



Dialling up the style

Exotic finishes are shaking up one area of horological design – with dazzling results. By *Joshua Hendren*

Luxury watch houses were switching up the dial game at this year's Watches and Wonders exhibition in Geneva. From ornamental gem-setting to the use of silk, marquetry and enamel, unique and alternative materials were in abundance as the world's most influential brands championed clever dial design with a revival of métiers d'art and artisanship.

"True luxury lies in rarity, and as we lean ever further into technology, particularly thinking about the implications of AI, which is edging its way into almost every human skill, handcrafts are going to become ever more obscure," says Rachael Taylor, a journalist and editor specialising in jewellery and watches. "For watch brands to stand out, they must offer something unusual and different, and investing in niche artisanal crafts such as lapidary, leatherwork and marquetry when creating dials gives them that edge."

Among the brands leading the charge is Hermès, with the watchmaker unveiling the newest interpretation of one of its most beloved watch models: the Arceau, with a leather marquetry and silk thread dial. First introduced by Hermès' former artistic director Henri d'Origny in 1978, the curving, equestrian-inspired Arceau has long been a canvas for the house's most intricate and decorative watch designs. The new white-gold Arceau Mon Premier Galop comes with plenty of the line's signature details, including its distinctive stirrup-

shaped lugs and a rounded bezel frosted with 82 brilliant-cut diamonds.

The standout feature, however, is its whimsical watch face, which depicts a horse galloping in the sand accompanied by a butterfly – a reference to a cashmere and silk Hermès scarf illustrated by Chinese artist and illustrator Tong Ren. To recreate this motif on the dial, Hermès' master artisans have hand-set a combination of silk thread in blue and gold shades and slices of fine leather, trimmed to just half-a-millimetre thick, and cut to a precise 30-piece jigsaw against yellow and blue enamel.

"Silk and leather are two patrimony materials of Hermès, it is very natural that I wanted to have them on a watch," says Philippe Delhot, the creative director of the brand's watch division. "I love the warmth and sensuality of the leather. This material also offers vivid colours that dialogue very well with the smoothness and shine of the silk. I like the way they live together on one dial, bringing different emotions, reflections and plays on light every time you look at the watch."

At Swiss maker Piaget, a new transformable pendant watch is decorated with a dial of vibrant turquoise. Strung on a hand-twisted gold chain dressed up with yellow sapphires, brilliant-cut diamonds and beads of malachite and turquoise, the dial is housed in a trapeze case – a nod to Piaget's original collection of sautoir watches from 1969 –

and perches atop a 29.24ct Sri-Lankan yellow sapphire and 6.11ct aquamarine.

"At Piaget, we only use plain turquoise, a very lagoon turquoise with no veins, which of course makes it even more rare," reveals Guillaume Chautru, head of gemmology at Piaget, emphasising the challenges of setting such a gem on a watch dial. "Any ornamental stones are very fragile. So, when you slice them down to 0.4mm, it can break easily. In addition, the best turquoise mines are now either extinct or closed, like the Sleeping Beauty turquoise mine in Arizona. So, we still manage to find some ancient roughs but it is, of course, getting harder and harder."

Elsewhere, at Van Cleef & Arpels, a staggering 70 different colours, finishes and enamelling techniques have been used to embellish the candy dial of its new Lady Arpels Casse-Noisette timepiece. The 41mm white-gold model takes the beloved 19th-century ballet *The Nutcracker* as its inspiration, with a technicolour melody of plump hand-carved gems and minerals that includes coloured sapphires and diamonds to blue tourmalines, onyx, lapis lazuli and sugilite, a semi-precious stone in a rich purple hue.

For watch-jewellery creator Beauregard, meanwhile, a boxed set of six limited-edition rose-gold Lili Bouton timepieces featuring gemstone dials highlights its new Watches and Wonders offering. "Every petal is individually carved, and hand-polished to a precision of 0.02mm to render the invisible setting," says Alexandre Beauregard, the brand's Geneva-based founder. The six pieces showcase stones like fire and Fanta opal from the Chiapas caves in Mexico, yellow opal from Brazil, Australian chrysoptase, Arizona topaz and Peruvian amethyst. "This exacting process produces a heartbreaking number of breakages and commands weeks of work for every dial," says Beauregard.

From left to right: Vacheron Constantin Egérie, POA, vacheron-constantin.com; Van Cleef & Arpels Lady Arpels Casse-Noisette, POA, vancleefarpels.com; Beauregard Lili Bouton, POA, beauregard.ch; Tadao Ando x Bulgari Serpenti Tubogas, £16,000, bulgari.com; Piaget transformable watch sautoir, POA, piaget.com; Hermès Arceau Mon Premier Galop, POA, hermes.com

The new Egérie Pleats of Time watch from Vacheron Constantin – a collaboration with Paris-based couturier Yiqing Yin and master perfumer Dominique Ropion – is another showstopper. The unique piece (although a limited-edition production watch is also available) commands attention with a lilac mother-of-pearl dial finished in a fine pleated texture, as well as a scented strap.

Roman jeweller Bulgari, meanwhile, has refreshed its line of Serpenti timepieces with hard stones. Made in partnership with Japanese architect Tadao Ando, the resulting 35mm watches feature dials of cut gem fragments in varying patterns, including a green aventurine model, tiger's-eye and two mother-of-pearl designs in white or pink.

Whether encrusted with unfamiliar gems or everyday materials, weird and wonderful watch dials are certainly having a moment – but can we expect this trend to develop through 2024? "I think we will continue to see watchmakers experimenting, with a particular focus on reviving heritage skills," says Taylor. "As well as looking to traditional goldsmithing techniques, we will likely see watchmakers producing dials inspired by skills used by other creatives such as sculptors, couturiers, weavers, and so on."

"Such celebration of hand skills is being driven by demand from collectors seeking unique timepieces, and those with an understanding of what goes into the making of such dials are willing to invest in human talent," she adds.