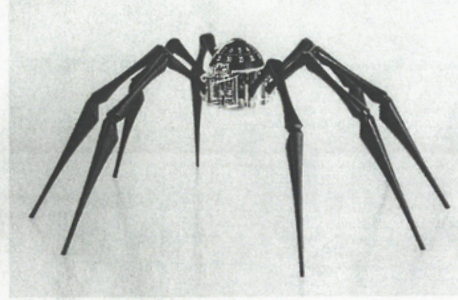
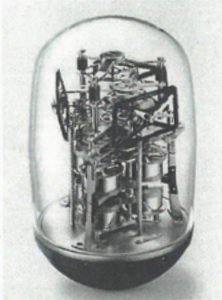


OFF THE WRIST

Time as a design feature

Some collectors prefer the aesthetics of a beautiful clock that they can set on a table as 'a mechanical sculpture' rather than wear



BY ALEXANDRA CHENY

"Accuracy for the time doesn't matter to me," Solomon Chen, the chief executive of a consumer electronics company, said recently by phone. "When my jaw just drops and also when people say, 'What is that? What do you have in there?,' that's why I collect clocks."

For the last 25 years, Mr. Chen, 62, has amassed a collection of wristwatches, music boxes and more than 70 clocks, eight of which occupy an entire console table in his Irwindale, Calif., office. Rather than focus on the timekeeping aspect of his clocks — which include desk, table and display models, to name a few — he says he prefers the aesthetics and design. He is not in the minority.

"Nobody buys a clock to tell time," said Maximilian Büsser, the founder and creative director of MB&F and an avid clock collector. "It's that beautiful object, a mechanical sculpture which gives you time." Although his company is best known for its innovative watches, Mr. Büsser has partnered with L'Épée 1839, a Swiss brand specializing in high-end mechanical clocks. Over the past 11 years the two created 14 "machines," as he calls them, including the Arachnophobia, a clock in the shape of a giant spider. More are now in development.

For many collectors and brands alike, not only has the purpose of a clock

changed but its meaning as well.

"The difference between a desk clock and a table clock, most people either don't understand it, don't care or it changes from one person to the other," Arnaud Nicolas, the chief executive of L'Épée, said by phone. He explained that, historically, a desk clock was very often a quartz model, typically with an eight-day power reserve and an alarm. Occasionally, such models were called travel clocks and tended to be on the smaller side.

As Mr. Büsser noted, desk clocks often had the same basic design as wristwatches and were akin to an accessory. Think of the Cartier Santos, for example, a square watch with a geometric dial, exposed screws and sword-shaped hands. The Santos desk clock not only carries the same name but also has the shape and characteristics of the watch. A table clock, on the other hand, usually had a mechanical movement. Older ones often had a heavy case of wood, marble or stone and therefore were not meant to be moved frequently. Today, those characteristics can be as varied as the timekeeping devices that house them.

"A table clock goes on a table," Massimo Bonfigli, head of brand heritage at Ulysse Nardin, said on a video call. But, he noted, tables come in all shapes and sizes and can be placed almost any-

where within a living or working space.

With 675 components, three time zone indicators and a one-year power reserve, Ulysse Nardin's latest piece that belongs on a table is its UFO — Unidentified Floating Object — introduced in 2021 for the brand's 175th anniversary. Inspired by nautical buoys, the UFO sits on a spherical base of varnished aluminum that sways when it is pushed, a bit like a child's roly-poly clown toy. Underneath a hand-blown glass dome, the mechanism is accented in one of three colorways — designated to identify its exclusive retailers: ice blue for Bucherer, champagne for the Hour Glass and green for Yoshida.

"We didn't want to enter into the precision field," Mr. Bonfigli said. "It's no longer the purpose of table clocks, nor the need. Instead, we wanted to show something different and fun."

The brand says it "reinvited the historical codes" with the UFO, a \$68,600 marine chronometer-inspired table clock, which was produced in a 75-piece limited-edition collaboration with L'Épée and sold out in two weeks. "We are not a table clock producer, and we will never be," Mr. Bonfigli said. "However, we frustrated a lot of people because we only had so many clocks and the demand was very great. It showed us the desire and demand for this type of object."

Luxury wristwatches continue to rise in popularity — the Business Research Company's Luxury Watch Global Market Report 2023 estimated that the global luxury watch market value would grow to \$34.1 billion this year from \$30.5 billion in 2022. Still, watchmakers are finding that clocks resonate more than watches with some of their clients.

"Clocks have almost had a renaissance," said Silas Walton, founder of A Collected Man, a pre-owned rare-watch online platform based in London. "For watchmakers, clocks are now a way to peacock and create an unusual or eccentric way of displaying time."

Mr. Walton, 35, currently owns four clocks from Hermès, Cartier and Jaeger-LeCoultre. He previously owned an MB&F Balthazar, a nearly 16-inch-tall robot clock with a jawline like the Terminator, two disks in its chest that show the clockwork displays of jumping hours and sweeping minutes, and a winding key hidden in a shield on its right arm.

He sold it, Mr. Walton said on a video call, because "it was very loud and distracted people."

"These are art pieces, not functional clocks," he said. Widely considered by industry insiders and collectors to be the original design-forward timepiece, Jaeger-LeCoultre's Atmos premiered 95 years ago, and its recent iterations continue to use a

mixture of gases that expand and contract to power its mechanism without the need for other power or, frankly, any kind of human interaction.

"In Paris in the 1930s there was this salon culture where you invited guests to your home, but you didn't necessarily go to a restaurant," Matthieu Sauret, product marketing and heritage director at Jaeger-LeCoultre, said on a video call. "I think, post-Covid, this is again the trend and with it, an importance toward oneself and one's home. Interior design, from designer chairs to clocks, matters."

The watch industry seems to agree. Last year, the foundation that organizes the Grand Prix d'Horlogerie de Genève, an annual awards event, added a mechanical clock prize to its lineup. The inaugural winner was the Van Cleef & Arpels Fontaine aux Oiseaux, a multi-million-dollar one-of-a-kind automaton. The piece, standing about 1.4 feet tall, featured two bejeweled and articulated birds that are poised over a small pool of water made from slices of ornamental stones, with the time displayed on its base.

"For many years, people didn't think about having a clock because it was no longer necessary and it became boring," said Mr. Nicolas, of L'Épée. "That completely changed when we started thinking about clocks as creative objects."

Form and function
From far left: the UFO, or Unidentified Floating Object, by Ulysse Nardin, which sways when it is pushed; the Santos desk clock from Cartier, whose design has the same characteristics of the wristwatch by the same name; the Atmos Transparente clock by Jaeger-LeCoultre, which is ultimately powered by its environment; and the Arachnophobia clock, from a partnership between MB&F and L'Épée 1839, which can stand or be hung on a wall.