

JAPANESE MAGIC

A FEW DEDICATED
CRAFTSMEN KEEP
AN ANCIENT
ART ALIVE

BY SOPHIE FURLEY

Six thousand miles separate Switzerland's watchmakers and Japan's maki-e lacquer artists, but fortune has brought them together to create some of the most exciting timepieces on the market today. Watchmakers such as Vacheron Constantin, Peter Speake-Marin and Van Cleef & Arpels have teamed up with a few of the remaining Japanese maki-e artists to produce lacquer dials that bring a completely new dimension to watchmaking. But what makes Japanese lacquer so unique?

Peter Speake-Marin's
Roaring Tiger watch

MASTERWORK

The dials of Peter Speake-Marin's maki-e watches are created by the master lacquer artist Mushū Yamazaki, who works alone on the west coast of Japan. Each dial takes about six months to create and combines the most sophisticated techniques known in maki-e lacquer. Each timepiece is unique.

The watches of the
Vacheron Constantin
Métiers d'Art La Symbolique
des Laques series: Plum
Tree and Nightingale, Pine
Tree and Crane, Bamboo
and Sparrow



VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Vacheron Constantin's Métiers d'Art La Symbolique des Laques collection was created in collaboration with the Zohiko lacquer workshop in Kyoto. The theme will change over a period of three years, with each year bringing a new set of three watches in a limited edition of 20. The first set explores long life through the theme Three Friends of Winter; the watches are Pine Tree and Crane, Plum Tree and Nightingale, and Bamboo and Sparrow.

Making of the Bamboo and Sparrow



Japanese lacquer is an amazing substance that comes from the sap of a tree. It hardens when exposed to oxygen, changing from a viscous state to an extremely hard material that is resistant to water and can withstand heat and even certain acids. The art of decorating objects with this lacquer is even older than the Swiss watch industry, dating back to Japan's Jomon period, around the fifth century BC. The interest for watchmakers is that amazing effects can be achieved with lacquer that aren't possible with the more traditional Swiss arts, such as enamel, guilloché and engraving. Today, however, as with many of the Swiss watch arts, only a few dedicated craftsmen are keeping this ancient craft alive.

Any visitor to Asia will notice that lacquerware is commonplace; it's found on everything from bowls to boxes to tea caddies, but the techniques vary greatly, from simple varnishes to the application of lac (a resin made from the secretions of insects) and true lacquer, which comes from

the sap of the *Rhus verniciflua* lacquer tree, also known as the urushi tree.

RARE COMMODITY

The sap used for true lacquer can only be harvested from trees that are at least 10 years old. Five to 10 parallel horizontal gashes are made on the trunk, and a thick, gray-colored caustic and toxic sap is collected. Each tree can be tapped several times a year but will only produce half a cup of sap and then often cannot be used again for a number of years. The quality of the sap depends on several factors, such as the age of the tree, the quality of the soil, climate and season. The finest sap is usually harvested in July and August, and this sap is collected separately and reserved for application in the uppermost layers of intricate lacquer decorations. Once the sap has been collected, it is stored in a wooden barrel and then filtered through a cloth to remove impurities.

Lacquer can be successfully applied to numerous substrates such as wood, textiles,

bamboo, leather, ceramic and metal. Mother-of-pearl or gold is often the base for a maki-e lacquer watch dial. Before application can begin, the base is prepared to allow the lacquer to adhere. Next, layer after layer of lacquer is applied (anywhere from one to 100 layers in all, ranging between 0.8 mm and 1 mm in thickness), but each layer must rest undisturbed for 24 to 48 hours before the next one can be added.

When lacquer hardens, it is not drying in the conventional sense; instead, it's actually curing through a chemical reaction that takes place in moist air. Raw lacquer contains an enzyme called laccase, which, in the right atmospheric conditions, acts as a catalyst for its oxidation and results in a permanent hardening of the lacquer. "Approximately four months are necessary to produce a single dial," explains Christian Selmoni, Vacheron Constantin's product director. "It depends notably on the seasons in Japan, because lacquer drying depends on humidity and temperature."



From left: Tuki Usagi, Niwa Sakura and Ganji watches from Van Cleef & Arpels' Midnight Japanese Lacquer Collection

EXTRAORDINARY ARTISTRY

Van Cleef & Arpels' Midnight Japanese Lacquer Collection comprises five different Japanese scenes created by the master lacquer artist Hakose San. Each design is limited to eight pieces.

The term *maki-e* literally means “sprinkled picture,” and it is an apt descriptive because platinum, gold, silver and other metal powders are sprinkled onto the lacquer while it is still wet using a sprinkling canister (*makizutsu*) or a hair-tipped paintbrush (*kebo*). Three common techniques seen in *maki-e* lacquer work are *togidashi maki-e*, *takamaki-e* and *hari maki-e*. In *togidashi maki-e*, a final coat of black lacquer is applied over the entire surface and then burnished briefly until the gold powder underneath is faintly revealed. *Takamaki-e*

STORIES TO TELL

The beauty of the recent collaborations between Swiss watchmaking and Japanese art is that both have a story to tell. Legends surround the art of *maki-e* as they do the Swiss watchmakers. Tales of Japanese artists sending their work out on a boat in the middle of a lake to dry or setting sail to finish their pieces away from dust and distractions are common.

While the image of the watchmaker at the bench is a romantic one, the Japanese lacquer artisan works seated on his *tatami* mat. “Without seeing the artist sitting on the floor paint-

‘precious soberness’ of the *maki-e* lacquer and the Zen spirit that it incorporates within,” shares Vacheron’s Selmoni.

MEETING OF CULTURES

Without seeing the results, it might be difficult to imagine just how well these two very different cultures work together and how much each can bring to the other’s art form, but the finished *maki-e* watches say it all, and listening to the watchmakers explain their respective adventures, it’s clear that the partnerships have been as enriching as the production of the timepieces themselves. “When you understand how it is done, you are just in awe of the work,” explains Speake-Marin. “These aren’t just pretty pieces—there is spirit and emotion here. To support artists like Mushū Yamazaki and keep the art alive is satisfaction in itself.”

Now that some of the finest Swiss watch brands have taken the step to collaborate with master craftsmen in faraway lands, the doors for artistic expression are now well and truly open for other artists to bring their skills to the world of timekeeping—what a joy for watch collectors and lovers of traditional decorative art forms the world over. speake-marin.com, vacheron-constantin.com, vancleef-arpels.com

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means raised *maki-e* and is a technique that involves building up designs on the surface by using a mixture of lacquer, metal powder, and charcoal or clay dust. *Hari maki-e*, or “flat” *maki-e*, is the simplest form in which a design is added to the lacquer. Other variations can include a combination of the above and the addition of eggshell, gold leaf, abalone or mother-of-pearl to create even more intricate designs.

ing with his single-haired brush, you wouldn’t believe it,” shares Peter Speake-Marin, an independent watchmaker who has offered *maki-e* dials in one-of-a-kind watches. Like Western-style enamel or engraved dials or the watch movements themselves, lacquer dials take months to make, and the hours, weeks and months that the artist spends on a piece cannot help but leave an imprint on the history and soul of the watch. “Personally, I admire the