

THE NEW BESPOKE

SPEAKING THE IDEAL WATCH INTO BEING

In today's watch world, more and more people are seeking out the unique, the special, the out of the ordinary. For those who want a truly distinctive watch, how about a custom watch, a *pièce unique*, modified to the individual's wishes so that there will never be another one exactly like it? Today, it's possible to get just about anything in any watch, for those who are willing to make the necessary investment.

This is nothing new—the Marie Antoinette watch from Breguet was a special order (the watchmaker was told to make the “most spectacular” watch possible) in 1783, and one of the most famous watches ever made is one commissioned by New York banker Henry Graves, Jr. from Patek Philippe in 1932, who charged Patek Philippe with designing and producing the world's most complicated pocket watch, now known as the Supercomplication. In 1999, this watch sold at Sotheby's for \$11 million. What *is* new is the technology now dedicated to configuring unique pieces for clients and the affordability of many custom watches. One need not be a Henry Graves or a Marie Antoinette to own one's ideal timepiece.

Vacheron Constantin: Quai de l'Île

For special projects, Vacheron Constantin has a dedicated department called the Atelier Cabinotiers Special Order, where customers can specify exactly what they want in a watch. Vacheron Constantin has also introduced a program that allows customers to customize watches in the Quai de l'Île line, using a state-of-the-art touch screen. Customers choose material combinations for the seven-piece case, dial colors with the latest security printing technologies, movement finishing and strap material and color. In all, there are more than 400 possible combinations available.

“It's the first time a brand of high watch-

making offers this kind of personalization,” says Christian Selmoni, marketing product director for Vacheron Constantin. “We wanted to offer our clientele the opportunity to personalize our complicated watches. It takes three months to get the watch—to start, only the day/date power reserve model is customizable. The price range for the watch is \$29,900–\$49,900, and customization adds 20 percent to the price.”

Cartier Special Order

Cartier has been offering special order custom timepieces since its earliest days. In fact, some of the most famous Cartier collections, such as the Santos and the Pasha, began as custom pieces. “Fulfilling special orders belongs to the DNA of Cartier; we've been doing it for years,” says Frederic de Narp, president of Cartier North America. “A customer simply goes to a boutique and talks with the sales people, and they communicate the special request to the factory. For example, we did an enamel watch with a portrait of a beautiful woman; it was fabulous. We do the drawings in our design department; then it goes through our creative committee, and even Bernard Fornas, the worldwide head of Cartier, has to sign off on it. There are some things we will not do, of course. And we never downgrade a product; for example, we will not make a tourbillon in steel. On the contrary, we will upgrade a product. We have aesthetic rules that we follow with special orders. We con-



The Vacheron Constantin Quai de l'Île (above) in rose gold and titanium and the Cartier Tank Americaine XL in rose gold.

sider each design individually.” Prices vary, depending on the customization, the materials, the precious jewels and so on. Cartier is now fielding more requests for unique watches than ever before.

Audemars Piguet: Flexibility for Individual Pieces

Audemars Piguet is aware of the trend toward customization and is well poised to take advantage of the opportunities. “I believe that special commission watches are interesting and are the wave of the future for the luxury watch industry,” says Octavio Garcia, design manager, at Audemars Piguet. “We are seeing it in the auto industry, where customers are allowed to customize. I think it could be an interesting experience to have a customer go into a retailer and pick the dial color, the strap and more. We had a client come into the factory and ask for orange in the Royal Oak Concept, because he didn’t like the green color, and we made the watch for him. We have the flexibility, and the demand is definitely increasing.”

Jean Dunand: Pièce Unique

Jean Dunand takes the concept of exclusivity to the highest level; every watch in its “collection” is produced as a one-of-a-kind pièce unique. Founded in 2005, Jean Dunand has been phenomenally successful with three basic models: the Grand Complication, the Tourbillon Orbital and the Shabaka.



The Jean Dunand Shabaka in rose gold (above) and the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Carbon Concept Tourbillon Chronograph.



Co-founder Thierry Oulevay knew there was a place for a brand that was firmly entrenched at the top of the high end, but he also knew it would demand extraordinary quality, incredible design and amazing creativity. Within the pièce unique concept, it’s possible for a client to personalize any model. “We welcome customers to personalize their Jean Dunand timepieces,” says Oulevay. “However, the request needs to be in harmony with the artistic style inherent to the brand. We will not craft a timepiece if it doesn’t respect the brand’s DNA.” This customization can add to the cost, based on materials, and it certainly delays the delivery of the watch.

Hautlence: Special Requests

Hautlence only makes a few hundred watches each year, but there are some clients for whom that is not exclusive enough. So, Hautlence accepts special requests. “We have already done some customization on request, such as painting a flag on the dial, engraving a name and so on,” says Guillaume Tetu, COO at Hautlence. “Some people want a special material like platinum, or a special setting with baguette diamonds. We are able to produce unique pieces and customize on request.”



The Hautlence HLd08 Arabie Saoudite (above) and the Zenith Defy Extreme Stealth 1000M.

Zenith: Only One Watch

Zenith has a special program called “Only One Watch” in which the brand will customize existing collections or even design special models for clients. “The latter are rather expensive, but fantastic, of course,” says Thierry Nataf, worldwide president of Zenith. “These watches do fantastic at Christie’s and Sotheby’s auctions. But everything has a price, of course.”

Kobold and Explorer Ben Saunders

At 31, Ben Saunders is one of today’s most accomplished and successful explorers. When he embarks on an expedition, he is often on his own; his very existence is on the line, dependent on his skill at surviving the isolation, the disorientation and the cold. Everything he takes with him is either custom-made or modified to fit his uses, including his watch. That’s why he chose Kobold, a small company based in Pittsburgh, PA, that specializes in watches for explorers. Saunders’ Polar Surveyor II comes standard in steel, but steel freezes to the skin at the extreme temperatures Saunders encounters, so Kobold made him a special watch using titanium instead. “I asked for titanium because of the cold and because I am obsessive about saving weight,” Saunders says.

According to Michael Kobold, customizing a Kobold timepiece takes only a little extra investment and the willingness to wait for the custom work to be done. “All you have to do is call us and tell us what you want,” Kobold says. “The custom projects take a lot of time, between six months for simple things and two to three years for something really unusual. We have received requests for everything from printing names on dials to one-of-a-kind movements in one-of-a-kind cases.”

Bremont Watch

A small company that was started by the brothers Nick and Giles English, Bremont specializes in aircraft-inspired timepieces. The brothers incorporate metal from the original aluminum wing skin of a combat-tested Spitfire into a limited edition watch, the EP120. “In terms of customization, one emotive thing we have been asked to do is have the number 601

(from the famed 601 Squadron of World War II) inscribed onto the back of the EP120 watch,” says Nick English. “The chap is 90 years old and flew Spitfires during the war. A friend of his is buying it for him. I think that is a lovely story—especially because he is from such a special squadron.”

Look for more watch manufacturers to make customization options available. These special requests might require lengthy production time and cost more, but they can certainly be done—allowing a watch lover to create the pièce unique of his or her dreams. ❖

Article by Keith W. Strandberg, international editor. Find contact information for featured brands on pages 140–141.



The Bremont Spitfire EP120