

A DAY AT VACHERON CONSTANTIN



TEXT AND PHOTO BY SERGIO ZAGIER WITH THE COLLABORATION OF CLAUDIA HERRERA

Visiting the house of Vacheron Constantin is a luxury that few can boast, an idyllic and timeless experience. We arrived in a limousine and left with powerful images that treasure the knowledge accumulated over centuries at the service of time made in the likeness of dreams.

To an enthusiast of sophisticated watches and the history of Patagonian exploration, the Vacheron Constantin “Famous Explorers” dedicated to Magellan is almost a religious experience. The enameled dial depicting an antique-style map of Tierra del Fuego with legends in Spanish does not have hands, but loose digits that fly over a 120 degree arch over an hour. Something innovative, with the aesthetics of half a millennium ago. With that image of the map of the Strait of Magellan, I left for Switzerland, anxious to visit the Vacheron Constantin Manufacture.

With a stopover in Zürich, the usual gateway to the country for travelers from South America a conventional and hyper-punctual train took us from the German-speaking area to the French-speaking region and classic watchmaking cradle. The central station of Geneva is the point of arrival, and from there a beautiful road leads to the hotel into the historical part of town, just a few tram stops ahead. The visit to the Manufacture would be early the next day, so I still had all afternoon to explore the lake coast where not a few high-end matchmaking boutiques exhibit their collections.

It was in that area of the former Geneva where Vacheron Constantin was born in 1755 and where it has never ceased to operate until today. The flagship boutique opens its doors to an island at the mouth of Lake Lemán.

At the next day, then, a limousine with our name on a sign came to take us to a more remote area of the



center, about 20 minutes away, called Plan-les-Ouates, where the headquarters of Vacheron Constantin have been located since 2004. As we approached, we noted that the building is a work of architectural art in itself, designed by the Swiss-French Bernard Tschumi. Glass and metal surround a spacious reception, where Armelle Carreras, an English-speaking guide waited for us. Then, in the company as well of Aude Pittard, responsible for Public Relations, the tour of Manufacturing began, without cameras, since no one can register what happens in the emblematic production sectors.

The plant in Geneva houses 350 workers. A similar number are established in the production area in the Vallée de Joux, another traditional watch-making area. The brand delivers to the market around 19,000 pieces annually. The tour consists of a visit to the workshops located on both sides of glassed hallways where it is possible to contemplate the dynamics of workmanship. Each room dominates a specialty, and the more exquisite the craft, the less





populated the room. Therefore, contrary to what one may think, the workshops where the simplest parts are put together-if this adjective is applicable to a Vacheron Constantin -may count with twenty- something specialists. In contrast, the assembly of a complicated piece may be in the hands of two or three experts with many years of experience. Among them, we met a Spanish technician who was being trained by a veteran specialist in complicated pieces

who would soon retire. The learning phase will last two or three years, during which the master will share his experience of decades with his disciple.

Just seeing the work table of the expert inspires an unusual respect towards the person that keeps in his mind decades of experience in giving birth to these miraculous little machines. Precise and with multiple functions, and basically equivalent to those produced by the geniuses of the XVIII century.

Speaking of teaching and technical education, Vacheron Constantin boasts a workshop for training young watchmakers coming from the Geneva school. There they perfect their training in the real manufacture to join the firm later. This is a great investment on the part of the company which assures the continuity in the staff -as a high end-brand requires- of craftsmen that have an impeccable ability and responsibility.

From there, we proceeded to the small enameling section, one of the specialties of the brand. We could see examples of the blue pigments that

are applied on the engraved surfaces to produce that typical effect of decorated watches.

Many of the calibers that are produced boast a hand-made decorative engraving over bridges and plates. This turns the watches into jewels, particularly due to the tendency in many brands to launch skeletonized models or with a transparent crystal back in place of the metal of the rest of the case. Vacheron Constantin watches are a classic in this sense. It is enough to remember the exposed bridge with the shape of the Geneva Cross, a small masterly piece with sharp points which is extremely difficult to produce.

The Geneva Seal calls for a special mention. It is an extremely demanding award granted when certain technical requirements, which are imposed by an independent commission striving for excellence, are met. In one of the hallways of the Manufacture, a long panel describes in detail each point the calibers must meet to be approved and stamped with the Maltese Cross. Of course, Vacheron not only meets but exceeds these requirements and is then allowed to exhibit the tiny shield in its watches.

Back to our tour of the building, in the rooms the atmosphere is not only of order and concentration, but of a deep serenity. As if they had all the time of the world on their side. The vast glassed spaces, through which light passes unrestricted remember the small domestic workshops where two or three centuries ago watchmakers designed, created or repaired watches with a technique closer to craftsmanship than industry. It was the heroic time of horlogerie:

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watchmakers not only produced new calibers, but discovered new principles and created new concepts to keep time under control. They also invented escapements, compensated temperature and decorated small works of art.

About all this, we talked with Christian Selmoni, Artistic Director of the firm, with whom we shared lunch in an exquisite private room. Great windows overlooked the semi-urban surroundings, very verdant and bucolic. The rest of the walls exhibited antique collection watches. “Our industry suffered an almost terminal epidemic a few decades ago -Christian says- but thanks to the drive and courage of some visionaries, classic watchmaking survived and prospers.”

After visiting Vacheron Constantin and knowing its décor, its sobriety and respect for detail on each piece, one understands why collectors are willing to give everything for a watch like the ones created here. ◇

