

A maturing **Roger Dubuis** adds C.O.S.C.-certification to its all-Geneva-Seal collection. Also, Sympathie returns in 2011.

Seals of Approval

BY MICHAEL THOMPSON

With 350 employees, Roger Dubuis operates one of Geneva's most modern watchmaking facilities. (Photo by Jason Pitsch, professional-watches.com)



Like many teenagers, Roger Dubuis is searching for an identity. Now fifteen years old, the Geneva-based luxury watch firm wants more than anything to earn the confidence of high-end watch buyers, many of whom backed off from the brand prior to its 2008 sale to Richemont, the luxury group that also owns Cartier, Piaget, IWC, Jaeger-LeCoultre, A. Lange & Söhne and numerous other highly respected brands.

A dispute with its North American distributor and lingering repair bottlenecks led many to applaud the firm's Richemont connection.



The Excalibur collection, updated this year with a deeply fluted bezel and a streamlined crown guard, includes an automatic chronograph with microrotor (left) and the newest version with an open dial (below). At bottom, the perpetual calendar with large date and moonphase and the minute repeater with flying tourbillon.



Today Roger Dubuis has done much to win back those consumers, and is successfully wooing the appropriate retail partners to help convince buyers that the brand has grown up.

“The brand was successful in the United States and peaked around 2005,” says Matthias Schuler, Roger Dubuis’ newest CEO.

“In 2009 we, with Richemont, began cleaning up the distribution and opening retailers that fit the brand. We envision about twenty points of sale by end of this year. That’s below the previous number, but it’s OK as long they are the right ones.”



Roger Dubuis COO Claude Vuillemez (left), a seasoned Cartier veteran, works with CEO Matthias Schuler (right) to maintain the firm's focus on in-house manufacturing and bold design. At the center is a view of Caliber RD 14B, which is inside a new model that features a date display via bi-retrograde jumping hands.



With several impressive debuts this past January at the SIHH, Roger Dubuis seems poised to earn reconsideration by collectors. Schuler (formerly at IWC) and COO Claude Vuillemez, who comes to Roger Dubuis from Cartier, have instituted wide-ranging changes at the company's complex in Geneva.

No rush

The most immediately apparent move the pair made put a halt to rushing models to the marketplace.

"We were like a teenager, going too fast," Vuillemez told *International Watch* during a recent visit to the firm's offices in Geneva. "Our little brand that is only fifteen years old has twenty-eight movements. In 2006 we launched six movements, which was crazy," he says.

Acknowledging that all the design and manufacturing for the movements was completed in-house with the firm's state-of-the-art machinery, he adds that good movements need maturity.

"We had great diversity, but you cannot just send a drawing and have

the wheels made," he quips. Today, the number of calibers actively utilized and placed into existing models is closer to sixteen, while the number of collections in the 2010 line has been pared to four. He and Schuler also dramatically slashed the number of models offered, from a staggering 3,000 three years ago to a manageable 300.

By lassoing production numbers, the new managers can much more closely monitor quality and design from start to finish. This allows them to also revamp the after-sales service, a critical component in any luxury brand's long-term plan.

"Since Claude arrived, we have made many changes," observes David Chaumet, the company's head of customer service and quality. "We have daily morning meetings to look at production and forecasts. If the quality department won't sign off on it, we won't make it," he says.

And his department isn't the only eye on production. Roger Dubuis, which launched its Geneva Seal program in 1999, this year adds a second certification: The *Contrôle Officiel Suisse des Chronomètres*, or

COSC. Roger Dubuis is currently working closely with the newly established Geneva-based TimeLab to update both Geneva Seal and COSC guidelines.

"It's good to have independent people looking at us," says Chaumet. "It forces us to look at quality and it's also good for our customers."

Beginning this year, those customers can expect every new Roger Dubuis caliber to be COSC certified. The new Caliber RD821, used inside several Easy Diver models, is already being delivered with COSC certification.

"Next we'll send the RD781, a chronograph with micro rotor, to the COSC, and then we're sending the RD505, which is a new skeleton model," he adds.

The new attention to service means a revamped U.S. presence, where a watchmaker will be dedicated to handling only the brand's pieces for repair, though most of the complicated pieces will be sent directly to Geneva, where fully sixty watchmakers are now on hand to finalize repairs and maintenance. →

The facility

Roger Dubuis is housed in a modern, two-building facility set amid a field of wildflowers in Geneva's Meyrin district. The facility is considered among Switzerland's most state-of-the-art, employing nearly 350, of which fully 130 focus their activities to assure collectors that all movements meet Geneva Seal guidelines. This means primarily cutting, beveling, sanding and polishing components by hand.

While the firm's high-tech computer-aided cutting and milling machines form the base for movement bridges, levers, gears and pinions, each piece still requires hours of attention under a scope or a loupe at the hands of a watchmaker or technician.

"Overall we spend sixty percent more time finishing each piece in order to meet Geneva Seal guidelines," says Vuillemez. Roger Dubuis stands alone among Geneva's major watch

firms to stamp every one of its movements with this prestigious mark.

The Geneva Seal guidelines, require that, for instance, all steel parts in watch movements must have polished bevels, smoothed visible parts and polished holes. Pivot shanks and the faces of all pinions must also be polished, and the ratchet wheel and crown wheel (two critical gears in a movement) must be finished with a registered pattern.

Employing Geneva Seal standards has been a critical marketing and technical benchmark for the firm, but the tradition-based standards can be a mixed blessing for a firm with the contemporary flair of Roger Dubuis.

"We have to work with the Seal when we want to use any new materials," notes Chaumet. "With the Easy Diver titanium, however, they were fully with us, as they were with the black skeleton models."

Notably, Roger Dubuis makes its own hairsprings, a critical component made by only a handful of Swiss or German watch firms.

Skeletons

With production of only about 3,000 to 4,000 units annually, Roger Dubuis must carefully plan where it places its resources. In recent years, the firm's skeleton models and its tourbillons have emerged as iconic designs. Therefore many of the workers at its manufacture devote their days to polishing and beveling tourbillon cages and the tiny components required to make the regulating devices conform to Geneva Seal finishing standards.

A steady stream of these components emerges roughly finished from any of the dozens of computer-directed milling and spark erosion machines at the firm. Workers then finish about one complete tourbillon regulator each day, possibly the highest daily

Roger Dubuis makes its own hairsprings and finishes all watches to meet strict Geneva Seal standards.





The Easy Diver Skeleton features a tourbillon and 300-meter water resistance. This may be the world's only skeletonized diver tourbillon watch.



The new 46 mm Easy Diver column wheel chronograph

rate in the Swiss watch industry.

Skeleton models are made with pre-conceived designs (which here typically originate with engineers rather than watch designers) and are not cut away from existing calibers. The design is angular and bold, not frilly or intricate as so many traditional skeletonized calibers are finished.

"The look is a strong one," notes Vuillemez. "They show air. Every area has to be uncovered and all angles need to be polished."

Marie Chassot, the brand's head of business development for watches and jewelry, says skeletons are popular, and notes that she would like to have at least one such model in each Roger Dubuis collection. CEO Schuler says he likes to draw consumer eyes to the firm's calibers.

"We'd like to make the movement more evident on more watches," he adds. "We'd like to offer an automatic skeleton soon. It's part of our DNA now."

Newly added to that gene pool is the firm's expanded use of multi-level dials, particularly those that have been laser engraved and then hand engraved, a two-step process known as deep engraving. Lionel Favre, the company's head designer, who recently joined the firm after twelve years at Chopard, says such intricate dials should be used on complicated watches, a practice he instituted soon after joining Roger Dubuis.

New models

Roger Dubuis currently concentrates its debuts in four collections, Excaliber, Easy Diver, King Square and Golden Square. This past SIHH saw mostly debuts in the Excaliber group of round and complicated models, though among the firm's Easy Diver editions it has a new \$12,900 entry point, well below the brand's former starting price of about \$18,000.

The Easy Divers feature fluted bezels and the trademark triple lugs.

Among the two newest models is the 46-mm column-wheel chronograph with a sporty orange-accented dive-timer bezel.

The movement's Geneva Seal splendor can be seen from the back through a sapphire crystal. Notable is the blued column-wheel screw, which, unlike many firms, Roger Dubuis makes by heating the metal for just the right length of time. The dial, with a silvered sunray finish, features applied numerals at twelve, and in contrast spells out the six. To add depth, it features two satin-finished zones above and below the black chronograph counters. The pushpieces feature orange and black molded rubber elements to complement the bezel.

The small-second automatic Easy Diver in rose gold also features a Geneva Seal movement (RD14) that has been COSC-certified and uses a more traditional (and gold) central rotor. And where the steel chronograph model is overtly sporty,



Left: Excalibur Skeleton with double tourbillon flanks the gold-cased flying tourbillon with off-centered hands. Below is a KingSquare chronograph.

the 46 mm gold version is dressier, with its dial set with gold markers, none of which is spelled out as on the chronograph.

Tourbillons

This year, the firm offered numerous tourbillon models, including several within its Excalibur collection and one in King Square. The Excalibur models, updated this year with a deeply fluted bezel and a streamlined crown guard, include a tourbillon edition with a minute repeater, dual micro-rotors and an always-impressive double tourbillon, itself a redesign of an earlier edition.

Vuillemez notes that when it was

launched in 2006, the double tourbillon experienced some disparate rate results, so the firm redesigned its dissipater wheel (between the two tourbillons) effectively reversing the direction of one of the tourbillons, which solved the problem. The same platinum-cased model adds a retrograde minute hand and a power reserve indicator on the back for a complicated package that is not unusual for this brand.

Other complexities include the firm's in-line instantaneous perpetual calendar, on which the day, date and month are arranged in a straight line.

Next year Roger Dubuis plans to launch a newly designed edition

of *Sympathie*, which was part of its collection in years past. *Sympathie* features a modified cushion-shaped case and will be made next year with two case sizes as a dressy counterpart to the *Easy Diver*. But don't mistake it for a trendy ultra-thin model.

"We are not Piaget and we don't want to do a flat movement now," says Favre. "This will be a dressier line in steel and gold and will feature several complications, but it will be thinner than Excalibur."

Stay tuned to *International Watch* for full coverage of all Roger Dubuis models beginning January when we'll report live from Geneva's SIHH watch show. ☺