

CLASSIC DRIVER

Watch Fashion 2012: The Year of the Dragon

Lead

If dragons and skeletons are your horological bag, this year's Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie – the world's most exclusive watch show – would have held considerable appeal, writes Simon de Burton.

With Asia being where the money's at, the leading high-end brands have understandably tailored their products to suit by embracing the fact that 2012 is the Chinese 'year of the dragon'. Piaget, for example, has decorated watches in its Emperador, Polo, Altiplano and Protocole lines with enamelled and bejewelled dragons, while the centrepiece of the Parmigiani Fleurier stand was a remarkable one-off dragon clock costing more than £1 million. It found a buyer even before it was completed.

Asian horophiles also like to have skeletons in their cupboards – or, to be more precise, in their watch boxes. This partly accounts for the proliferation of openwork dials at the show, the most impressive of which could be seen on the 40th anniversary special editions of Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak. Having grown large and chunky over the years, the mighty Oak has been reduced in bulk (again, partly in honour of the Asian market) with the new openworked time-only and tourbillon models being in extra-thin cases of 39mm and 41mm diameter, respectively.







There's no doubt about it, luxury watch sales are soaring once again (the giant Swatch group recently posted an unprecedented annual sales figure of more than Sfr 7 billion) but this year's SIHH saw none of the arrogance which many brands had begun to display during the heady times before the economic crash of 2009. The number of truly crazy, money-no-object watches has diminished considerably (although Richard Mille's RM056 Felipe Massa split seconds tourbillon watch with a case made entirely from sapphire was pretty far out - especially with its £1.2 million price tag).



By and large, last year's 'simple classicism' theme still seems to prevail, with brands such as Panerai, Jaeger-LeCoultre, Girard-Perregaux and Vacheron Constantin majoring on the traditional models that have made their names, albeit with the incorporation of plenty of 21st Century horological finesse.





Panerai, for example, has embraced the use of ceramic for a new line of Luminor 1950 models, one of which, the Tuttonero, gets a matching black ceramic bracelet. The Panerai's most people were drooling over, however, were the beautifully spare Radiomir California three-days which combines Arabic and Roman dial markings, and the equally minimalist Radiomir S.L.C - the initials standing for Siluro a Lento Corsa, a manned torpedo that Panerai-equipped Italian Navy divers used during WWII.



Jaeger-LeCoultre reminded us of its technical mastery by unveiling its Duometre a Spherotourbillon, the only tourbillon in the world which can be adjusted to the exact second and with a tourbillon cage that rotates on a double axis. It's a true work of micro-mechanical genius - but an incredibly simple version of the classic Reverso with a delectable dial in blue enamel attracted just as much praise.







Likewise, everyone was impressed with Vacheron Constantin's Metier d'Art offerings with complex engraved, enamelled and tessellated dials, yet the new Malte models celebrating a century of tonneau-shaped Vacheron watches were what many really coveted. IWC scored a hit, too, with its reworked yet still classic-looking pilot watches, as did Ralph Lauren with its rugged Safari chronograph.







The fact is, most of us are really pretty conservative when it comes to what we hang from our wrists and it makes one wonder whether or not everything that is to be done in the world of mechanical watches has been done. I, for one, shan't complain if the leading brands simply concentrate on refining historic styles.



But then I've always believed the great American typeface designer Frederic W. Goudy was right when he so sagely observed that "The old fellows stole all of our best ideas."

Photos: Brands

Gallery

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