

PASSION ACROSS TIME

In the late 1980s, Peter Stas and his wife, Aletta Stas-Bax, were frustrated by the lack of reasonably priced fine watches. So, they decided to start their own company offering to watch lovers a new class of watch, calling it accessible luxury, and thus Frédérique Constant was born.

M “When we started this project, we were our own target market,” says Peter Stas, founder and CEO, with a smile. “We always wanted to make watches with great designs, so we really focused on the details; we wanted the watches to be as beautiful as possible—for example, the engraving and printing on the dials are very refined, especially for our price segment.”

At the beginning, Frédérique Constant was a typical Swiss watch company, designing watches, buying ETA or other movements and outsourcing just about everything else from the excellent network of suppliers throughout Switzerland. Then, Stas began to notice that as suppliers became overloaded, movement availability was restricted by the movement makers, and customers started to focus on the “heart” of the watch.

“We still purchase about 45,000 mechanical movements (from ETA, Sellita, etc.),” Stas explains. “But we were not allowed to buy greater quantities, so to grow, we decided to begin our own production. In the atelier here, we assemble about 5,000 of our own movements. To get the Heart Beat movement oriented exactly the way we wanted, we had to make it ourselves.”

In 2005, Frédérique Constant moved into its current manufacturing space, a purpose-built facility in Plan-les-Ouates, Geneva, among some of the giants of watchmaking: Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin and Piaget. Here,

Frédérique Constant assembles its own movements, including its in-house tourbillon, and produces a total of 100,000 per year. Frédérique Constant has its own design department, using state-of-the-art computer systems, as well as its own CNC machines for making critical parts, which gives the company an advantage.

“We do everything with our network of suppliers except certain key movement parts,” Stas details. “This gives us enormous flexibility. We can be much quicker. Suppliers often don’t have the capacity and can’t work fast enough to supply our demand, but we have the ability to make the parts ourselves.” Frédérique Constant has a bevy of specialized testing equipment, designed and developed in-house, including innovative quality control and water-resistance machines. These help Frédérique Constant stand out as an affordable luxury brand, with a core price range of \$600–2,000.

Stas is rightfully proud of his company and what he and Aletta have accomplished. He attributes the success to the company’s focus on three pillars—design, quality and innovation. All the designs for Frédérique Constant are created by Stas and his wife, then worked on by the company’s dedicated designers before they go into prototyping and production. “We have six or seven dial suppliers who work closely with us to realize our designs,” Stas explains. “My great grandfather, Constant Stas,
continued on page 52



The Frédérique Constant Maxime Manufacture Automatic in steel, the example at left with an 18 karat rose gold-capped bezel.



CONSTANT MOTION

THE FRÉDÉRIQUE CONSTANT RUNABOUT CHRONO AUTOMATIC

Perpetuating its three pillars of design, quality and innovation, Frédérique Constant pays tribute to the Runabout—a legendary and luxurious class of teakwood motor yachts of the 1920s—with an elegant duo of automatic chronographs in a limited edition of 1,888 pieces each in steel and rose gold plate. The brand is also celebrating its involvement in the fourth annual Hélice Classique, a sophisticated sailing event honoring the classic Runabouts, organized by the Société Nautique de Genève on Lake Geneva, Switzerland.

The Runabout Chrono Automatic's round 43mm case is hand-polished and displays a silvered dial decorated with central Pavé de Paris guilloché. Under a convex sapphire crystal, the case-matching applied and polished indices guarantee legibility. The

chronograph subdials appear at 12 (minutes) and 6 (hours). The date is also found at 6 and small seconds at 9. In keeping with the watch's maritime theme, a boat's propeller is engraved on the caseback and a porthole offers a view of the manufacture FC-392 movement with 42-hour power reserve. The Runabout is water-resistant to 100 meters and is finished with a calf leather strap with water-resistant lining and a case-matching buckle.

To emphasize the special value of this timepiece, it is delivered in a gift box that includes a miniature replica of a Runabout yacht. Frédérique Constant dedicates this new model to all passionate sailors—especially those who are captivated by the style and grace of the famous Runabout. ❖

—Bill Albers, assistant editor



The rose gold-plated Runabout Chrono Automatic in its presentation box; front and back views of the steel Runabout Chrono Automatic (opposite).



The Love Heart Beat watch (top) in two variations and Frédérique Constant headquarters in Plan-les-Ouates, Switzerland.

“Our cases are rounded and polished
This requires that all our cases are
something that is typically

because we like the ergonomic feel.
polished by hand, which is not
done at this price point.”

—Peter Stas

had a lithography company where some of the dial manufacturers are today—it was founded in 1904, and he also made clock dials, which were etched, so we have a historical connection to great dial work.”

The second pillar, quality, is something near and dear to Stas’s heart. Attention to detail is a hallmark for Frédérique Constant. “I love the mechanics, the engine parts, the technology that goes into making our time-pieces, the software to make and create it, and the design that goes into the great details,” Stas says. “I get a kick out of managing all the parts and the specifications.”

Frédérique Constant takes many additional steps to ensure quality, because, as Stas says, “Last year, we made 100,000 watches, and we work as hard as we can to eliminate any customer dissatisfaction.” No number, however small, of unhappy customers is acceptable to Stas.

The facility that Frédérique Constant occupies illustrates the company’s dedication to quality. The watchmaking area is a giant clean room, where dust and dirt are blown off people’s clothing as they enter, and the air surrounding the watchmaking stations is completely replaced six times a day. “All the air in the building is specially filtered, which takes all the dust out of the air, and it is done because of the critical assembly,” says Stas. “We have a special camera to check the sizes and specs of parts. We have special waterproof testers, which we developed with the manufacturer. We also have a testing machine that can evaluate precision and can even tell us which tooth on the gear has a problem, so it can be easily fixed.”

The last pillar of the company is innovation, which Stas sees as essential in today’s competitive watch industry. “We have an ultra-modern facility, which offers the best environment for our watchmakers; we have in-house CAD-CAM and CNC machines; we have our own manufacture tourbillon—we are open, collaborative and entrepreneurial,” Stas details. “Our tourbillon is really outside our scope of affordable luxury, but we did it to stimulate and motivate our watchmakers and to show we have the high-end watchmaking capability. It retails for \$45,000, and it uses our own silicium escapement. Every part is made in house and checked for accuracy.”

Frédérique Constant was classical before classical was cool. Since its introduction more than two decades ago, the brand has stayed true to its roots. “Classical is a trend now, but we have been ultra-classical for 20 years now,” Stas says. “Many other brands moved away from our segment and left it for us. That’s why we grew from 48,000 watches to 100,000 watches in just two years, because everyone else vacated this market. We have also made a concerted effort to create much more brand awareness.”

“The Heart Beat watches are our iconic watches, but they are only 30 percent of our total production,” Stas continues. “We have the entry-level automatics, Maxime, Slimline and Persuasion. No single collection produces more than 50 percent of our sales, which is healthy.”

The US, one of the world’s largest markets for watches, is still largely untapped by Frédérique Constant. The brand recently opened its own distribution office in the US, where currently, sales represent 3–4 percent of the brand’s total sales, which for Stas is much too low. He hopes that this figure will grow, so that the US eventually accounts for 10–15 percent of Frédérique Constant’s total sales.

“I have the feeling that people are now taking us seriously,” Stas says. “We don’t have much to lose in the US market, because it is such a small part of our overall sales. We currently have about 40 retailers in the US, but by the end of 2010, we want to have about 100. There are not many Swiss-made, Geneva-made watches in the \$600–2,000 price range, other than Frédérique Constant.”

Stas is determined to stay consistent with Frédérique Constant’s spirit—classic and elegant, as well as accessible. Stas is true to his *raison d’être*, which is to “live your passion.” Stas’s passions are product development and attention to detail, which are clearly evident in Frédérique Constant watches. Stas is proud to have created Frédérique Constant and to have celebrated 20 years of watchmaking last year—a milestone that is perhaps becoming increasingly rare in these tough economic times. ❖

By Keith W. Strandberg, international editor. To learn more about Frédérique Constant, telephone 877.619.2824 or visit www.frederique-constant.com.



from top—Peter Stas; the limited edition Heart Beat Manufacture Tourbillon with silicon escapement; quality control at Frédérique Constant.