

Life Storybook Romance

IN THE WORLD OF VAN CLEEF & ARPELS,
LOVE IS COMPLICATED

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD “COMPLICATIONS” IN RELATION TO WATCHES, WE THINK OF MINUTE REPEATERS, TOURBILLONS, WORLD TIME FUNCTIONS AND MORE. Van Cleef & Arpels, with its remarkable Poetic Complications collection, is out to tweak this perception. The brand is inventing ways to make complications serve art and story as well as horology.

A perfect example is a watch Van Cleef & Arpels debuted early this year at the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie (SIHH) trade show in Geneva. It is Le Pont des Amoureux (the Lover's Bridge), named for a famed bridge and favored lovers' meeting place in Paris, where Van Cleef & Arpels has its headquarters. The watch's story is told by two figures playing out a scene on the dial while simultaneously indicating the time.



Une Journée à Paris



Le Pont des Amoureux

The Butterfly Symphony with retrograde hours and minutes indicated by butterflies flitting around a sculpted gold tree



The man is eager to meet the object of his affection, so he goes to the middle of the bridge every 60 minutes (he is the minutes hand, after all), but the woman (the hour hand) plays coy and advances to the top of the bridge only twice a day, at noon and midnight. At those two hours, the lovers meet and share the longest kiss in watchmaking history—60 seconds. Then—reluctantly, we might imagine—the lovers part and return to their original positions to re-enact their scene again.

RAISON D'ÊTRE

Van Cleef & Arpels' Poetic Complications exist to elevate a growing number of the maker's exceptional timepieces from mere watches to something emotional and beautiful. In the 21st century, watches are not about telling time—luxury watch companies acknowledge this—instead, they are about expressing personality, mood, a high regard for time. The concept of the poetic complication takes the symbolic meaning of watches to another level and uses watchmaking to tell emotional stories that can inspire at best and offer a diversion from daily life at the least.

"These kinds of products are embedded in the history of Van Cleef & Arpels, because the company started with a love story between Alfred Van Cleef and Estelle Arpels. They started a romance and then created a house and a dynasty," explains Stanislas de Quercize, worldwide president and CEO at Van Cleef & Arpels. "Time flies by, and I think it's good to have something to remind us that time is precious," de Quercize opines. "There's nothing better than a precious

watch. It asks you what are you doing today, for this hour, for this minute."

Looking at Le Pont des Amoureux, with its figures anxiously making their way toward their tryst, it's difficult not to smile and admit to your own anticipation. Likewise, it's hard not to think of time passing when beholding the Quantième des Saisons (Four Seasons), an early Poetic Complications piece, knowing that its beautifully enameled rotating dial takes a full year to make one revolution. The seasons of the dial are synchronized perfectly with nature.

POÉTIQUE, MÉCANIQUE

Nicolas Bos, creative director at Van Cleef & Arpels (and also president and CEO, the Americas), recounts how the Poetic Complications concept originated. "About five years ago, we were talking with watchmakers about what we could do in the future," he recalls. "They described traditional developments like new chronographs, longer power reserves, different tourbillons, all things that were masculine and rooted in precision. We are more about women, flowers and butterflies, and they asked us what we were doing in the watchmaking world."

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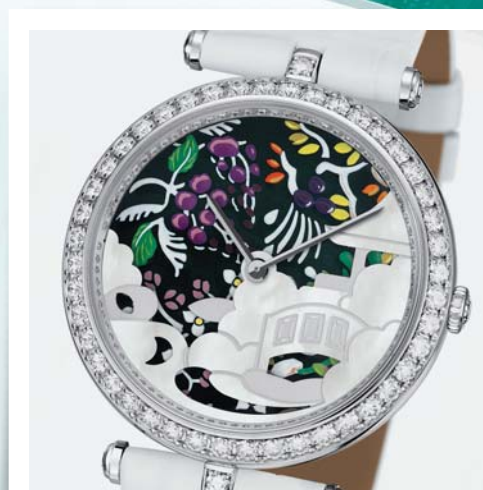
—NICOLAS BOS



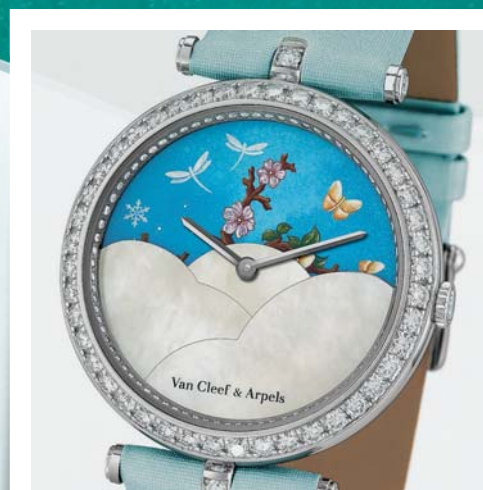
ROMANTIC ENGLISH GARDEN



FRENCH GARDEN



ASIAN GARDEN



QUANTIÈME DES SAISONS



ATLANTIDE



ITALIAN RENAISSANCE GARDEN

THE COLLECTION The Poetic Complications collection comprises a range of mechanisms, motifs and techniques that combine and recombine in the 20 timepieces created to date.

POETIC MECHANISMS

- day/night indication via 24-hour rotating dial
- changing scene via 365-day rotating disc
- retrograde hours and minutes indicated by figures
- tourbillon

POETIC MOTIFS

- the seasons
- sea nymphs
- fairies
- ballerinas
- hummingbirds
- butterflies
- flowers
- peacocks
- Paris

POETIC TECHNIQUES

- champlevé enamel
- cloisonné enamel
- contre-jour enamel
- guilloché with enamel
- sculpting
- engraving
- gem setting
- inlay

“I was interested in using the possibilities of mechanical movements to tell stories, as we do in our high jewelry,” he adds. “As an example, I told them I would like a watch that shows the passing of time through the passing of seasons. This makes sense in the world of Van Cleef & Arpels. Our vision of time is very associated with the passing of the seasons and nature, more a cycle than hours and minutes. I wanted something that would move extremely slowly, imperceptibly. We love the idea of a secret that only the wearer knows about.”

The stories Van Cleef & Arpels watches tell originate with Bos and his team in the brand’s creative studio. Often the stories are inspired by the history of the House of Van Cleef & Arpels, known informally to many as the Maison, or its legendary jewelry.

The man responsible for surmounting the mechanical challenges of the Poetic Complications is renowned watchmaker Jean-Marc Wiederrecht. He says, “This series of Van Cleef & Arpels timepieces provides genuine watchmaking functions beneath a poetic appearance, displaying the time in a decidedly innovative way. Adapting the watchmaking complications allows us to bring Van Cleef & Arpels’ stories to life. The complications are therefore perfectly suited to the Maison’s narrative side.”

In the initial design stage, not much consideration is given to whether an idea is

mechanically feasible. The designers turn over their sketches to Wiederrecht and trust his ability to make the magic happen, and Wiederrecht enjoys the challenge. “The most beautiful creations are often the result of proposals which, at first sight, appear to be almost impossible to achieve,” he says. “Knowing my initial temptation to refuse these proposals, and knowing how great my satisfaction is when I find suitable solutions to apparently unsolvable problems, I take my time before completely abandoning a project.”

Wiederrecht also appreciates the opportunity to explore uncharted horological territory. “Traditional watch complications are all already known to professionals and are often variations on proven technical solutions,” he explains. “The Poetic Complications developed to date do not appear in any manual; they require new structures and concepts. They make artistic objects—often large, heavy and difficult to master—move. They must also guarantee an extremely precise measurement of time; it should be noted that all our timepieces are subjected to shock-resistance and reliability tests according to the strictest standards.”

MÉTIER D’ART

At the same time the movement is being designed, the artisans working with Van Cleef & Arpels are busy creating the dials. Dominique Baron is the director of l’Atelier,



“The creation of these objects depends on both a creative impetus and on a highly technical, high-quality base of watchmaking knowledge.”

—JEAN-MARC WIEDERRECHT



Butterfly Symphony



part of Stern Créations, which is the branch of Richemont International SA responsible for creating unique enamel dials illustrating Van Cleef & Arpels' stories in brilliant color. "The development and creation of each new dial represents a true challenge for l'Atelier," Baron says. "It entails finding the most suitable enameling technique for each design and then developing this technique so that it allows us to remain faithful to the initial creative idea. Finally, it involves achieving considerable feats in a short time."

A big part of l'Atelier's work is research and adaptation of techniques. "We must continue to suggest new ideas and thus continually research and exploit both very ancient and new techniques," Baron details. "We often go in search of old, even abandoned, techniques in order to make them our own and use them for future collections." Baron is proud to be helping to keep the art of enameling alive. "In my opinion, it is very important to preserve enameling techniques that are, sadly, not showcased enough, particularly on dials, despite the fact that they allow truly unique aesthetic effects to be created," she says. "I love the blend of tradition and innovation, and the rigor and patience required. You know, success can never be taken for granted with enamel, so it is necessary to accept failure and start again until the desired result is achieved, without ever getting discouraged."

For his part, de Quercize sees Van Cleef & Arpels as a patron supporting artisans through the creation of its Poetic Complications pieces, so the company goes out of its way to celebrate and acknowledge the tremendously skilled people who create these watches. Baron elaborates, "For several years, Van Cleef & Arpels has been committed to the promotion of the artistic professions, including enameling, which is particularly suited to its world, and the Maison showcases the craftsmen with whom it works. There is a true sense of openness at Van Cleef & Arpels; we work together in an atmosphere of mutual trust, pooling our expertise in order to create truly unique timepieces."

Pushing the boundaries of watchmaking, art and artisanal achievement is admirable, but it's only an exercise if it's not commercially successful. Happily, the collection is doing well in the marketplace. "Sales of the Poetic Complications are excellent," says de Quercize. "We have a waiting list for these pieces because they are very difficult to craft." Perhaps this success is attributable to Van Cleef & Arpels' doing something that no one else in watchmaking is doing—combining emotion, art and enchanting stories in highly complicated timepieces. Theirs is a story of complications in devoted service to the intangible.

vancleef-arpels.com

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