

# THE UNIQUE ART *of* Diamond Setting

By Keith W. Strandberg

Diamond and precious stone-set watches are more popular than ever before. Sparkling stones on a watch can transform an ordinary timepiece into something spectacular and take an already spectacular watch and make it unforgettable.

There is an art to stone setting and to get inside the atelier, I talked with the people who know – the gem setting experts at Harry Winston, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Vacheron Constantin.

## Design

Many “entry level” diamond watches are just normal watches with diamonds on them. At the highest level, however, the diamonds are an integral part of the overall design of the watch.

“Harry Winston’s diamond-driven style is the culmination of efforts and skills between gemologists, designers and craftsman, working together to create exquisite jewels and watches,” says Didier Decker, Vice President, Manufacturing and Geneva Facility, **Harry Winston**. “In practice, once a design is finalized, our technical department provides a gem setting plan. Then, stones are selected by our expert gemologists according to the requirements of this plan.

The setting is dependent on the watch, what possibilities it presents, “then we see what kind of stones we will use, round or square,” details Stefan Richi, Gem Setting Manager, **Jaeger-LeCoultre**. “If the stones are round, we use grain or snow setting, and if the stone is square, we use a closed setting.

“When we have a definitive design, all the stones will be on the plan of the design,” Richi continues. “After, we have to discuss with the designer and the setter, because it may not be possible to do exactly what they want. We might be able to put more diamonds there.”

The stones themselves have to be exactly the right size. “When designing the watch, we consider the size of the diamonds,”



Christian Selmoni, marketing product director, **Vacheron Constantin**, says. “We work with companies who supply us the diamonds cut to the right dimensions. We receive the lot of diamonds so we can set the whole watch. Each diamond is individually cut to be set into the watch. The stone setter works with us as we develop the watch, so when the watch is ready to be set, there are no bad surprises. On the technical drawing, each stone has an individual number, so the setter knows where it goes on the watch.”

## Setting the Stones

There are basically two methods for setting – traditional (manual) and by machine. Lower end watches often use machine-setting, as it’s faster and cheaper. Most higher end watches use traditional setting, as it results in better quality. Sometimes even the high end brands use machines to prepare the case for setting, to make sure the initial holes are as precise as they can be, but then the stones are set and finished by hand.

“Machine setting is a more time-efficient method, however the overall aesthetic will never match the intricacy and look of traditional setting,” says Harry Winston’s Decker. “While a piece set traditionally by hand takes a lot of time, it guarantees a handcrafted look.

“At Harry Winston we exclusively use the traditional method,” he continues. “In preparing the cases, we sometimes use machines for grain setting, which means digging the small holes for the stones. After this initial step, however, there is then significant manual work done to finalize the setting preparation. Setting is truly an art, and finding the best craftsmen is imperative in order to maintain Winston’s elevated standards of quality and design.”

Vacheron Constantin only hand sets its watches, sometimes using machines to prepare the case. "What we set in-house is always done by hand," Selmoni says. "We do only high jewelry timepieces that are set by hand. For certain kinds of stone setting, for aesthetic reasons it's better to have something more symmetrical and preparing the case by machines helps us maintain the clean aesthetics."

In watches that are covered in diamonds, the skill of the stone setter really comes into play, as it's up to this master craftsman to figure out which stone goes where, like a jigsaw puzzle.

"On some watches, we use the 'snow' setting, with different size stones, with no metal in between," says Stefan Richi, Gem Setting Manager, Jaeger-LeCoultre. "For this setting, the setter has to prepare the case himself. You put one stone near the next, because you cannot know which stone comes next. We mix very small diamonds of 0.5 mm with big stones 1.8 mm."

The hallmark of artistic and high level setting is how alive the stones are – which is dictated by how much light can enter the stones.

"The setting of a Harry Winston watch is recognizable by the minimum space between the stones and by the path of light, which the jewel-setter achieves by turning the watch in his hand as he sets each diamond, each reflecting in the next," says Harry Winston's Decker. "The result is unequalled levels of brilliance. When stones are perfectly set, the watch feels very smooth and delicate to the touch without any bumps or roughness.

"In developing our Jewels that Tell Time such as the 'Cluster of Time,' unveiled this year at BaselWorld, we partner with Harry Winston's jewelry workshop in New York to achieve the same ultra-fine settings of our diamond jewelry designs," he continues. "In this exclusive piece, a combination of round, pear and marquise shaped diamonds are artfully angled to maximize brilliance and light. Each of the 1,038 diamonds are individually set in ultra-fine platinum wire, creating the effect that diamonds are almost floating in their setting."



"If I could, I would attach the diamonds directly onto a woman's skin."

(Harry Winston)

#### Added Value

In gem set watches, there is value in both the setting and the stones. Not only are the stones the best these high end watch companies can buy, the setting is artistic and beautiful and can take a great deal of time, depending on the setting and the number of diamonds. In some cases, the setting alone can take more than a month.

"For all diamond watches, we provide a certificate of the quality of the diamonds," says Jaeger's Richi. "Now, more and more people are aware of diamonds, and our retailers are informed so they can communicate about the settings and the quality of the diamonds. Look for the spaces between the stones – the closer they are, the more diamonds there are, the more expensive the watch will be."

At Harry Winston, diamonds are the brand's best friends. "For Harry Winston, diamonds are an integral part of our DNA, so setting a fine timepiece with precious stones or diamonds is not merely a 'finishing touch,' explains Decker. "Diamonds add a meaningful value and an unmatched brilliance to the piece. And in some instances, like Opus 9, diamonds even provide a real function, telling the time. This happens only at Harry Winston."

Diamonds and precious stones on a watch can make all the difference. "I like the use of diamonds in feminine and creative ways," says Vacheron's Selmoni. "As Vacheron is very masculine and technical, it is very challenging to develop watches with a creative setting. This is very interesting for us. I like the Lady Kala Flame, using the Flame cut. We are the first brand to present the flame cut diamonds in watchmaking, it's an asymmetrical cut. It's a very creative, bold and contemporary watch."

Precious stones – diamonds, sapphires, rubies and more – on a timepiece can have a dazzling effect when set correctly. It's all in the details – design, technique, choice of stones and the actual art of setting all come together to make these watches magical.



Invisible settings have become extremely popular at the high end. "In 2009, we launched a high complication that had a case totally set with special cut diamonds, and they are set with the invisible set technique, which is very modern and difficult," says Vacheron's Selmoni. "We use this technique because it allows you to really see the diamonds – it looks like the case itself is made of diamonds, you can barely see the case. To do this kind of setting, you need really experienced and masterful setters. There are only about 15 people who can do this and we have one of these in-house."

