



# A METAMORPHOSIS EXTRAORDINAIRE

*In its journey from a pen maker to a  
serious watch brand, Montblanc has  
expanded quickly and effectively*

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*Montblanc's Le  
Locle manufacture*





*A watch being assembled; (right) hand bevelling of a tourbillon*



“Where do you put the ink in it?”

The year was 1997. Armed with scepticism and a volley of questions aimed at Norbert A. Platt, the then CEO of Montblanc, journalists thronged the brand's debut presentation of its first ever collection of wristwatches at SIHH.

Montblanc commanded an unprecedented legacy as a manufacturer of fine fountain pens and, to expand its portfolio in the business of luxury, Platt steered the company towards watchmaking. Reflecting the design codes of its best-selling Meisterstück fountain pens, Montblanc introduced its first collection of watches with black dials and gold cases.

Platt was prepared for mixed reac-

tions. However, the big surprise came within a year of the launch. Montblanc had made 12,000 pieces for the first series and had sold each one of them. The critics had their answers. Encouraged by the market response, Montblanc gradually got into the numbers game and crossed the 1,00,000 mark in 2004.

While the company's widespread distribution network and independent boutiques helped accelerate its market presence, Montblanc lacked a longstanding tradition in horology. This was remedied with the clever acquisition of the 150-year-old manufacture Minerva in 2006. “The setting and integration of our two manufactures in Le Locle and Minerva have been the most crucial landmarks in Montblanc's journey as a watchmaker. They lend us a unique language in watchmaking,” says Davide Cerrato, managing director of the watch division at Montblanc. “While the assembly of our watches and the 500-hour test regime take place at the manufacture in Le Locle, Minerva is where all our haute horlogerie pieces are crafted by hand. We will be celebrating the incredible watchmaking story of this manufacture on its 160th anniversary next year.”

Known for its superlative chronographs from the early 20th century, Minerva, founded in the village of Villeret in Switzerland's Jura region, was originally an independent specialist in mechanical movements. It enjoyed the status of a family-owned company for almost a century before being sold to some loyal employees and then to an Italian investor in 2000. Montblanc's parent company, the Richemont group, bought Minerva with its treasure trove—the extensive design archives, the right to all its calibres, traditional watchmaking



tools and machines—at just the right time. The acquisition helped Montblanc join the coterie of select manufacturers of handcrafted timepieces.

Today, the Minerva-made movements are counted among the most superior, high-quality calibres, at par with the likes of Laurent Ferrier and MB&F. The limited edition watches and customised timepieces made at this atelier command anything between 30,000 euros and 2,00,000 euros for super complications. “We have around 30 employees at the Minerva manufacture. Dedicated to preserving traditional Swiss watchmaking techniques, many of our craftsmen come from multi-generational families of watchmakers,” says Cerrato. “Our in-house calibres are part of the two technical pillars—the ExoTourbillon and the Chronograph Monopusher—developed and patented in Villeret. This year, our SIHH novelties like the Heritage Chrono-



*The Villeret manufacture; (below) watchmakers at work inside the building*





THANKS TO MONTBLANC'S  
OBSESSIVE ATTENTION TO  
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*The Rally Timer 100 was made at the Minerva atelier*



metrie ExoTourbillion Rattrapante, the Rally Timer 100, the 1858 Chronograph Tachymeter Bronze and the TimeWalker Chronograph 1000 limited edition were all products of the Minerva atelier. This growing segment of high-end watches is steadily and significantly contributing to the development of the watchmaking legitimacy of Montblanc.”

Minerva is one of the last few ateliers in the industry that still makes watches in a time-honoured tradition. The atelier procures its own raw material for the balance wire and puts it through several delicate procedures to make the perfect balance spring. The manufacture also uses old stamping machines and tools to make its components from scratch. A component can take up to ten production steps to create and the completion of a movement, like the Calibre MB M67.40 used in the Montblanc Metamorphosis, undergoes nearly 4,000 individual control steps.

All the haute horlogerie pieces here are polished over the course of many days, not with the aid of any machines, but with the stem of the gentian plant. The spherical tourbillon bridge of the Montblanc Tourbillon Cylindrique Geosphères Vasco da Gama is entirely bevelled by hand and takes about two weeks.

Thanks to such obsessive attention to detail, most collectors do not mind paying the high prices for Montblanc’s top of the line timepieces, like the Heritage Perpetual Calendar and the Tourbillon Cylindrique Geosphères Vasco da Gama. “There is something particularly significant about sustaining these traditions at a time when most watch companies are vying to produce only the most modern and precise movements. The Chronograph Monopusher Calibre 16.29 that was awarded the GPHG last year for the best chronograph is a perfect example of this legacy,” says Cerrato.

The Minerva atelier makes not more than 30 watches and 150 movements a year. While the development of a new movement can take up to five years, it takes at least two years to develop a fresh module. Apart from the mega complications, the workshop also provides movements for the 1858 Villeret chronographs.

Until 2013, the manufacture in Le Locle was producing the more accessible models from the brand and the Villeret workshop made just the haute horlogerie pieces in small numbers. All this changed with Jerome Lambert’s arrival as the company CEO four years ago. Though Lambert has now moved to a bigger role as the head of operations at the Richemont group, he set a more efficient and organised regime at Montblanc with the integration of the two facilities.

As part of a larger marketing strategy, Lambert opened up a broader price range for Montblanc watches with Villeret movements. Right from perpetual calendars in steel priced at around 10,000 euros to the Meisterstück Heritage Pulso-graph (the most affordable model in the Villeret collection) priced at 27,000 euros, the new range of watches appealed to aspiring as well as seasoned collectors. “The fine watch-



making codes of timepieces like these and their respective retail price points have enabled both a new generation of collectors and the established ones to own a beautifully crafted complicated watch. There has been a growing demand for value in timepieces over the last few months. Montblanc has been making such watches with good design and technical content at accessible prices for the last four years. This is what makes us unique,” says Cerrato.

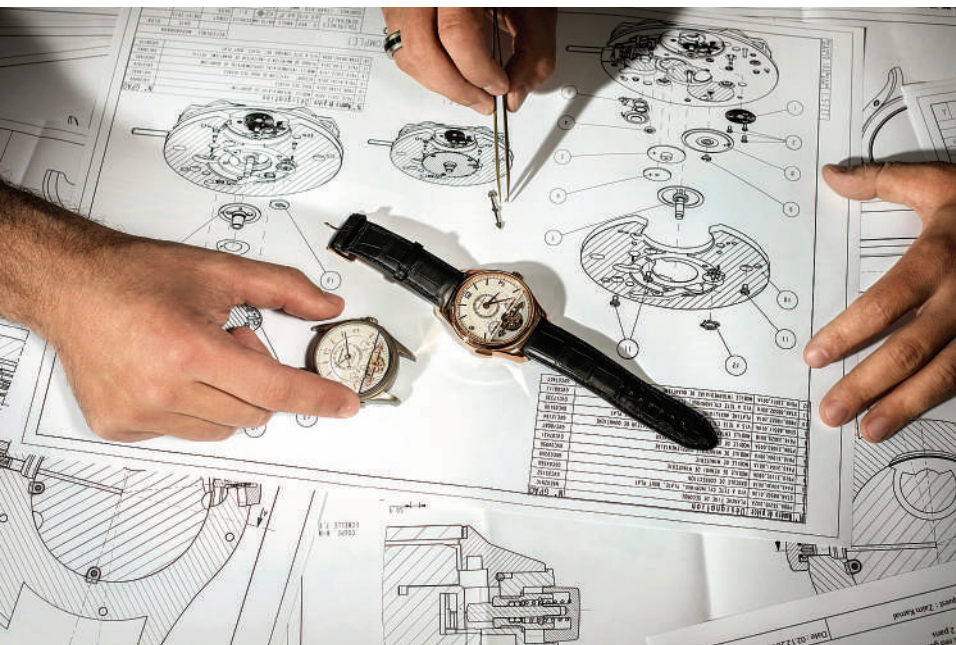
From the 2008 launch of the Nicolas Rieussec Monopusher Chronograph—the company’s first timepiece with a movement made entirely at its Le Locle facility—to the birth of the Villeret Metamorphosis, the brand’s most complicated watch unveiled in 2010, Montblanc has been surprising connoisseurs with consistent innovation in design and technology. “The Rieussec’s historical significance and its design with the system of rotating discs gave us a strong standing among watchmak-



*The movement of the Metamorphosis, Montblanc's most complicated watch, has more than 700 components*







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CHINA, THE US, SOUTH AMERICA  
AND THE MIDDLE EAST.”



*Davide Cerrato, managing director of the watch division; (above and left) movement assembly and technical development at the facility*

ers. The Metamorphosis was a watchmaker's dream brought to life with a unique animated dial disclosing two completely different faces of the watch, both in terms of display and technical content. The calibre had more than 700 components and different patents that displayed our watchmaking mastery and provided poetry and pleasure to a few happy owners,” says Cerrato.

All Montblanc timepieces, with the exception of the high complications crafted in the workshop in Villeret, are assembled with the utmost care at Le Locle. Before a Montblanc timepiece leaves the manufacture in Le Locle, it

goes through a comprehensive test programme. For almost three weeks, or 500 hours, the timepieces are subjected to a variety of conditions a watch must endure when worn on the wrist—daily wear and tear, numerous settings and resetting of the crown, different climate conditions, performance tests, and the everyday use of all its functions. Only after successfully passing the Montblanc Laboratory Test 500 are the timepieces released for delivery.

Today, the Montblanc watch division offers around 10 collections, including the Summit line of connected watches launched this year. “Having gained experience in digital luxury for a number of years with products like the Montblanc Screenwriter, Smart Cover and the Augmented Paper, the Summit was a natural step in Montblanc's evolution. With state-of-the art technology developed in partnership with Google, it caters to the modern needs of today's con-





*The Heritage Chronometrie ExoTourbillion Rattrapante*



*All Montblanc watches go through a comprehensive test programme before leaving the manufacture*

nected generation while upholding the key elements of luxury wearables. We have introduced fine watchmaking codes to the connected watch world and marked a new era in luxury wearables for men. The result has been a sellout success globally,” says Cerrato.

Hoping to draw in more youngsters to watches and wearable devices like the Summit, Montblanc has also been adding a slew of sports watches to its existing collections. “The extraordinary heritage of the Minerva manufacture and its specialisation in chronometric functions for precise time measurement have inspired our TimeWalker collection, which takes one back to the glorious days of motor racing,” says Cerrato. “The strong vintage look of the 1858 in steel and bronze, the Chronograph Tachymeter and the entire TimeWalker line with exciting racing-inspired design and technological materials are hugely popular with the younger generation.”

Speaking of the top sellers from Montblanc, the latest edition of the TimeWalker collection has proved to be a great hit in India. “Its classic motorsport look is very close to the original design launched by Minerva, which we believe makes it extremely appealing to the Indian market,” says Cerrato. Pursuing an aggressive growth strategy worldwide, Montblanc’s stint in India is gradually bearing fruit through its alliance with Titan. The partnership involves 51 per cent investment from Montblanc and 49 per cent from Titan. The main focus is to develop a strong retail network. “While Montblanc has enjoyed considerable customer loyalty in India, it is only over

the last three years that we have rolled out our expansion strategy across the country. We now have seven boutiques in India—in Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Delhi. We would be adding seven more stores by the end of this year,” says Cerrato.

Priced between ₹70,000 to a few crores, Montblanc watches in India are following a slow yet steady growth trajectory. The brand has re-entered the market with 18 points of sale and is looking at viable retail points in northern India. “We have more than 500 boutiques worldwide and India is one of our top five markets, apart from China, the US, South America and the Middle East,” says Cerrato. ○