

ULYSSE NARDIN
PERPETUATES ARTISANAL
ENAMEL CRAFTSMANSHIP WITH
THE ACQUISITION
OF DONZÉ CADRANS

HEART A · N · D SOUL

• BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG •

Besides revolutionary watches like the iconic
Freak and other inventive complications,
independent Swiss watch manufacture

Ulysse Nardin is well known and admired for its
decorative dials. So, when the owners of Ulysse
Nardin's enamel dial supplier, Donzé Cadrans
SA, announced they were planning to retire and
sell the business, there was only one thing for
this watch brand to do. Ulysse Nardin purchased
the enamel specialist immediately and without a
moment's hesitation.

Ulysse Nardin's HMS
Caesar Classico Cloisonné



① Making cloisonné cells



2. Applying enamel to a guilloché dial



3. Applying enamel to cloisonné cells



⑤ Sprinkling enamel powder



4. Firing finished enamel dials



⑥ White enamel dials after firing



7. Applying dial transfer

Past AND FUTURE

The history between the two companies goes all the way back to the beginnings of the modern Ulysse Nardin, when the late Rolf Schnyder, the brand's owner and president, was looking for a unique, translucent blue color for a special dial. Schnyder discovered Donzé Cadrans and commissioned the company to make the dial, which turned out to be an expensive process of trial and error. Dials burned up in the oven, broke before they were completed because they were so fragile, shattered during assembly because the watchmakers didn't know how to handle them, and so on. In the end, however, the special blue watch, the San Marco, was a great success, and all the hard work paid off for both companies. In fact, every Ulysse Nardin enamel dial since then has been produced by Donzé Cadrans.

Commenting on the decision to acquire this enamel specialist, Ulysse Nardin CEO Patrik Hoffmann says, "The first priority was to secure our past; that was important to us. The work we had done with Donzé Cadrans is not a big part of our business, but it was an important milestone for Ulysse Nardin, because we really revived enamel and the art of cloisonné work. At first, we considered incorporating Donzé Cadrans into our company, but then we decided to keep it as a separate entity, so that it can continue to supply third parties. It is really about perpetuating master craftsmanship in this area."

The ARTISANAL WAY

In many companies, there is a move afoot to modernize operations and streamline production. At Donzé Cadrans, however, the work is decidedly artisanal. In fact, walking into the factory feels like walking back in time, because dial creation here is done just as it has been for centuries.

Dial production is a labor-intensive proposition, and this is doubly true when it comes to enamel dials. Virtually every step is done by hand, from the exacting application of enamel powder to firing the enamel in the oven. There is no magic formula either, no guarantees about the outcome of any particular enameling process. Much depends on the artisan's experience and feel for the materials. When plain white enamel dials go into the oven (to take the simplest example), the temperature has to be just right, and the dials have to stay in the oven for just the right amount of time, but there are no electronic timers present. The enamelist who places them into the oven watches, waits, turns the plate holding the dials,



checks and checks again. When it feels as if the right amount of time has passed, she takes the dials out, and they are done. Another layer of enamel powder is applied, and then the dials are fired again, and the process repeats.

When it comes to creating miniature enamel paintings, it's a similar but infinitely more complicated process, since each color has to be treated differently. In fact, the color of the enamel changes as it is fired, so the enamelist has to have the experience to know which enamel powders to apply and how long to fire them in the oven to achieve the desired result.

Quality control is rigorous. Enamel dials are some of the most expensive dials to produce, and they are expected to be perfect. The colors must be right, and there can be no imperfections. While visiting Donzé Cadrans recently, I took a look at some of the dials that had been rejected during production. I had difficulty spotting any problems with them, but the Donzé people were ruthless. What I assumed might have been acceptable—a small bubble or a miniscule spot, for example—was reason for a dial to be discarded. Impressive standards indeed.

New OUTLOOK

Although Ulysse Nardin now owns the dial factory, Donzé Cadrans will continue to work with other companies in the watch industry. The arrangement is similar to the existing arrangements Ulysse Nardin has with its part-owned silicon suppliers Sigatec and Memotec. In addition, Ulysse Nardin will work to streamline operations at Donzé Cadrans, and equipment will be modernized where possible.

"Donzé Cadrans is an extraordinarily impressive dial producer," says Hoffmann. "They were, however, a typical small business workshop. They are already very good at their craft; now it is about making operations more efficient. We are going to bring a proper structure, and we are buying new machines and renovating the facilities," he adds. The artisanal flavor of the way the company works, the real heart and soul of Donzé Cadrans, however, will not change.

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The Classico Lady with
cloisonné and gemstone dial;
at right, Safari Jaquemarts
Minute Repeater with
cloisonné enamel dial

