

FASHION & STYLE

Jewels That Tell Time

By TINA ISAAC-GOIZÉ MARCH 24, 2017

Gem-laden wristwatches tend to round out the seasonal offerings at high-jewelry houses, accents rather than centerpieces of the glittering collections. But this season, in an unexpected change, lavishly embellished bracelets and other pieces concealing small quartz movements were introduced at the Place Vendôme jewelry houses and at independent brands alike.

Just don't call them watches. These are jewels that tell time, with prices generally in the six-figure range.

"Right now, there's a real need for folie, innovation and creativity, which is the definition of luxury. There has to be an emotional impact," said Vincent Grégoire, creative director at the NellyRodi agency, a trend-forecasting company in Paris. "You have to feel that a piece was designed by an engineer-poet, so jewelers are pushing the limits on [what's] stylistically and technically incredible."

Secret watches of today are not far removed from 18th-century automata or the invisible watches of the Twenties, he added. "We're moving toward pieces that are more and more illusionistic."

"Even I was surprised that secret watches were hot," said Giampiero Bodino, an independent high-jewelry designer in Milan who is also a creative group director at Richemont. In Paris, Mr. Bodino presented just three one-of-a-kind

secret watches with delicately hued pavé gems and gumbdrop-sized cabochons, giving them the poetic Italian names Primavera, Rosa dei Venti and Mosaico.

Formerly a freelance designer for Panerai, Jaeger-LeCoultre and Bulgari (as well as Gucci and Prada), Mr. Bodino said creating his own timepieces has “always been in a little drawer in my heart.”

Women, he believes, haven’t yet been well served by the category. “I see women wearing men’s watches, or shrunken versions of a design, but it’s not something that’s completely dedicated to them,” he said. “I wanted to create a piece that totally respects the jeweler’s DNA, but with this little secret inside.”

And the fact that electronic devices now dominate our lives makes “nice jewelry that tells time” all the more relevant, he said.

Suzanne Syz, the independent jewelry designer and art collector based in Geneva, presented Her Ben, a trompe l’oeil limited-edition watch — with its face frozen at the classic display time of 10:10. But flip open the diamond-encrusted laser-cut cover, and an identical (but working) timepiece appears underneath. An engraved quote by Benjamin Franklin appears inside the cover: “You may delay but time will not.”

“If I’m going to wear a jewelry watch, it can’t be quartz,” Ms. Syz said of her decision to create her own mechanical watch version. She fitted her limited-edition creations with a Manufacture Vaucher 26-ruby self-winding mechanism with a mini-rotor that is visible through the glass back.

Stowing diminutive watches under large opals in the Dior et d’Opales collection allowed Victoire de Castellane, the artistic director of high jewelry at Dior, to tackle a style paradox. Traditional French aesthetics do not allow wristwatches at night, she said. “You don’t match your bag with your shoes, and you don’t wear a watch to a soirée,” she said, adding, “With all the stones and colors, I could continue a train of thought I’d already begun with the Cher Dior collection. Hiding the watch was just more elegant.”

At Chanel, timepieces were tucked into important camellia bracelets and faux-modest necklaces. One pendant in the Les Éternelles collection bore a large pear-shaped crystal with 587 brilliant diamonds, 26 Japanese cultured pearls, an

Indonesian cultured pearl and a 5.32-carat fancy light yellow diamond. The watch rests on the underside, against the wearer's skin.

Van Cleef & Arpel offered a mind-bender with its Cerf Volant pendant, depicting a kite in flight, in onyx, spinel, rubies, mother-of-pearl and diamonds. Press on the ruby cabochon and the front panel drops down, revealing a mirror that reflects a counterclockwise quartz movement.

Boucheron offered the season's showstopper with Lierre de Paris, an ivy-themed collection inspired by an 1881 necklace designed by Frédéric Boucheron. An asymmetrical creeper in sculpted gold set with nearly 800 diamonds, it took 650 hours to make. The secret timepiece is set into one leaf and concealed by another, which springs up when pressed and then resettles on its own, a design element devised to mimic nature as closely as possible.

"We all know that time is the ultimate luxury," said Claire Choisne, the creative director at Boucheron. "It's what we are always running after, what we always need more of with friends and family."

So the ultimate scenario, she noted, is "to have this beautiful jewel and never feel the need to look at the time."

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