



MICHAEL MAYER

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# THE ART OF SURPRISE

L'EPÉE 1839

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IN 1839, AUGUSTE L'Epée and Pierre-Henri Paur founded the L'Epée company in Saint Suzanne, near Besançon in France. Originally making clock parts and music boxes, the company took out patents in the 1850s and began to make the precisely engineered and beautiful carriage clocks that it is still known for today. L'Epée 1839 has never made watches, and the fact that it still stands at the pinnacle of mechanical clockmaking is testament to its pedigree and innovation that spans three centuries.

Now based in Delémont in the Swiss Jura Mountains, the heart of L'Epée 1839 still lies within the intricate workings of its classic carriage clocks. However, since being acquired by the Swiza clock and watch manufacturer in 2008, the company has taken a new direction, working with contemporary designers to create unique limited-edition timepieces. Dramatic, playful and surprising, they include shiny robots, elegant hot-air balloons, human skulls and metallic spaceship sculptures bathed in a pool of blue light.

"Many customers describe our work as 'kinetic pieces of art,'" says L'Epée's CEO Arnaud Nicolas of these forward-looking pieces that have quickly become the most popular strand of the business. "It's hard to say that we're making pieces of art. Declaring yourself an artist is never a good idea – only other people can say that of us – but we're proud of the description."

Nicolas says that while the backbone of L'Epée 1839 is likely to remain its carriage clocks, these new designer pieces represent its future. The Time Machine, for instance, is a mechanical digital clock set inside a glass tube to reveal its inner workings. It also serves as

a retro-futurist steam-punk sculpture, mounted on a tripod, inspired by vintage science fiction imagery.

The startling Arachnophobia, created with Geneva-based watch brand Maximilian Büsser and Friends, is based on Louise Bourgeois's massive monumental spider sculpture Maman, created for the opening of London's Tate Modern in 2000 and returning to preside over the Thames in 2007. Arachnophobia can stand and pose menacingly on its gleaming gold-plated legs or be fixed to the wall, its black head telling the time and its body exposing the gleaming brass mechanism.

Despite Nicolas's modesty, the art world has recognized the worth of the company's "kinetic art": Arachnophobia was exhibited in 2018 at the Geneva Museum of Art and History. "Our goal is to inspire, to speak to people, and even sometimes to shock people," says Nicolas. "For me, that's what art is: a special object."

Other contemporary designs showcase the intricacy and beauty of the clock movement in operation. The Le Duel Perpetuel Tourbillon takes this to extremes, a simple glass case displaying every detail of the clock's horological complications, including a perpetual calendar and a tourbillon – a mechanism that slowly rotates the escapement and balance wheel, designed to counter the effect of gravity. With six different finishes to the brass and palladium components, from sand-blasted to highly polished, the light as it catches the working movement is kinetic art in itself.

For Nicolas, the challenge of maintaining the company's pedigree while making such bold strides is one to relish, not fear. "Of course, we'll continue with both sides – the carriage clocks are our history," he says. "But we want to keep surprising people."

