



If watches have a face, Jean Singer is their creator

Its aim has always been to rank among the best dial manufacturers in Switzerland. Today the company works with the greatest names in watchmaking, who lay great store by its prompt service and high-quality products.

Janine Vuilleumier

For almost a century, the company Jean Singer has been designing and making dials for Switzerland's leading watchmak-



Cutting press / Presse de découpage

ers. This family business was established in 1919 by Jean Singer and his wife. It started out in a small detached house at number 32, rue des Crêtets in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and stands on the same site today. At that time, the Swiss watch industry was booming and demand for reliable and attractive products was very high. In the 1930s, their son Paul-Emile took over the reins of the business, supported by his French wife Jeanne Singer-Vieille. The firm then became a limited company (1935).

In 1951, Paul-Emile Singer died suddenly leaving his wife Jeanne alone, without descendants, at the head of a rapidly expanding business with a 300-strong workforce. His foresight ensured that a management team of five people was in place. Led by Rolf Engisch, a lawyer by training, that team steered the firm to a commanding position in the Swiss watch industry, becoming the second-largest dial manufacturer in Switzerland with more than 450 employees, behind the Flückiger company based in Saint-Imier.

In 1971, Jeanne Singer died and bequeathed the firm to its management team. The

devastating crisis which, from the end of 1973, took an increasingly heavy toll on the Swiss watch industry, eroded the esprit de corps of the five managers then in situ. The four sectoral directors handed in their resignations to Rolf Engisch, who therefore took charge of the company and put together a new management team.

Brought low in his turn by health problems, though only 54 years of age, Rolf Engisch turned for assistance to his son Jean-Claude, who had completed his engineering studies at EPFL only a fortnight earlier. Though he had neither planned nor wished to take over the firm, he continued the family adventure until 2010, his father being unable to return to work due to poor health.

In this way, the firm remained an independent family business. Today it is run by Joris Engisch, a member of the third generation of the family, who joined the firm in 2007 alongside his father.

At the heart of the historic building occupied by the firm is a maze of passageways and rooms. Yet the location of each department is

clearly defined and each one follows the logistical flow of dials and appliques in the design process. The firm even has its own machine shop, thereby ensuring the availability of specific tooling. The creation of a dial, whether plain or extremely complex, necessitates many operations, whose contributions are sometimes invisible yet always indispensable.

Dials

Because of the diversity of their designs, there are virtually no two dial collections that are identical. The dial is the face of the watch and is created with meticulous care by Jean Singer, from product engineering, capable of developing predefined projects or simple client wishes, to technical and visual inspection, the ultimate step reached by products before they are delivered to customers. Through a combination of tradition and new technologies, Jean Singer provides solutions to all manner of complex and diverse requests.

There are two main types of dial: dials with decorations stamped on large balances manufactured singly, mainly from brass but also from precious metal (gold, silver or platinum); and non-stamped dials made from a strip of brass. In both cases, all holes (in particular centre points, openings for apertures and moon phases, as well as holes to accommodate the feet of appliques) are



CNC machining / Usinage CNC

made using punches and dies or with the help of ultramodern machining centres. The final operation is the soldering of feet, elements essential for subsequent manufacturing operations which will also, in most cases, be used to attach the dial to the movement.

The unfinished blank thus obtained will be smoothed down to remove imperfections and polished to add brilliance, before work on its production continues. Next come the finishing phases which give dials their true char-

acteristic features. There are two very distinct surface preparations, namely brushed preparations (sunray, vertical, horizontal or circular), and atomized preparations, which give the surface a matt finish. These different textures will then be enhanced by the addition of a surface treatment to bring out the full qualities and colours of the dials. This intervention can be of galvanic, varnished, or lacquered nature. Other historical speciality for which the firm is renowned, the PVD (Physical Vapor Deposition), fine technical layer covering dials, which also brings shine and colours to surfaces. It is also possible to give the dial a unique character by using a range of precious or natural materials, such as mother-of-pearl, stone, wood, meteorite, etc. Finally, the dials receive a thin translucent coating called Zapon, which protects them against corrosion and provides an additional aesthetic finish (brilliant, matt, semi-matt, super-matt, etc.). Thus protected, transfer of the hour circle, minute circle and other decorations will be carried out by tampography, according to the customer's wishes. After this stage in the manufacturing process, the dial is ready for the application of appliques, logos and other symbols.



Robot for galvanic colouring process / Automate de mise en couleur galvanique

Appliques

The La Chaux-de-Fonds company is familiar with every aspect of the design of »

» appliques, whether by stamping/blanking, CNC machining or laser technologies. This work calls for a very patient and meticulous approach, as the components are small and difficult to handle. Whether simple or complex in shape - flat, round, curved, faceted or recessed to receive luminescent material - they can take the form of Roman or Arabic numerals, different apertures, brand logos, symbols, or indeed settings in which one of the firm's jewel-setters will insert diamonds. Made mainly from brass, they can also be manufactured in other materials - such as aluminium - and subsequently anodized or gold-plated for the most prestigious watch-makers.

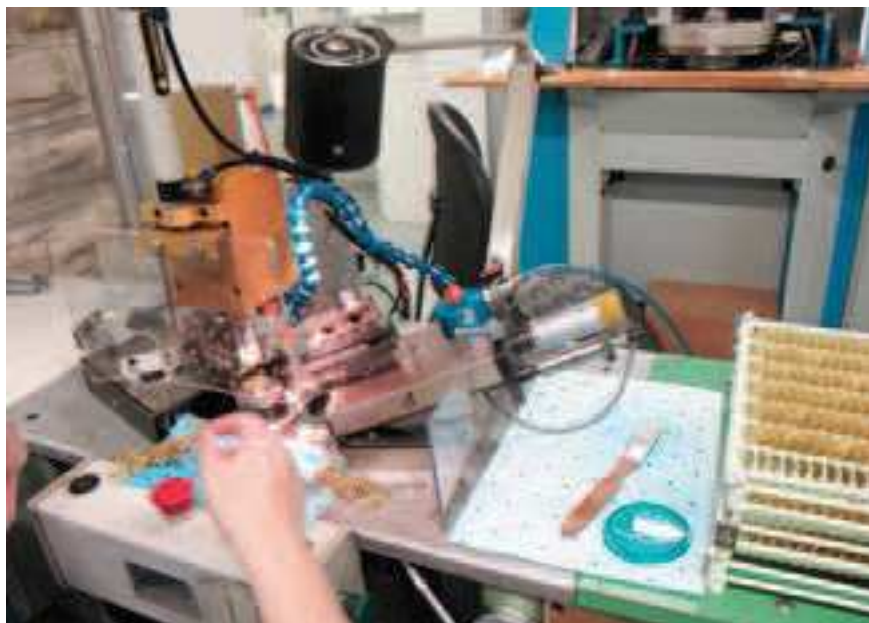
Fitting of appliques

This operation requires tremendous dexterity and patience on account of the small size of the components and their fitting calls for absolute precision, to ensure that no damage is caused to the applique and/or dial. Indexes, numerals, apertures, logos and symbols are assembled on the dial and mechanically riveted, glued or laser-welded in place, sometimes using a combination of all three methods.

On top of all the other inspections carried out during the numerous production stages (several dozen for the simplest models, many



Feet soldering operation / Opération de soudage des pieds



Diamond faceting operation / Opération de diamantage

more for those that are more complex), these «works of art» are subjected to painstaking final verifications to ensure compliance with dimensions and to detect any anomalies, scratches or other unwanted alterations.

Logistics

To orchestrate the complex flows required for the manufacture of dials, Jean Singer, in partnership with a regional firm, has developed an original logistical interface. This means that parts can be precisely monitored as they are routed through workshops, and enables priorities to be managed in real time. There is even a gateway developed specially for customers which allows the latter to check the progress of orders and set priorities.

Subsidiaries

Jean Singer has a smaller subsidiary located in Peseux, Someco SA, which employs around 60 people. Living historically in the shadow of its parent company, it is capable, like Jean Singer, of carrying out the entire dial-making process totally independently, whether for clients requiring industrial volumes or small brands seeking the responsiveness and dynamism that a firm of this size can offer. Jean Singer for its part

employs 250 people, an extremely qualified workforce which has been with the firm for many years. All products manufactured by the two entities are guaranteed Swiss made.

If Jean Singer today features among the best and last independent Swiss dial manufacturers, it is because its directors have always defended a business culture based on family values such as rigour, customer responsiveness, transparency and open-mindedness. Today, several thousand dials are manufactured each day in La Chaux-de-Fonds and will find their way to the country's leading watch brands. ◯