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Last Man Standing: L'Épée CEO Arnaud Nicolas Tells Us Why His Luxury Clock Brand Contin

Last Man Standing: L'Épée CEO Arnaud Nicolas Tells Us Why His Luxury Clock Brand Continues to Thrive Today

BY JEFF YEUNG, LIFESTYLE EDITOR | 01 FEB 2024



After a pandemic-driven hiatus, L'Épée is returning to Hong Kong. Its CEO and artistic director Arnaud Nicolas tells us why Switzerland's only remaining luxury clockmaker is still thriving today.

Driven out by the pandemic several years ago, Swiss luxury clockmaker L'Épée is returning to Hong Kong, this time in partnership with the watch consignment company Wristcheck. The two brands came together last year to hold an exhibition at the latter's Landmark Atrium store and collaborated on an 88-piece limited-edition of L'Épée's famous Grenade clock.



While such innovative, imaginative and inventive designs might suggest a more recent genesis, the Delémont-based brand was founded in 1839 when Auguste L'Epée established the company with his friend Pierre-Henri Paur.

Although now situated in Switzerland's picturesque Jura, the manufacture was first located in Saint Suzanne, France, where it produced horological parts and music boxes. By the mid-19th century, L'Epée shifted the focus to producing platform escapements for alarm and carriage clocks. The process of climbing the industrial ladder encouraged innovation after innovation, gradually driving L'Epée ever closer to horology's leading edge. By 1889 it was producing 200,000 platform escapements annually, a record at the time.

Pairing engineering and technical expertise with manufacturing prowess, it wasn't long before L'Epée began to attract attention beyond its home market. By the early 20th century it had won six gold awards in exhibitions and fairs around the world, more than any other clock or watch-maker.

The last century saw the company in constant flux, diversifying and then narrowing its catalogue more than once before settling on a business model based solely around luxury clocks. As if in a repeat of its first century in business, its dedication to the art was rewarded when its clocks were selected for use on the supersonic Concorde passenger jet; L'Épée clocks were also given to guests at the 1981 wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.

However, the rapid adoption of the mobile phone meant that, by the turn of the millennium, everyone was carrying an accurate means of telling time in their pocket or handbag. Clocks, it seemed, were becoming redundant.



It was a friend's rant about this likely outcome – in a bar, of course – that spurred L'Épée's current CEO and artistic director Arnaud Nicolas to invest in and eventually lead the company. "The market for clocks was dying," Nicolas recalls. "In 2009, when I called retailers and introduced myself and my company, I barely managed to finish my sentence before they hung up on me. With clocks, people weren't just walking away – they were running away. When I told people I was going to buy L'Épée with a friend, they all told me it was a terrible idea."

So why did he do it? “Sentiment,” he confesses. The company was one of the last Swiss luxury clockmakers still standing, and as it was a brand he’d grown up admiring he found it hard to sit back and watch it disappear. In the first five years after Nicolas took over, the brand began developing a more modern collection, using complications such as retrograde seconds, power-reserve indicators in the form of animated logos, perpetual calendars, chiming mechanisms and even tourbillons, but it wasn’t until 2014, when the brand reached its 175th anniversary, that his ingenuity gave L’Epée its much needed rebirth.

That year, at Nicolas’ insistence, the company introduced its Creative Art line, which quickly became a L’Epée signature. Under that banner, the artistic director and his team of designers and engineers spawned some of the most revolutionary clocks the industry has ever seen, in the form of rockets, aliens, robots, skulls, racing cars and even grenades.

“Everyone who knew about the Creative Art line told us it would never work,” says Nicolas. “Now, it’s what keeps us alive. I’ve always liked to think out of the box – and if other people don’t trust my ideas, that’s all right. I trust myself, and that’s enough for me.”



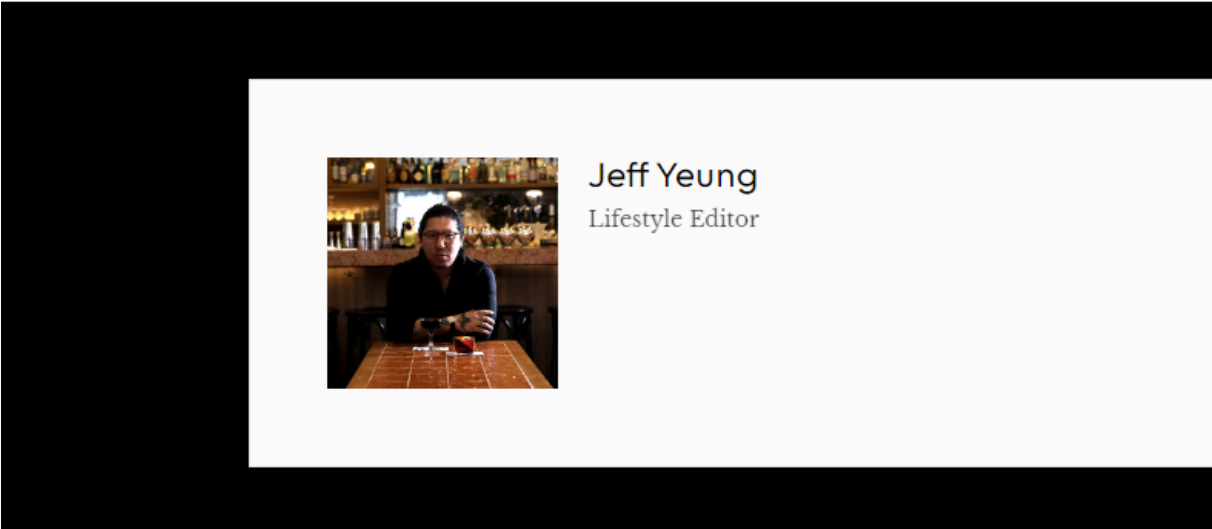
It’s not simply the stunning designs, but the almost unbelievable attention to detail that makes these clocks so coveted. Take the chrome Time Fast II, for example: the escapement is placed in the driver’s helmet because it’s the clock’s “brain”; the adjustable steering wheel changes the time’s direction; a dashboard-mounted key starts or stops the clock; and in a throwback to friction-powered clockwork toy cars, the clock can be charged by moving it back and forth, engaging the wheels that wind its power reserve.

“We start with a story, then we design the object,” Nicolas explains. “A lot of people pick up a movement or an engine and design around it. You see this for watches, for cars, for computers or most other things. Then they’ll call up their marketing team to invent a story in order to sell it. What we do at L’Epée is the opposite.

“I start with a story or idea, and then I work with a designer to design both the engine and the casing at the same time. So there’s no difference between the body and the movement. We combine form with function, and no detail is overlooked. There’s always a purpose for everything in our creations.”

The Creative Art line’s success has brought new life to the company, so much so that Nicolas feels it’s no longer under threat from newer technologies that tell the time. The key, he says, is to focus not on what a clock is, but what it can be.

“A clock used to be a tool to tell the time and to wake you up in the morning,” he says. “We no longer need it for that. That’s why we make creative art here. A L’Epée clock is first and foremost a kinetic sculpture. It just also tells the time. It’s no longer the same concept of a clock as it was 20, 50, or 100 years ago. Now, it’s a kinetic piece of art.”



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