

BACK TO LIFE

• *Revived vintage movements offer unique luxury* •

Although the outcome is much happier, it's a trend that might bring to mind the unique insights and revivification ambitions of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, who, by the way, was Swiss. I'm talking about the wave of refurbished and revived vintage movements that bring life and character to new watches by a handful of luxury watch companies.

One of the consequences of the 1970s quartz revolution—when the emergence of quartz watches almost killed the mechanical watch

industry—is that stockpiles of then-new mechanical movements were abandoned in the mid 20th century. Some were destroyed, many were liquidated for pennies on the dollar, still others simply languished in storage, forgotten about as companies adopted quartz technology and converted their production.

Now, numerous companies are working to refurbish these rediscovered movements and use them in new watches, each one containing an authentic piece of watchmaking history. One of the leaders in this arena is Armand Nicolet.

— BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG —



Movement assembly at
Armand Nicolet

THE PROCESS

Steps in refurbishing a vintage movement

1. Catalog the pieces of the vintage movement, one by one
2. Create 3-D drawings of the complete movement and all its parts
3. Study the parts and the complete movement and plan the modifications
4. Add an anti-shock system
5. Replace old barrel spring with a modern one
6. Make a new balance wheel and a new hairspring
7. Determine whether it is necessary to refinish the wheels and other moving parts
8. Change or add jewels
9. Determine whether to add a swan neck regulator or other devices
10. Establish the level of decoration of all unfinished or undecorated parts
11. Complete a first lot of pieces for technical testing to see if they will meet quality standards
12. Once the technical tests are passed, begin mass production
13. Begin modification of all the old parts
14. Begin decoration of all the parts to be decorated
15. Assemble and oil the movements

source: Armand Nicolet

The Armand Nicolet LL9 with Calibre AN704A, based on a 1960-vintage movement



Examples of Armand Nicolet vintage movements in original condition and fully refurbished condition

CEO Rolando Braga discovered a stockpile of vintage movements on the property when he took over the company. Eager to see what the market’s reaction would be, his brand undertook the daunting task of refurbishing these old movements and began to offer the completed watches in limited editions.

The success has been phenomenal. Armand Nicolet now makes around 1,000 of these “new-old” watches each year. And this success has helped the brand’s other collections to gain traction. “You need something to set your brand apart in today’s world,” Braga says. “With their mixture of watchmaking history and modern performance, our vintage movement limited editions do that.”

NO SIMPLE TASK

It sounds easy—find some old movements, spruce them up a bit, place them inside modern cases and sell them at a huge profit. But that’s far from the reality of vintage

movement refurbishment. “The main difficulty in reworking vintage movements is the fact that quality standards have changed so much over the years, so a movement of acceptable performance from 40 years ago now must be upgraded in order to achieve the precision that is expected of a mechanical watch today,” Braga explains.

His team, which has gained a tremendous amount of hands-on knowledge over the years, begins by disassembling the movement. They map it using modern-day software and then determine which parts (e.g. the mainspring, the balance wheel, the escapement, etc.) must be improved or replaced—all before the real refurbishment work can begin.

“Obviously, some movements require less work, but each vintage movement has its own peculiarity, and they are all interesting, despite the huge investment they require,” Braga explains. “We have

set up a specialized team, dedicated only to this type of work. And we have invested in special equipment and tools, because that’s the only way to get good results.”

Thomas Morf, now managing director at Hanhart, produced some vintage movement watches when he was heading up Carl F. Bucherer. He acknowledges how difficult and expensive this work is. “Just acquiring

“YOU NEED SOMETHING TO SET YOUR BRAND APART IN TODAY’S WORLD”

—Rolando Braga



Decorative finishing at Armand Nicolet

LIVING HISTORY

Based in an old castle outside of Stuttgart, Germany, Grieb & Benzinger specializes in unique pieces powered by vintage movements. “We have about 20 movements, from a standard, three-hand Patek Philippe movement to perpetual calendar movements, minute repeaters and more,” says Georg Bartkowiak, a partner in the firm. “Mostly, the movements are by Patek, Vacheron, Jaeger and Agassiz [a maker that was very active in the early days]. We also have a collection based on the Unitas movement, which is “baby vintage,” because it is from the 1960s. For other pieces, we use movements dating from 1880 to 1920. grieb-benzinger.com



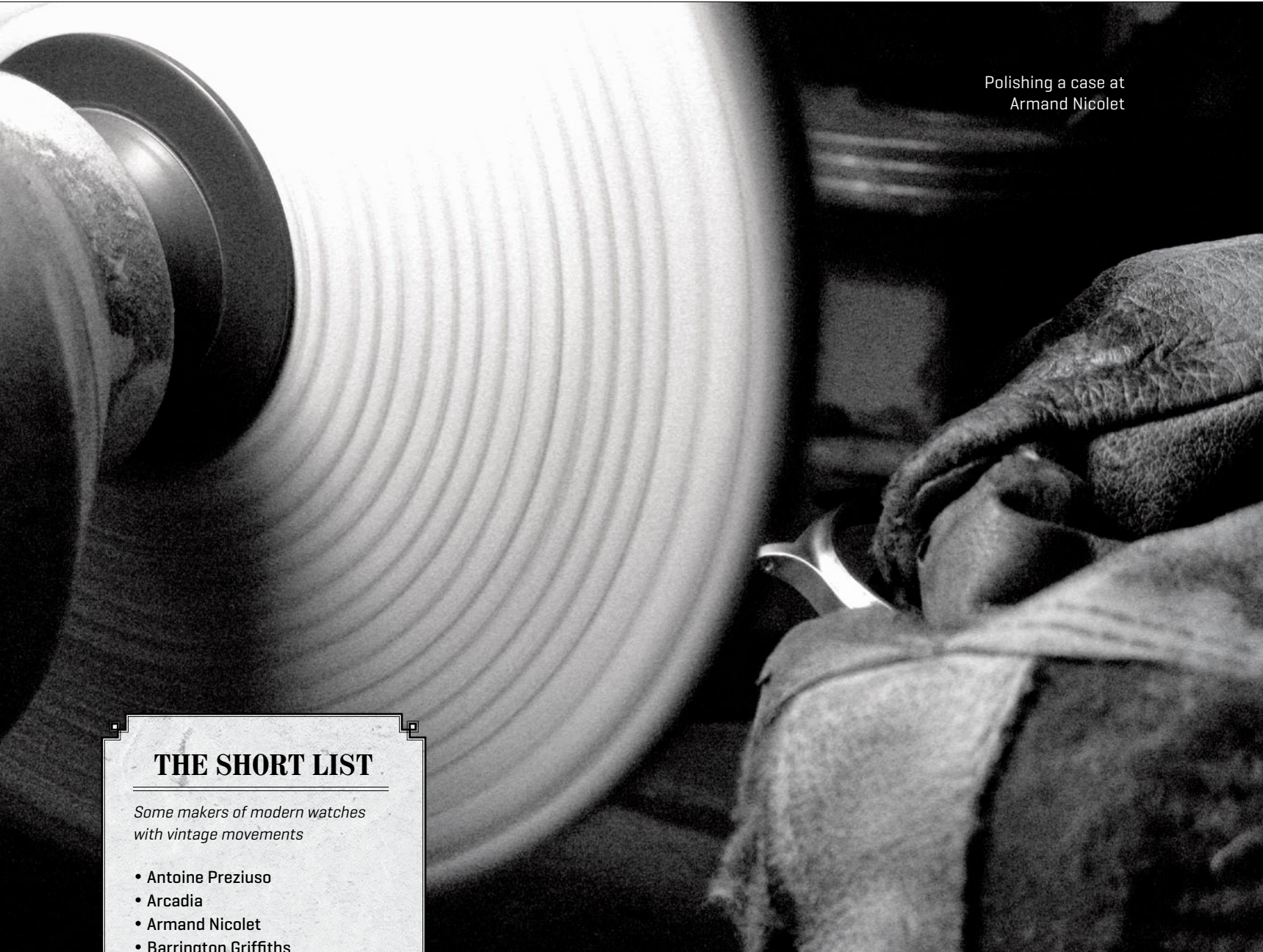
Blue Danube minute repeater with Patek Philippe movement, ca. 1890

the movements can be extremely expensive, and then the work is intensive and time consuming; you really have to be committed to it,” Morf says. “Remember, these movements have been lying somewhere, wrapped in oil paper, for four decades or more. They are ‘Stone Age’ engines, if you will.”

“In production, the entire movement must be disassembled in order to find out the condition of wheels, bridges, pinions, escapement, levers and more,” Morf continues. “Some components need to be replaced, while some of the them can still be used. Don’t forget the huge amount that goes into decoration—Côtes de Genève, perlage, anglage, etc. The escapement is the most sensitive part of an old movement, because accuracy, reliability and power reserve are determined by this critical component.”

FROM THE SOURCE

Sometimes, vintage movements come up on the auction market, but in Armand Nicolet’s case, Braga found a stockpile of vintage movements, enough for his brand’s production for the next 20 years, on his company’s old factory grounds. “When quartz movements hit the market in the 1970s, some companies (like ours) that were totally involved in finishing and assembling movements for other companies ended up with a stock of unfinished movements that couldn’t be sold anymore. Some factories underwent a transformation process or shut down. The Armand Nicolet facility remained like it was, frozen in time.” Braga recalls the first time he walked through the Armand Nicolet facilities. Everything was covered in dust, but, otherwise, it looked as if the



Polishing a case at
Armand Nicolet

THE SHORT LIST

Some makers of modern watches
with vintage movements

- Antoine Prezioso
- Arcadia
- Armand Nicolet
- Barrington Griffiths
- Carl F. Bucherer
- Chronoswiss
- Glashütte Original
- Grieb & Benzinger
- Maurice Lacroix
- Zenith



Arcadia Vintage 22 with 1930s
Valjoux 22 movement

watchmakers had just quit for the day,
not for 50 years. Everything was in place,
ready and waiting to be restarted.

“We do this work because all these
movements—dating back to the 1940s
through the 1960s—lay in the company’s
warehouse, just waiting to be recovered,”
Braga details. “Another crucial factor is
that, in our facility, we also found the spe-
cial tools that are necessary to work on the
movements along with the booklets written
by the master watchmakers who were work-
ing in the atelier back then, reporting the
data necessary to do the regulating. This
saves us a huge amount of work and time
and gives our watchmakers a head start on
this delicate job.”

A similar thing happened with watch-
maker Claude Sanz, owner of Arcadia
Genève, which recently introduced the

Vintage 22, a watch with a 1930s-vintage
Valjoux 22 movement as its heart. “Hav-
ing made watches for 30 years, nearly all
my life, I am very interested in the history
of the watch industry,” he explains. “With
Arcadia, I found some never-assembled

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—Antoine Prezioso

parts of the Valjoux 22. I found enough
parts to assemble 40 of these column-wheel
chronographs. They started manufacturing
this movement around 1916 and stopped
in 1964. By the late 1960s, people were
convinced that mechanical watches were
finished. Some smart guys collected these
parts from the trash heap.”

Master watchmaker Antoine Prezioso
has also restored vintage movements for
unique pieces or small limited editions. “It
is a beautiful challenge to give these move-
ments a second life and make an excep-
tional timepiece,” Prezioso says. “For me,
it is a voyage in time to discover a vintage
movement. At the same time, it is a huge
source of inspiration, as I see exactly how
those before me accomplished things. I try
to choose extremely rare movements, and
I prefer complicated movements with the
Geneva Seal. It is always an honor for me to
restore these very complicated pieces and
bring them to life again.”

FINISHED PRODUCT

The finished product is a modern watch
with a vintage heart, a tangible piece of
watchmaking history unlike any other on
the market. “The reason the market is pay-
ing more attention to these vintage move-
ment watches is that these are such rare
and unrepeatable pieces,” Braga says.
“When people buy luxury products,
such as mechanical watches, they
look for pieces with an emo-
tional element, and these time-
pieces certainly have that.”

Of course, one of the most
intriguing things about vin-
tage movement watches is
that there are a finite number
of special vintage calibers out
there. And when they are gone,
they really will be gone.

antoine-prezioso.com,
arcadia-watches.com,
armandnicolet.com, carl-f-bucherer.com



Antoine Prezioso
Royal Tourbillon
with rare
1928 tourbillon
movement



Antoine Prezioso Mystery Minute
Repeater with restored LeCoultre
movement, which has earned the
Geneva Seal