



Grandfather's CLOCK

AS A RELATIVE NEWCOMER TO HAUTE HORLOGERIE,
CECIL PURNELL IS WITHOUT COMPROMISE WHEN IT COMES TO
ITS EXQUISITE TOURBILLON WATCHES.

BY GOVIND DHAR



Deciding to start a fine watch company at the age of 50 takes some doing, especially when you plan to make only tourbillon watches and have the movements made entirely in-house. "We chose not to be the watch for everybody but to make only tourbillons, because it was always classed as the highest pedigree in watchmaking circles," says Jonathan Purnell, chairman and managing director of Cecil Purnell, a company he named after his grandfather. While a number of newer watch brands including those from high fashion houses opt to buy movements from established third parties, Jonathan knew that to aim to rank among the best

The approximately ₹1 crore Cecil Purnell La Croix (top) and the La Grande Date (above) debuted at the Baselworld watch and jewellery fair earlier this year.

watchmakers in the world, he would have to be in complete control of the creation and quality of his watch movements—an expensive proposition in a world where outsourcing has become an easy option. “Our watches are not made by a third party watchmaker in the lost areas of Switzerland, and 80 per cent of our components are made in-house.” Headquartered in Fribourg, Switzerland, Jonathan and partners Marcel Lachat and Stephane Valsamides spent some years scouring the Jura valley and testing watchmakers who could create tourbillons and movements exclusively for the company. They found few who could live up to their expectations. “We were disappointed with what we found so we went on looking for other suppliers and movements. We could have gone to Renaud & Papi and the company that made movements for Chanel, but this would put us in the OEM [Original Equipment Manufacturer] category.” Resisting the option to simply acquire movements from third parties, the trio would spend some years getting their formula right. In fact, Purnell would go on to buy out an independent watchmaker and then exit the company when its priorities didn’t align with the chairman’s. Today, the company has retained two watchmakers to exclusively make movements for Cecil Purnell.

To further differentiate his watches, Jonathan sought to create a specific tourbillon. “Our movements run at 21,600 vibrations per hour, which is one of the hardest watches to adjust, but it is one of the most reliable frequencies for a tourbillon at 3Hz. You are then getting a movement that’s highly accurate. We also put our tourbillon cage between two bridges, which is the traditional way

of doing it. Flying tourbillons didn’t exist for 150 years because they couldn’t make ball bearings small enough to make them work. If you take Vacheron Constantin and Patek Philippe—they don’t make flying tourbillons because they make it the traditional way—between two bridges. We do the same thing,” he says.

With a life spent in the collection and sale of diamonds, estate jewellery, and vintage watches for himself, international royalty and magnates, it could be said that Jonathan Purnell knew exactly how to source the right

would do all the oiling and calibrate the watches by hand...by stopwatch. The fantasies and the ideas that come from such moments back then are still vivid in my mind.”

Exclusively available in India through Excedo Luxuria, Cecil Purnell’s approximately ₹1 crore watches made an appearance at the Baselworld watch and jewellery fair earlier this year. While their La Grande Date certainly caused a stir, the showstealer was a model that was debuted alongside it—the La Croix. “In the La Croix, we were looking for something on the visual

Miniature gold carvings of Hindu gods Ganesha and Lakshmi will appear in a La Croix model as an example of Cecil Purnell’s customisation services.



ingredients to start a bonafide haute horology company. But despite a history of dealing in beautiful objects old and new, few ingredients for his venture could contend with the magic of watching his grandfather fix watches when he was a child. “It was my grandpapa who instilled the love of watchmaking in me,” he says. “He was injured in World War I and gassed by the Germans, so he was sent to recover in Besançon, near the Swiss border. I spent a summer with him when I was eight and saw him take watches apart and put them together again at his *tablier*. You didn’t have the machines that you have today, so he

side that was so iconic you would recognise it from a distance, just like you’d recognise a Patek Philippe Nautilus or the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore,” says Purnell. And how would old Cecil feel about that? “I think if my grandpapa saw the direction we’re taking the company in, he’d be ecstatic,” says Purnell. “However, if I showed him the Hambergé [one of their sportier models], I think he’d probably roll over in his grave.” ■

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Cecil Purnell’s watches embody a traditionally crafted tourbillon with a bridge across two plates and partly skeletal features to show off the models’ finer details, such as in The Classique.