather in Switzerland to discover the technicity of the 250th anniversary pieces. Among them is a super-complicated watch, which is the most sophisticated piece ever produced in the watch industry. It has 834 components, a world record, and they all are hand-finished. (See sidebar.) Each of the pieces in the anniversary collection is a masterpiece that will stay as a milestone for the brand.

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## **WT: Will these pieces be included in Antiquorum's 'Quarter Millennium' auction?**

CDP: We are very excited about the auction, which will be held in Geneva at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel du Rhône on the afternoon of April 3. There will be 250 lots, including the unique piece and the first number of the limited edition 250th anniversary pieces. We have made certificates for all the pieces that will be on auction.

## **WT: What other anniversary events are planned?**

CDP: SIHH (International Salon of High Horology) starts on April 4. We will have a new booth where we will show all the new pieces of the 250th anniversary. We will also go around the world with the 250th anniversary collection and antique watches from our museum. We will

We built it to have more space and a clearer organization. It was necessary to expand for better control of production flow and to bring administration and production together under one roof. You see the improvement in terms of production flow systems, the space available, and the comfort of the watchmakers. The building is on 30,000 square meters of parkland. We have 170 people here now, which will grow to 250 in due course.

The *manufacture* is the center of activity: design, marketing, distribution, technical offices, logistics, finance, human resources, and production, which includes adjusting mechanical movements, casing, testing and after-sales service. We hand-finish part of the production here in Geneva and part in the Vallée de Joux. We hand-assemble and we check all these elements, because it's required by the Geneva Hallmark, the Poinçon de Genève. One unit here is specifically dedicated to performing the finishing



**Vacheron Constantin's new headquarters and manufacture in Plan-les-Ouates on the outskirts of Geneva**



**Watchmakers at work in the new *manufacture***

have 20 exhibitions where we will go as pilgrims to meet the people. A new book showing the products in the museum, produced by Franco Cologni, will be published in May. And we will launch other new products for 2005, in addition to the anniversary collection, throughout the year.

## **WT: Two of the biggest events related to the anniversary occurred in anticipation of it last year.**

CDP: We opened the new manufacture here in Plan-les-Ouates on August 9. On December 8, after a year's restoration work, we inaugurated the Maison Vacheron Constantin in our historic headquarters on the Quai de l'Île in the center of Geneva, where we have been since 1755.

For the *manufacture*, we decided to design something beautiful and contemporary. Some might say, it's not Vacheron, it's so daring. But we still have the Maison Vacheron Constantin, where we have our tradition. So we make a link between tradition and modernity. We want to show people that we do not have a beautiful old *manufacture*, which is a nice souvenir, but a modern building combining dynamism and permanence.



**Vacheron Constantin's Caliber 1400 hand-wound movement was designed and built entirely in the company's workshops.**

of mechanical movements to meet the criteria of the Geneva quality hallmark. Each of the movements is enhanced by exceptional finishing work, with steel surfaces systematically beveled and decorated by hand. The dial and the case are also hand-finished.

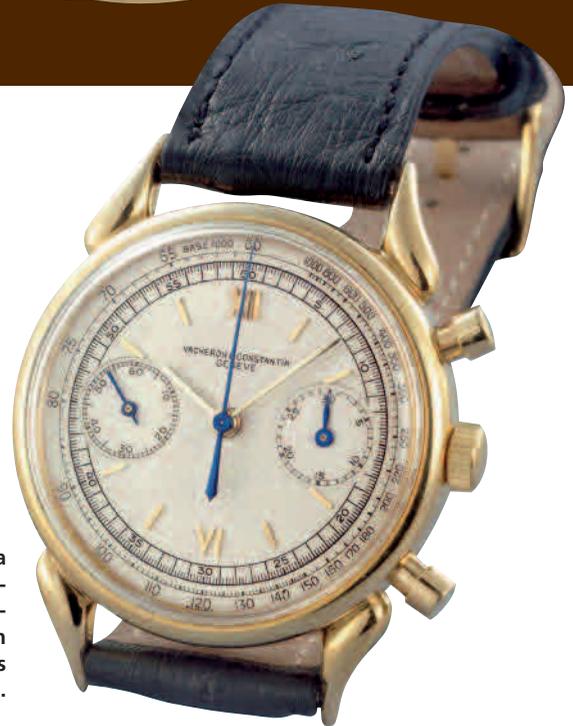
The Geneva Hallmark is an external guarantee coming from the state of Geneva, which is good for the customer. The quality of materials has to be checked, the production process, the hand finishing. There are 12 criteria for the hallmark of Geneva. It's tedious, difficult, and costly. But it is important because it is a guarantee of long-term reliability.

We have another location in the Vallée de Joux, (Vacheron Constantin Vallée de Joux) where we have research and development and where we produce all our new components, which are assembled and checked here in Plan-les-Ouates. We bought this company in 1998 after working with them for many years. We have developed it further and have more than 80 people there.

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Maison Vacheron Constantin, the firm's former headquarters in the center of Geneva, houses a boutique, museum and historical center.



Museum pieces: a 1915 pocket chronometer with anti-magnetic protection (above) and a 1950s chronograph (right).

## WT: What is the status of Vacheron Constantin's movement production?

CDP: We have worked for a long, long time as a *manufacture*. In the course of development of Vacheron Constantin, we have had contact with various *manufactures*. One in particular is Jaeger-LeCoultre, with whom we have collaborated for more than 100 years. So along the way, there were various steps. For a time we delivered a lot of products to other top companies.

But in developing Vacheron over these last 15 years, our requirements became so specific in terms of technicality, finishing, and so on, that it was more and more difficult to find capable partners. When I need 15 special balance wheels, it is 15, not 15,000. So sometimes you are bound, for strategic reasons, because it's a danger for your regular flow of production, to go your own way.

It's also the expectation of the customer. If we want to have a clear position in the market, we have to be very differentiated in terms of what we bring, what ideas, what type of calibers. So we decided to develop all our new calibers in Vacheron Constantin. We launched the 9-ligne manual Caliber 1400 a few years ago. And we have developed the automatic, which comes on the market this year. All of the calibers for the 250th anniversary pieces are our own.

On that base, we can build. You build your small and mid complications. For the top complicated watches, we develop all new movements.

## WT: What becomes of your historic building that sits on L'Île in the Rhône in Geneva?

CDP: It has been completely restored. We call it Maison Vacheron Constantin. Today it houses the boutique, the brand archives, tools, ma-

chines and watches, as well as workshops dedicated to the professions of the art of watchmaking and to the restoration of antique watches. It is the patrimonial area so that people can understand the past. We don't want to just show old pieces and the nostalgia from the past. We want to show the roots of the company, the strength of the company, as a living museum.

We have two floors. On the ground floor is the boutique. On the first floor we have 45 cubic meters; it's a lot. We have the archives; we have the old tooling of the watchmakers and 150 machines. There you can see the watchmaking process as in the past. And we have the museum



The first Vacheron watch: Jean-Marc Vacheron earned his master watchmaker title with this “master piece” in 1755. It has a silver case, enamelled dial, 35.6 mm key-wound movement with crown wheel, fusee and chain and is engraved “J:M:Vacheron A GENEVE.”

pieces, more than 650 of them, starting from 1755. We show them in periods of 50 years, so you can follow the history of Vacheron Constantin. And with full documentation.

The past, present and future are there. People can visit the new historical center, Maison Vacheron Constantin. And they can visit the new *manufacture*. They can judge with their own eyes what is tradition, what is modernity, and why they combine so harmoniously.

**WT: This year marks your 17th year as CEO of Vacheron Constantin. What are your personal feelings about this milestone?**

CDP: I see the 250th anniversary as a springboard for the future. Not an arrival, a departure. I said to our people, “It’s an incredible privilege we have to live this moment, this quarter-millennium.” On the other hand, it’s a big responsibility. I think if our plans succeed, it will be the respect we owe to the people who have built this company. To say that we have done our part. To reaffirm the legacies of our founders.

It is thanks to three people that Vacheron exists as it does today. First is the founder, Jean-Marc Vacheron. He is the brain, the artist, and the genius watchmaker. The second person is François Constantin, who entered the company in 1819. He is a man of adventure, who opened new markets. He would be today the director of marketing and distribution. The third is Georges-Auguste Leschot, who entered in 1839. Leschot is the technical inventor, who brings basic tooling; mainly the pantograph, the first machine that allowed you to copy components perfectly. Up to that time, you had to produce all your components by hand. Each one was a little different. So, you couldn’t use the same components in two similar watches because they did not match. The pantograph allowed the production of precise identical components. It’s a big advance, which led to increased production.

G-A Leschot pushed the tradition of the company. He said “Now I bring you something new and interesting. You can accelerate your production, keeping and improving the quality.” And they developed it. At the time, it was contemporary. Today this contemporary is tradition.



Back view of the Tour de l'Île 16-complication watch

## FOR AN EXCEPTIONAL ANNIVERSARY, EXCEPTIONAL WATCHES



Vacheron Constantin's one-of-a-kind mystery clock

That Vacheron Constantin was working on an extraordinary timepiece for this year's celebration of its 250th anniversary was well known in watch circles. The piece, called L'Esprit des Cabinotiers, a one-of-a-kind mystery clock four years in the making, lived up to the pre-launch buzz. It put a round gold perpetual calendar, astronomical, repeater clock within an engraved gold sphere that opens and closes at the push of a secret button. What was unexpected was that the clock would have such stiff competition for the anniversary limelight from other gee-whiz watches that Vacheron has created for its 250th anniversary collection.

But that's what happened when Vacheron unveiled the collection for the international watch press in Geneva in early February. In addition to the unique clock, Vacheron presented four other anniversary collections, highlighted by what it claims are two record-setting wristwatches, one containing the most complications (16), the other the highest power-reserve (250-plus hours, i.e. 11 days).

All of the new pieces contain new calibers created entirely in Vacheron Constantin's workshops. The wristwatches feature special characteristics designed for the collection: knurled gold or platinum cases, extended soldered horns with a newly designed shape, a secret signature, and a new

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The decorated dial of a *Métiers d'Art* watch.



St. Gervais: more than 250 hours of power



Jubilé 1755 contains Vacheron's new automatic caliber.

guilloché pattern created for the anniversary. The dials also display the Geneva Hallmark.

By far the most complex timepiece is the clock. It was designed, says Vacheron Constantin CEO Claude-Daniel Proelochs, as "a unique object that represents the ultimate expression of 250 years of Vacheron Constantin know-how." The clock consists of a pink-gold sphere that sits on a base of lapis lazuli, onyx and pink gold. When the owner activates a secret mechanism, the eight petals of the sphere open like a lotus flower and the large (145 mm diameter) complicated clock rises from the center. The piece will be sold to the highest bidder at an Antiquorum auction devoted exclusively to Vacheron Constantin timepieces in Geneva on April 3.

Tour de l'Île is Vacheron's name for a double-faced wristwatch that it calls "the most complex watch ever made" because of its record number of complications and movement parts. Its 47mm x 17.8mm, pink-gold case contains a new Vacheron caliber, 2750, made up of 834 parts, the most ever in a single wristwatch movement. Its front side (see photo page 56) displays the hours and minutes, a tourbillon with 60-second counter, 24-hour subdial for a second time zone, a moon-phase display, and two power reserve indications: one, at 1 o'clock, shows the torque of the striking mechanism, and the other, at 9 o'clock, shows the power reserve of the movement (58 hours). On the backside dial are subdials for the perpetual calendar (day, date, month) and a leap year aperture at 1 o'clock. In the center is an equation of time indicator. Two retrograde hands pointing to arcs positioned at 4 and 8 o'clock indicate sunrise and sunset times. In the 6 o'clock position is a sky chart showing the Northern Hemisphere. Vacheron will make seven Tour de l'Île watches, plus

one for its museum. The price was not set at press time, but is expected to be between 1 million and 1.2 million euros.

The other record-breaker is St. Gervais, a perpetual calendar tourbillon watch with more than 250 hours of power reserve. Inside its 44mm-diameter platinum case is the new VC caliber 2250, containing 410 parts and four barrels, stacked in pairs to provide 250 hours of power, with another 20 in reserve. The dial features indicators for the perpetual calendar, and two arcs showing the power reserve from 250 hours to 125 and 125 to 0. Vacheron will produce 55 of these watches at a retail price between 400,000 to 500,000 Swiss francs. Note the "1755" symbolism in the production of the anniversary pieces: 1 unique piece, 7 Tour de l'Île watches, and 55 St. Gervais watches.

For its Jubilé 1755 watch, Vacheron will produce – you guessed it – 1,755 pieces. The watch marks the debut of Caliber 2475, a new automatic movement developed entirely by Manufacture Vacheron Constantin. The automatic day-date power-reserve watch is manufactured in yellow and pink gold cases (500 pieces of each priced at SF30,130), white gold cases (500 priced at SF33,360) and platinum (250 priced at SF50,040), plus another five watches for the museum.

Finally, the company will produce 48 watches – 12 sets of four watches each – dedicated to the decorative arts. The dials of the *Métiers d'art* collection feature an image of Apollo and his chariot, created by engravers, jewelers and enamellers. There are no hands; hours, minutes, day and date are indicated through apertures on the dial. The watches are sold in sets of four expected to be priced between SF350,000 and SF450,000.

*Joe Thompson*