



# The Market's Verdict: Vacheron is back

**Record setters: Vacheron Constantin's King Fouad I pocket watch of 1929 (left) and the new Tour de l'Île double-faced complication wristwatch**



As most of you know, Vacheron Constantin is celebrating a unique anniversary this year. As we noted in our cover story in the last issue, Vacheron is the world's first watch firm to complete 250 years of uninterrupted watch production.

To me, the biggest day of Vacheron's big year was April 3. On that Sunday in Geneva, Antiquorum Auctioneers held a themed auction devoted entirely to Vacheron Constantin watches, where 250 lots went on the block. Like many, I was more than a little curious to see how the market would respond. Here's why.

Unlike some famous Swiss mechanical watch producers, Vacheron Constantin did not come roaring back after the quartz crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. The mechanical counter-revolution that followed the quartz revolution was led by the likes of Patek Philippe, Rolex, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Blancpain/Frederique Piguet, firms that were true "manufactures" and made their own movements.

Vacheron Constantin, for all of its historical prestige, came limping out of the quartz crisis. It was owned by the Ketterer family, who had run it since 1938. Among its many problems was that CEO Jacques Ketterer was ill. When he died in 1987, control of the firm passed to Sheik A. Z. Yamani, world famous as Saudi Arabia's oil minister and head of OPEC. He was a Vacheron Constantin devotee, but his interest in Vacheron reportedly had more to do with its magnificent real estate on Ile de la Cité in the Rhône River in Geneva's city center than with its historic watch legacy. Yamani hired Claude-Daniel Proelochs to run Vacheron.

I remember visiting Proelochs in those early days and listening to him explain that Vacheron was working in the great tradition of the Geneva

*établisseurs*, who made watches using the best materials from suppliers working around them in the Geneva watch district: a movement from here, cases from there, dials, hands, etc. from elsewhere. "We don't have to reinvent the wheel," he said. Proelochs shined the best light on Vacheron's situation, since it no longer manufactured movements. But the heroes of the mechanical watch boom of the 1990s were the *manufactures*, not the *établisseurs*, and Proelochs knew it.

He worked hard to restore the mechanical watch luster Vacheron had lost during the quartz crisis. A major turning point came when Sheik Yamani sold Vacheron to Richemont in 1996, and Vacheron got an infusion of capital. Two years later it took control of the complicated movement producer in the Vallée de Joux that had long been a major supplier to the firm. A few years later, work started on Vacheron's own sparkling new *manufacture*, which opened in 2004 in bustling Plan-les-Ouates on the outskirts of Geneva. There Vacheron now makes its own basic hand-wound and automatic calibers. Certainly, the new avant-garde building is a testament that Vacheron has resumed its place among the world's premier mechanical watch producers.

More impressive, however, was the testament of the April 3rd auction, which registered the market's verdict on the Vacheron revival. The sale totaled SF18.14 million (\$15.64 million), with both new and antique pieces fetching top, in some cases, record, prices. Noted Antiquorum chairman Osvaldo Patrizzi, "This sale clearly confirmed Vacheron Constantin's importance to the world of watch collecting, and reaffirmed its place in the top echelon of watch manufacturers."

We see that in the prices paid for first issues of Vacheron Constantin's 250th anniversary collection of limited edition watches, which we previewed in the last issue. The one-of-a-kind L'Esprit des Cabinotiers mystery clock set a world record for a Vacheron clock at SF2.21 million. The Tour de l'Île double-faced complicated wristwatch in rose gold set a world record for modern wristwatches at SF1.88 million. The Metiers d'Art set of four enamel dial watches sold for SF446,250 and the Saint Gervais platinum, tourbillon, perpetual calendar with 10-day-plus power reserve sold for SF446,249.

The show's star was the King Fouad I pocket watch, a Grande Complication piece presented to the King of Egypt in 1929 by the Swiss expatriate community there. The large watch, made of 18k gold and enamel, contains 12 complications, including a minute repeater, perpetual calendar and split-seconds chronograph. It sold for SF3.31 million, the highest price ever paid for a VC pocket watch, and the fifth highest price paid for any pocket watch at auction.

All of the watches are on view at Antiquorum's website, [www.antiquorum.com](http://www.antiquorum.com). They are well worth a look.