

The resurrection of Besançon

Museum of Time



› Keith W. Strandberg

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Watchmaking?

Ask anyone and they will most probably think of Switzerland, the watchmakers in Geneva and the Jura. Some might also mention Glashütte, Germany, including A. Lange & Söhne, Mühle Glashütte, Tutima and Glashütte Original in that group. France would be low on the list, but the city of Besançon, France is out to change that perception.

Besançon is the historical centre of watchmaking in France. A vibrant city with incredible energy, Besançon is poised to regain its title with the launch of several watchmaking concerns, support companies and the return to prominence of the Besançon Observatory.

The history

Besançon is only about an hour from Geneva, right over the Swiss/French border, so by virtue of its proximity and its access to the French market, Besançon became the centre for watchmaking in France.

Situated on a bend in the Doubs river, Besançon is a beautiful old city of about 220,000 people. The city has won the title of France's 'greenest city' and the Citadel that overlooks the centre of the city is an amazing historical site.

France's most famous watch brand, LIP watches, was founded in 1867 in Besançon. The company made about 10 million watches until they



closed their doors in the 70s, and signs of LIP in Besançon are visible throughout the city (The LIP trademark is now owned by the Manufacture Générale Horlogère). In the excellent watch and clock museum in Besançon, there are a number of references to LIP watches and some great old advertising placards from LIP.

Many Swiss companies had offices in France. Zenith, in fact, had a manufacturing concern in Besançon, making entire watches, including several movements, to avoid customs quotas and duties. The French production for Zenith had 'Fabrication Française' printed on the dial. Currently, several large companies have service centres and some manufacturing operations in Besançon. Timex has a big facility, as does Breitling. Also, the workshops of Muller Design/Development and Alain Silberstein are based in Besançon.

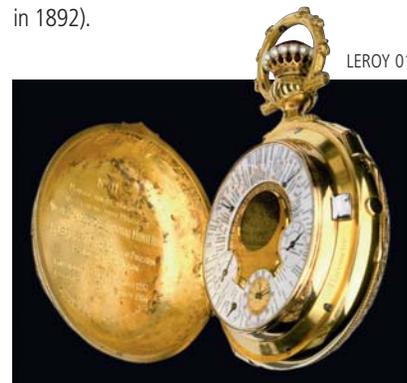
As for watchmaking, however, three companies have come to the forefront recently, raising the profile of Besançon: L. Leroy, Dodane and M. Benjamin; and the Observatory of Besançon has started certifying watches again.



L. Leroy: A leading French name resurfaces

L. Leroy is a famous mark from France, at one time one of the leading watchmakers in the world. Established in Paris in 1785, the founder, (Basle)-Charles Le Roy, was named Master Watchmaker, allowing him to open his company and workshop. Success followed: Le Roy was named 'Watchmaker to Her Imperial and Royal Highness, Madame the Mother of the Emperor (Napoleon)', Watchmaker to the Queen of England, as well as the Emperor of Brazil and Queen Isabelle II of Spain.

The famous Leroy 01 (on exhibit in the Besançon Museum of Time) was the most complicated watch in the world for almost 100 years and had been finished in the Besançon workshops of L. Leroy (the company had moved to Besançon to be closer to the heart of Swiss watchmaking in 1892).



LES GRANDES HEURES SCIENTIFIQUES by L. Leroy



The company continued to flourish and had a wealth of prestigious clients – Franklin D. Roosevelt, Alfred Noble, Antoine de St. Exupéry, Charles Lindbergh, Alberto Santos-Dumont, Frédéric Chopin, Marcel Proust and more.

In 2004, Miguel Rodriguez, founder and owner of Festina-Lotus SA, bought the L. Leroy brand and put it back in Besançon. Now, running the brand is Guillaume Tripet along with master watchmaker Bruno Laville.

“L. Leroy’s mission is to position itself as a ‘flagship’ of the renewal of the French watchmaking activities in the world of luxury,” Tripet explains. “France, the country of ultimate luxury, no longer has watch brands able to compete with the Swiss maisons. Those who could do so, produce most of their parts or their entire watches in Switzerland.

“To be fully consistent with our history and to restore L. Leroy’s visibility that the company would not have if we had chosen Switzerland for our rebirth, we decided on Besançon,” he continues. “Moreover, the very high level of know-how of the watchmakers here in Besançon allows us to claim a quality workforce that we probably would not find in other French cities. Finally, our collaboration with the Observatory and its certification skills were among the decisive aspects of our choice. For us, Besançon is the ‘heart and soul of French watchmak-

ing’ and L. Leroy must become the face of Besançon again.”

If Tripet has his way, one day soon Besançon will be the vibrant centre of French watch production and again gain worldwide recognition. “For many French people, Besançon is still the city of watchmaking excellence and it will be again,” Tripet concludes.

Reviving Dodane

The Dodane manufacture was founded in 1857 and rapidly became known in the world of watchmaking for its research ethos and its involvement in aviation. The Dodane family is native to the Val de Morteau, and they were the pioneers who cut the first villages out of the forest near the Swiss border.

Alphonse Dodane, with his father-in-law François-Xavier Joubert, created a watchmaking facility and ébauche workshop in the heart of the Doubs gorges, on the edge of the Swiss border, in order to make use of the hydraulic power from the river. The first Dodane watches were manufactured at that time in a factory employing 120 workers.

After that, the son of Alphonse Dodane, Raymond Dodane, moved the factory to Morteau (in France’s Haut Doubs region). Raymond Dodane diversified the company by manufacturing chronometric instruments for

aviation. In 1917, Dodane developed a reverse chronograph to improve the targeting of bombers. This development cemented the Dodane company with aviation.

In 1929, the third generation of the Dodane family settled in Besançon, and Dodane carried on the traditions of complicated watch fabrication. The company became one of the longest-standing authorized suppliers to NATO.

In 1983, Laurent and Michel succeeded their father Raymond in directing the company and produced up to 100,000 watches, distributed on all five continents. The House of Dodane was the only French company to have been certified for the fabrication of altimetric chronographs permitting parachutists to do night jumps with delayed openings. The company also created the 1/100th of a second timer for the control of the ejection seats used by Aerospatiale. Dodane also supplied many civil airlines, both in France and abroad, as well as to the Aéropostale, the French national department of education, and post and telecommunications offices.

The company folded, but the dream lived on in Laurent and his son Cedric Dodane and the Dodane family continued to supply onboard chronographs to the military, so their company quickly resurfaced as a NATO authorized supplier. Building on their family expertise, the

TYPE 21 by Dodane



company subsequently launched a wristwatch based on the legendary Dodane chronograph: the Type 21.

"When we relaunched, we started all over again with total financial independence," says Cedric Dodane. "Our resources were very restricted but we had the firm intention to not let go of five generations of watchmaking heritage. Our main objective is to put the customer at the heart of our job. We wish to propose products with a good price/quality ratio, and with personalized and exclusive service always by being tuned in to the expectations of the clients. It is what differentiates us to the other watch actors who often forget that it is their customers who are important.

"Our watches are adjusted carefully in order to be able to be certified as a 'chronometer' by the National Observatory of Time Measurement in Besançon, using ISO standard 3159," Dodane continues. "The Time and Frequency Scientific Research Department continually



ensures chronometric testing on mechanical watches, and the Type 21 has been able to benefit from this prestigious service, just like the original watch in the 1950's. The uniqueness of this ISO 3159 test is that it applies only to a fully assembled watch and not to uncased movements (COSC certifies uncased movements)."

Dodane is committed to supplying the military, which was its exclusive niche in years gone by, but also plans to branch out sales to the general public as well, a sort of French Panerai, if you will. "We take advantage of our watchmaking know-how by conceiving and by selling onboard chronographs and wristwatches which answer the requirements of the professionals and the public," Dodane says. "The pilots require a high level of reliability, performance and quality. The instruments must be able to support extreme conditions of acceleration and temperature variations while preserving functioning and precision."

Currently, Dodane produces about 1,000 military watches a year, with additional civilian limited editions.

"The main objective of the company is to protect the watchmaking know-how of the Dodane family," Dodane adds. "So, our motivation is more than strong and our dedication is total. We work as a family: my father, my brother, my wife and I, as well as two master watchmakers."

M. Benjamin

Watchmaker Benjamin Muller came by his interest in watchmaking honestly – he got it from his father, Jean Muller, who launched the Bugatti brand in the 1980s. In 1999, Benjamin joined his father's company, which has worked with such brands as Girard-Perregaux, Dior, Louis Vuitton, De Beers, Richard Mille, Montblanc, Van Cleef & Arpels, Chopard, Leviev, Guy Ellia, DeLaneau, TAG Heuer and more. Last year, Benjamin decided to launch his own brand, M. Benjamin, with the Spyder collection. Using a very unique skeleton design, one that is instantly recognizable and doesn't resemble anything on the market, M. Benjamin has a good chance of really succeeding.



Benjamin Muller

"I started one year ago, after working ten years for my father's company," says Muller. "I work with Concepto to realize my movement designs, then a network of suppliers in Switzerland and in France to finish the watches.

SPYDER Collection by Benjamin Muller



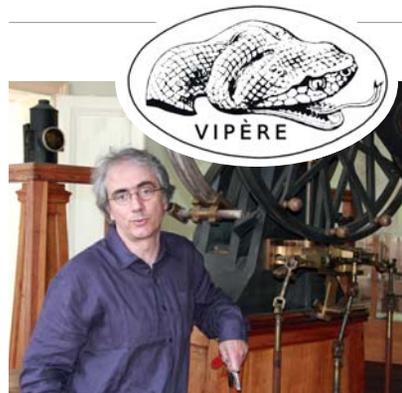
For me, the watch embodies the spirit of luxury sports cars with the engines on view – like Ferrari and Lamborghini. My movements are all in a line and everything is out there to see.” Muller still lives in Besançon and it’s important to him that his company use the city as a base. “In the future, my watches will also receive the certification of the Observatory of Besançon,” he says. “I think it will be possible to bring Besançon back to the forefront of the watchmaking industry – it’s already happening.”

The Besançon Observatory

The last piece of the puzzle is the Observatory of Besançon, which is once again certifying watches as chronometers. The Observatory was established in 1887 and has been involved in chronometric certifications from the start, as it was created for the local and national watch industry.

The certification of watches is just a very small part of the Observatory’s work. “Here, the main activity is time and frequency measurement, at the nanosecond level,” says Dr. François Meyer, Time and Frequency Team, the Observatory of Besançon. “Though the Observatory stopped watch certification for a period of time, the know-how to certify chronometers has not disappeared. We can measure to one billionth of a second, so we can easily do one second.

“Manufactures are coming back to the fundamentals, like precision, so chronometric certification is becoming more in demand,” he continues. “We hope that Leroy will lead companies back here to control their watches.” (Editor’s note: Laurent Ferrier certifies his watches here.) The Observatory currently certifies about 100 watches a year, but has capacity to do up to 1,000 watches a year. Watches that are certified at Besançon receive the legendary mark of the Viper. “The Viper mark was started in 1897, but I don’t know why they use a snake,” Dr. Meyer says. “There are legends about a snake woman here, maybe this is related to the mark. I would be very curious if anyone has knowledge about this.” *Europa Star* readers, please help!



Dr. François Meyer

The future

“Besançon, the capital of the French watchmaking actually enjoyed its heyday until the 70’s and even at this time, large companies such as Kelton Timex numbered more than 3,000 employees within its plant in Besançon,” details Didier Sikkink, Deputy Director, the Mayor of Besançon’s Cabinet. “Then various economic problems led to this industry to decline sharply and later to almost disappear in the early 90s. The local know-how enabled several brands to remain on-site with their after-sales services such as Breitling, Tissot, Audemars Piguet, Festina and gradually a new network of watchmakers arose, no longer based on large productions, but based on a know-how of the watchmakers here. More recently Festina has heavily invested in building its French distribution subsidiary, Breitling has grown in scope and Leroy has established its luxury watchmaking in Besançon. Aware of its assets and taking into consideration this dynamic willing, the city of Besançon has decided to support this movement and to involve itself within an approach that gives value to our territory within this niche market in which Besançon could excel in the past.

“Leroy is now settled in Besançon and Breitling has recently announced the creation of a new site dedicated to customer service and to train its dealer network,” he continues. “Further contacts are being explored with major brands. We rely heavily on our Observatory which delivers the stamp of the Besançon Viper. We will host the 2013 chronometric competition in partnership and agreement with the town of Le Locle, Switzerland. It is quite clear for the entire watch industry that Besançon remains an area of knowledge for high level watchmaking and our approach is fairly welcome which is essential for the future.”

Besançon is working hard to recapture the legacy it had in watchmaking and if Dodane and L. Leroy are any indication of how things will be, Besançon has a real opportunity to once again become the centre of French watchmaking and rival the Swiss. <