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EUROPEAN & INTERNATIONAL: 0040
GLOBAL: 004709 | CHAP00122 | 09/10/14

THE FRENCH WATCHMAKING INDUSTRY SHOWS INITIATIVE

BY SERGE MAILLARD

Buoyed by UNESCO's recognition of France's horological tradition, and a growing appreciation for local craftsmanship, several French brands have launched initiatives to finally reequip their country with a national manufacturing infrastructure worthy of the name. Designing a French mechanical calibre is a key piece of the puzzle.

Signs of a revival of the French watchmaking industry have multiplied since last year, against the backdrop of the pandemic. While the local ecosystem is still a long way from the size, dynamism and prestige of the Swiss watchmaking industry, the revival of industrial and artisanal activity in Franche-Comté – the historical centre of watchmaking activity in the country – is no longer a pipe dream. It is becoming a reality. Today, the majority of French watchmakers actually work for the Swiss industry. More than 15,000 cross the border every day, with just a quarter of that number remaining to serve their local industry. But Franche-Comté wants to be more than just a supplier to its Swiss neighbour. After all, France is synonymous with luxury throughout the world. Several brands plan to build on this reputation to revitalise the national watchmaking tradition.

Repatriating lost know-how

The timing is right: Franco-Swiss – not just Swiss – mechanical watchmaking know-how was recognised as part of the world's intangible heritage by UNESCO in December 2020, after the two countries jointly filed an application. The problem is that France no longer possesses the tooling it needs to be self-sufficient. Most French watches are equipped with Swiss calibres, and key components of the movement are

produced outside France. The hoped-for renaissance can only be achieved by rebuilding the industrial infrastructure and recovering the lost expertise.

One company spearheading France's return to watchmaking independence is Pequignet. This flagship of the French watch industry, founded in 1973, has just emerged from an eventful decade. In 2017, on the verge of bankruptcy, the haute horlogerie manufacture based in Morteau was saved in extremis thanks to a management buyout by four of its employees. They continued to build up the brand until last year's takeover by French investment fund Enowe, which is determined to restore the brand to its former glory.

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A founding calibre

Today employing around twenty people, Pequignet is known for assembling its own movements, first the Calibre Royal (in automatic and then manual versions), followed by the Calibre Initial. This three-handed automatic movement with 65 hours of power reserve began appearing in Pequignet timepieces in December 2021, and will be offered to other French watchmakers.

The founder of Enowe, Hugues Souparis, a 66-year-old entrepreneur who built a company that is now a market leader in anti-counterfeiting technology, is clear in his goals. The reason he is investing in Pequignet, which earned the label "Entreprise du Patrimoine Vivant" (Living Heritage Company) in 2014, is because he firmly believes in the revival of Made in France watchmaking.

"I am not taking over a company that is losing money, but one that is growing," he emphasises. "Pequignet recorded a 50% increase in sales last year. The brand is profitable and its reputation has increased, especially since we started using social networks. That said, we are very much aware of a number of limitations that remain, which is why we are putting in place an in-depth strategy to ensure the brand's future."



The new Calibre Initial produced by Pequignet, a three-handed automatic movement with 65 hours of power reserve, is intended to equip other French watch brands.



The Instantanée LIP 36384 is a 60-year-old French LIP movement in the heart of a new Semper & Adhuc watch.

First customers

The reason for designing the new movement was to master a simpler calibre than the Calibre Royal, which is expensive to assemble and whose cost price makes it unsuitable for delivery to third parties. With the new calibre, Pequignet can diversify into becoming a supplier for other brands. The new owner reveals that two more French brands will be equipped with the new calibre by autumn 2022.

"Many French brands are interested in more local, more original production," he points out. "The Calibre Initial enables us to supply companies operating in a market ranging from 2,500 to 5,000 euros." The production of some components currently supplied from Switzerland will be brought back to France in the coming months, and Hugues Souparis is not ruling out other acquisitions in the region, with a view to equipping Pequignet with the necessary machine tools (only the actual assembly is carried out in-house at present). "We could go further in terms of controlling our industrial capacity, by manufacturing our own components. For the Calibre Royal, 75% of the components are produced in France and 25% in Switzerland. We need to regain all of this know-how!"



From now on, the La Joux-Perret G100 will also be assembled in the Humbert-Droz workshop on the French side of the border.

Franco-Swiss collaboration

In fact, initiatives are multiplying to put French brands back on the world horological map: in addition to Pequignet, brands such as Lip, Michel Herbelin, Dodane, Yema, Humbert-Droz, March Lab, Hegid, Semper & Adhuc and Ulinam have plans to promote French manufacturing, each in its own way and within its own range.

One initiative in particular has recently caught the attention of the region: the family watchmaking company Humbert-Droz, based in Besançon, has joined forces with the Swiss calibre manufacturer La Joux-Perret to re-establish the assembly of mechanical movements on an industrial scale on the French side of the Jura. The first step in this collaboration concerns the La Joux-Perret G100 calibre, an automatic movement with date and a 68-hour power reserve. The movement will arrive as a kit of individual parts (all parts are designed and manufactured in Switzerland) and will be entirely assembled in Besançon. In addition to Humbert-Droz, several other French brands will have access to this new calibre.

"The workshop will not receive a pre-assembled kit," explains Jean-Claude Eggen, CEO of La Joux-Perret. "It will carry out the complete assembly, including the gluing of the balance spring." As Julien Humbert-Droz points out: "The two countries need each other. Switzerland needs the French workforce. And France needs Swiss components and calibres. The aim is to set up a long-term project, perhaps with other movements!"

In parallel, another equally ambitious initiative was unveiled in March 2022, not in Franche-Comté but in the south of France, as part of the government-backed "France Relance" scheme. Industry body Aïon Group was launched last year to "recreate a strong watchmaking industry in France." With the support of national and regional authorities, this new entity plans to "invest tens of millions of euros in the coming years" to reach that goal.

Its first major action was to buy the historic Swiss manufacturer Felsa, with a view to bringing its machines and its know-how to France. A new factory in La Ciotat, near Marseille, is expected to produce its first automatic mechanical movements this year. The group has announced that it will be able to deliver 400,000 movements per year within five years. But its activities are not limited to production: they will extend to marketing and distribution. Among the

first partner brands is Paris-based Hegid, which until now has employed Swiss calibres.

The recycling route

Finally, another way to revitalise the French watch industry already exists: recycling. This is the path chosen by Semper & Adhuc, which specialises in assembling timepieces equipped with restored calibres from the golden age of French mechanical production. The brand has set itself the goal of creating a 100% French watch before too long.

Last year, Semper & Adhuc collaborated with the French brand that certainly resonates most in the collective imagination: LIP - which itself was repatriated from Hong Kong in 2015 to its historic city of Besançon. Thus was born the L'Instantanée model with its signature double dial, which combines a LIP R100 movement (a hand-wound mechanical calibre manufactured from 1958 to 1970) and a Semper & Adhuc watch. What better illustration could be needed, that a sleeping giant is about to wake up. ♦