

## THE COLLECTORS

# A design that's all yours

Opportunities to create a bespoke watch come in almost every price range and with any kind of feature

BY KATHLEEN BECKETT

Although the market offers thousands of watches, if none of them look quite right, you can design your own.

There are different ways to go about it: You can design a watch based entirely on your vision and imagination, or tweak a version of an existing watch. The process can take hours or years. It can cost from the low four figures to a sum with almost too many zeros to count.

The desired design can be turned into a timepiece by an independent watchmaker, or by a watch house, or by you. Almost anything is possible.

Ahmed Rahman, a London businessman, followed one popular route, using a watch created by an independent brand as the starting point for his own ideas.

While Mr. Rahman was attending the 2018 Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie fair (now called Watches and Wonders) in Geneva, "I saw De Bethune's DB25 Moon Phase Starry Sky," he said. "I thought it was stunning."

Stunning but not quite right. "My biggest gripe was the watch is too big," Mr. Rahman said. It is made in 42-millimeter, but he wanted 40. It came in white gold; he wanted platinum.

At the fair, Mr. Rahman met De Bethune's chief executive, Pierre Jacques, who said the brand would work with him to create the watch he desired.

And so began months of back and forth. Because the case size was being reduced, there would be no room for the power reserve indicator on the front; it would have to move to the back. Mr. Jacques proposed encircling the case with diamonds. No, Mr. Rahman said, but Mr. Jacques had another idea: What about diamonds instead of white gold for the stars on the dial? Done.

One special design idea really made the watch unique to Mr. Rahman. "The dial would show the constellations just exactly as they were at the time and place

of my birth: January 31, 1978, in Bangladesh," he said.

Eight or so months later, when the timepiece finally arrived, Mr. Rahman said he was delighted. "It was more than I expected," he said. "The diamonds against the blue titanium sky is gorgeous."

The price for such a personal treasure? "It cost about 15 percent above the catalog price," Mr. Rahman said, which he recalled was about 75,000 Swiss francs (about \$81,420).

Another London-based watch collector, Michael Hickcox, has designed two watches with the respected independent watchmaker Kari Voutilainen — both times in a group project with five fellow enthusiasts.

About 10 years ago, each man in the group designed his own version of a chronograph, a process one of them, Gary Getz, a noted California watch collector, described in an online post. Mr. Voutilainen then made the pieces.

The project was so successful that the group is at it again, but because the base watch they are working from involves a new movement and is still being developed, Mr. Hickcox said he had to be rather hush-hush about the plan. But he was happy to share some of the lessons he has learned.

Be open to change, he said, because what seems like a good idea does not necessarily turn out that way.

"Most of the ideas I wanted to incorporate didn't look right" when they were rendered, Mr. Hickcox said. "There was a watch that I referenced that had a black dial, and I wanted the same indications on my watch. But transposed on a rendering, it was way too busy. It didn't work on this watch."

"I went from a very busy indication of minutes on the dial, to just having minute markers every five minutes," he added. "It sounds like a simple thing, but where it ended up makes my watch so beautiful. It's a very restrained, almost

stark approach. It's not where I started." Designing your own watch isn't for everyone, Mr. Hickcox cautioned.

Deliberations on the new design "wouldn't keep most people up nights," he said, but he noted that he had done lots of tossing and turning, deciding whether to go with Mr. Voutilainen's new squared lugs, which are "rather sporty," or the watchmaker's signature teardrop shape. The originals won.

"It all takes time," he said, "and not everyone wants to wait. Discussion for this new watch started two years ago." The piece, though, won't be ready until 2021 or later.

And although he won't say how much the collaborations cost, he does concede that the process is expensive. "The pressure can be quite difficult," he said, adding, "You don't want to make a 100,000 Swiss franc mistake."

There are, however, significantly less expensive ways to design your own

watch. You can even build it yourself.

Initium, a Swiss company with branches in Geneva's Old Town, the village of Le Noirmont in the Jura Mountains and outside Zurich, can make that happen in as little as half a day.

"We don't make you a watchmaker," Gilles Francfort, the business's co-founder, said. "You choose what you want from different watch parts. We have many, many hands and cases, millions of possibilities. At any one time, we might have 150 bracelets to choose from, 23 cases, 13 movements, 25 hands and 45 dials."

With those extensive combinations, he said, "our aim is that every participant makes a unique watch."

Initium offers a half-day program in which "you won't touch the movement," Mr. Francfort said, "but in the full-day option, our best seller, you get to assemble the movement. We focus on everything that makes you understand how it

works — wheels, escapement, gears — you will assemble all of that. You understand each part of the watch."

The cost ranges from 1,690 Swiss francs, for a half day working with a manual winding movement, to 2,690 Swiss francs, for a full day making an automatic winding movement. In time for holiday gift giving, or for those who can't travel to Switzerland, Initium plans to offer a home kit; it is also adding a new tourbillon watch course. (At the moment, Switzerland does require visitors arriving from some countries to complete a 10-day quarantine.)

And then there's Les Cabinotiers, Vacheron Constantin's elite group of master watchmakers and artisans, whose job is to create one-of-a-kind masterpieces. When it comes to fulfilling a collector's dreams, there is almost nothing its members will not do.

"The sky's the limit," Christian Selmoni, Vacheron Constantin's style and heritage director, said. "We do unique pieces that combine watchmaking complications and decorative arts, whether engraving, guilloché or enameling." (He declined to discuss price.)

It is white glove service all the way. Those with watches on order are invited to come to the atelier in Geneva and see their designs being made, or, if traveling to Switzerland is not possible, Vacheron Constantin will send someone to them.

The process can take "at least 18 months," Mr. Selmoni said, although one notable project took eight years. "A very important collector requested a bespoke pocket watch," he said. "He wanted a perpetual Hebrew calendar" — and much more.

"Vacheron Constantin offered a combination of complications," he said. "At the end of the day he chose 57 complications. He wanted the most complicated watch ever made." And he got it.

**Do it yourself**  
At Initium, below, a Swiss company, consumers can enroll in half- or full-day programs to build their own watches. Below right, six models, all based on one chronograph, that Kari Voutilainen created for a group of collectors.



## IN THE INDUSTRY

## Electronics with elegance

Brands like TAG Heuer and Louis Vuitton still believe there is a market for luxury smartwatches

BY ROBIN SWITHINBANK

In 2015, TAG Heuer introduced the Connected, the Swiss watch industry's first luxury smartwatch.

Five years later, the category it defined — and that now includes offerings from the likes of Montblanc and Hublot — has yet to really take off. But brands are still rolling out new models and predicting success.

Sales of wearable technology have grown this year, at least partly driven by health applications. The Apple Watch Series 6 sensor app, for example, measures blood oxygenation, a possible indicator of coronavirus infection.

According to a report published in September by the market research company International Data Corporation, the global market for wearables, which includes wristbands, watches, in-ear devices and the like, will grow by 14.5 percent this year, shipping a total of almost 400 million products. The report forecasts that the watch category will total 91.4 million units, rising to 156 million by 2024.

Swiss smartwatch manufacturers hope their high-end models, priced at \$1,000 and up, will help protect brand profitability. But there's a long way to go. Even TAG Heuer's sales have been far from earth-shattering.

"Over the last five years, we have sold between 100,000 and 150,000," said Frédéric Arnault, TAG Heuer's new chief executive, referring to the Connected. (The third-generation Connected, which runs Google's Wear OS operating system and retails from \$1,800, was introduced in March.)

Vontobel, the Swiss private bank, estimates that TAG Heuer produced 600,000 watches in 2019 — which would mean that the Connected accounts for about 5 percent of the company's annual sales by volume.

Price is clearly a big factor in the lux-

ury smartwatch sector's performance, especially now that luxury sales have plunged since the spread of the coronavirus.

The new Apple Watch SE, a lower-end model than the Series 6, retails from \$279, and Samsung's top-end Galaxy Watch 3 starts at \$399.

In contrast, Hublot's Big Bang e smartwatch costs \$5,200, even though it uses the same Qualcomm Snapdragon Wear 3100 processor found in Fossil watches that cost a few hundred dollars (and in TAG Heuer's Connected). "We will sell around 5,000 pieces a year," said Ricardo Guadalupe, the company's chief executive.

For many outside the industry, it is no surprise that there are not more luxury smartwatches.

"True luxury objects should be free from obsolescence," said the Swiss-based designer Ini Arribong, who last year worked with Hermès on the Galop d'Hermès watch, which is not a smartwatch. "Their intrinsic value should come from something beyond their use value."

A relatively short operating life is not the only threat: Switzerland still lacks the skill base to develop its own technologies. So even though some brands are owned by large, well-financed groups — TAG Heuer, Hublot and Louis Vuitton by LVMH; Montblanc by Richemont; Tissot by Swatch Group; Frédérique Constant by Citizen — most rely on third parties such as Google and Qualcomm for hardware and software.

Some, however, have developed proprietary applications in a bid to add value and desirability: TAG Heuer's sports and golf applications, for example, were developed by the Paris-based TAG Heuer Connected Team, a group that was acquired by the brand for an undisclosed sum in 2018.

Retailers have also not lost faith. "We have been running waiting lists on the TAG Heuer Connected since launch" of



**High-end high-tech** The Tissot T-Touch Connect Solar, above, Swatch's solar-powered touch-screen smartwatch. Left, the Apple Watch Series 6, which has a sensor and app to measure blood oxygenation.

"Swatch Group always said they would never touch smartwatches, and now they've come with the new T-Touch," he said. "It's clear they've seen the light."

He was referring to the Tissot T-Touch Connect Solar, a solar-powered touch-screen watch introduced in August and the Swatch Group's first rival to the Apple Watch.

"For us, it's an opportunity to generate additional sales," said Sylvain Dolla, Tissot's chief executive, noting that the watch had been in development for four years at a cost of 35 million Swiss francs (about \$38 million). "Tissot is the world leader in Swiss watches in the \$500 to \$1,000 segment. We don't really need this, but it's a good opportunity to generate new clients."

The luxury smartwatch sector has

the third iteration in the spring, said Brian Duffy, chief executive of the Watches of Switzerland Group, which operates more than 130 showrooms in Britain and the United States.

Peter Stas, co-founder of Frédérique Constant and the Geneva-based technology company MMT, went even further. He said it was essential for Swiss brands to develop smartwatches and that many entry-level names were struggling because they lacked them.

based some of its hopes on an understanding of human nature. As Richard Whitehall, a partner at Smart Design, a strategic design company based in New York, put it, "There are still going to be watch aficionados who want to use tech in a way that's going to help them show off."

And then there's our obsession with sports. This month, Hublot announced the Big Bang e UEFA Champions League smartwatch, produced in partnership with world football's most-watched club competition, and a follow-up to its Big Bang Referee 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia watch. The new watch has a dedicated application that sends updates on the competition's scores and matches.

"I don't want to be a competitor of Apple and I don't want to produce 50,000 smartwatches, because this will dilute our image of luxury," Mr. Guadalupe said. "My watch is very exclusive and very rare, and that's why it's successful." (The World Cup watch, a 2,018-piece limited edition, sold out in two months.)

Montblanc, which has just released the third iteration of its smartwatch, the \$1,170 Summit 2+, is taking a different approach.

"There are people who want functionality but not the look and feel of a gadget," said Zaim Kamal, the company's creative director. "We wanted to bring across something that would feel like a mechanical watch." The Summit 2+ has dials that mimic the design of Montblanc's 1858 line, as well as a case, crown and pushers that are engineered to feel like those on a mechanical watch.

In the past, the marriage of luxury and consumer electronics has delivered mixed results. TAG Heuer's Meridist phone flopped, and Vertu, the one-time Nokia subsidiary, lives on as a cautionary tale.

"We have these examples in mind," Mr. Arnault of TAG Heuer said. "The big mistakes of these phones was to just invest in diamonds on the phone and sell them at times more expensive."

Mr. Dolla of Tissot has his own approach. "We don't want to fall into the risk of becoming a consumer electronic brand," he said. "The T-Touch Connect Solar is a fine watch, not a consumer electronic device meant to last two years."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW TESTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Sky's the limit**

Ahmed Rahman, a London businessman, wearing his made-to-order version of a De Bethune watch, the DB25 Moon Phase Starry Sky. Its face, above, displays in diamonds the constellations just as they were at the time and place of his birth.