

When Clocks Became Playful

Since Arnaud Nicolas became an owner of L'Épée 1893, it has created clocks that look like antique cars, spaceships and even a hot-air balloon.



The L'Épée Time Fast II in AC Cobra blue with white stripes. Hour and minute displays appear on rotating disks where an engine would be on the racecar that inspired it.

By Carol Besler

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The first time Arnaud Nicolas disassembled a watch, he was just 7 years old.

“My grandfather gave me a mechanical watch for my birthday and the first thing I did was take it apart to see how it worked,” said Mr. Nicolas, the chief executive and creative director of the Swiss luxury clockmaker L'Épée 1839. “Two days later he found me in my room trying to put it back together.”

Mr. Nicolas went on to become an aerospace engineer, working for Arianespace, a French company that builds rocket launchers for the European Space Agency and others. “From an intellectual point of view it was a dream job,” he said, “but it was missing something from my heart.”

The quest for that elusive component led him back to his childhood fascination with the mechanics of timekeeping in 2009, when he and his business partner, Sebastien Merillat, bought Swiza, a Swiss knife manufacturer, which owned the L'Épée brand.

“It all started with a conversation in a bar,” Mr. Nicolas recalled. “I was sitting with Sebastien and we were talking about our shared love of watchmaking and clocks, and the conversation turned to L'Épée. We talked about what a shame it was that the company was on the verge of collapse, and all that know-how would be lost.

“After a brief silence between us, Sebastien said, ‘Are you thinking what I’m thinking?’ I looked at him, and said, ‘Yes, we cannot let that happen.’ He told me, ‘OK, let’s buy it.’ I said, ‘Yes, we should do that.’ A month later, we had made it happen, and I was managing the company.”

His goal from the beginning was to elevate the decorative clock from its traditional roots to the level of art form. “When I took over, L’Epée was only manufacturing carriage clocks, which are beautiful, but traditional,” he said. “I thought there was a market for more design-focused, trendy objects, something more playful.”

“I was approaching this not as a watchmaker, but as a scientist,” he continued. “I wanted to harness the basic science behind these movements and use them to express my creativity. I was starting from a blank page.”

The latest, to be introduced this week during the watch fairs in Geneva, is a cylindrical reinterpretation of the cuckoo clock, a 99-piece limited edition priced at \$85,000 each. A cuckoo-looking bird trills the hours from the cylinder’s upper part, while four automatons appear at the bottom. They are meant to echo the monkeys who hear no evil, speak no evil and see no evil — although Mr. Nicolas has added a “do no evil,” too. During an interview in February, however, he had not yet decided whether the automatons would be monkeys, dogs or birds.

While Mr. Nicolas declined to disclose how many clocks the company makes each year, he has over the years produced a series of kinetic timekeeping objects that look an awful lot like high-end toys: classic cars with tiny functional engines (the Time Fast II, \$46,555); spaceships with propellers that power the movements (the Albatross, \$142,800) and, in a recent collaboration with Louis Vuitton, a hot-air balloon with a base made of miniature Louis Vuitton trunks ([the Montgolfière Aéro](#), \$26,500).



The L’Epée and Louis Vuitton Montgolfière Aéro, a hot-air-balloon-themed table clock with a base made of miniaturized Louis Vuitton trunks.

“Our clocks are all reinterpretations of objects or life-forms that exist,” he said. “Whether it’s a car, a boat, an aircraft or a jellyfish. The idea is to express a message by evoking a reaction, whether it’s inspiring or shocking.”

In June 2024, LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton bought Swiza from the men, acquiring L’Epée in the purchase. While Mr. Nicolas has continued to run L’Epée and its 90 employees, it now is part of LVMH Watches, which includes Hublot, TAG Heuer and other brands. LVMH does not disclose financial information on individual brands, but its watch and jewelry division reported revenues of 10.6 billion euros (\$11.5 billion) in 2024, a 3 percent decrease from 2023 totals.

Here, Mr. Nicolas talks about the sale, the most complex clock L’Epée has made, and what he wants to see on every wedding registry list. The interview has been edited and condensed.

Why did you sell L’Epée to LVMH?

Clocks are booming right now. We had more orders than we could fill, and LVMH wanted to increase the volume of what we were producing in collaboration with their brands. I had to tell them it wasn’t possible. My partner and I were very successful at running the company, but we were also the limiting factor of the company because we didn’t have the funds to expand it properly.

What has changed?

In terms of the direction of the company, nothing will change. What I was afraid of at first is that most of the C.E.O.s in big groups are just people who are not deciding but executing what the people have decided for them. But at LVMH, the point is the entrepreneurship. I was told by Mr. Bernard Arnault: “We’re not going to step in your business. If you need us, we’ll be there. You just have to ask. But don’t expect that we’ll take over. You remain at the head and we’ll be there if you need anything. You have a problem, we have solutions.”

What help have they provided?

We have added a new production building to our previous two, which has helped us to streamline production and clear up certain bottlenecks. The plan is to eventually have everything under the same roof.

In terms of distribution we are working with very nice partners. We have 108 points of sale [where their products are sold] in the world right now; I don’t want to jack it up to 200. I want it to remain something we can control, with volume that we can control. But we will increase our exposure by working more with other brands who have different networks, and look beyond the watch market to other markets, including the art market.

Art aficionados really like our objects and we think there is a huge potential there. I was at Singapore Art Week in January and people were queuing up to enter our booth. People were fascinated, saying, “It’s art but it’s also a clock. Wow, we didn’t expect that. We didn’t know it existed.”

You said 20 percent of L’Epée’s production is dedicated to collaborations. Will you maintain that ratio?

It will be more like the opposite of that — 80 percent collaborations. The brand L’Epée will remain very niche and exclusive, but we will expand on the manufacturing side to work with other brands, both from the LVMH group and outside the group. This will expand our reach because every brand has its own audience.

What was the most challenging piece the company has created?

I would say it was the Time Fast II, because of all the detail. It was inspired by a real racing car from the 1960s, and has a timekeeping movement plus an automaton that works like a V-8 engine, with pistons going up and down. There is a key on the dashboard, which you turn to start the engine.

What is your goal for L’Epée?

My goal is to bring back the clock as an important household item. Fifty years ago, clocks were one of the main objects inside the home; one of the most expensive objects, but also one of the most desirable. It was on almost every wedding list. My idea is to bring the table clock back to that position of prominence.
