



INTERVIEWS

01/31/2025

That's Entertainment: A Conversation with Arnaud Nicolas, CEO of L'Épée 1839

At LVMH Watch Week, we learned how a 186-year-old clockmaker became one of the most innovative companies in horology today.



BY RHONDA RICHE
Editor-At-Large

During the recent **LVMH Watch Week**, the North American watch press assembled high up in a tower above Tiffany & Co.'s Fifth Avenue flagship to examine a watch box. But not just any watch box, but **a futuristic, clear acrylic, mechanical house for your timepiece.**

It is pure objet d'art in that it doesn't wind your watch or offer extra security for your precious. So, what does it do?



L'Épée 1839 Watch Box © L'Épée 1839

Press a button on the front of the clear case, and the lid magically opens while the cushion levitates. Press the button again and watch it lower your watch back down into its little house.

The journalists were charmed, but no one seemed as delighted by the mechanism as its creator, L'Épée 1839 CEO and Artistic Director Arnaud Nicolas. You couldn't tell Arnaud had just crossed the ocean to present L'Épée's offerings for the first time in North America, and his passion for these clever clocks is infectious.

I Am a Scientist

First and foremost, Nicolas wanted to emphasize that L'Epée is a clockmaker, not a watchmaker. Moreover, he explained that the magic trick of the Watch Box is that the minute you place a watch inside its transparent housing the wristwatch becomes a desk clock.

"We started with the story of an object that expresses something kinetic," Nicolas said of the Watch Box's origin story. *"We would never do a winder because we would never do electronic. But it was fun meeting with collectors who wanted a place to display their watches."* Nicolas then had the idea to put the watch inside a clear casing to make a clock.



L'Epée 1839 Watch Box © L'Epée 1839

Adding the mechanical leveraging system – you can choose how quickly you want it to open, was a nod to L'Epée's history with clock automata – self-operating machines designed to respond to predetermined instructions like a little robot, built to impress and entertain. The Watch Box is a clock and a desk toy at the same time.

It's important to note that in interviews, Nicolas describes himself as more of an engineer with an interest in art than a watchmaker. This is what attracted him to L'Epée in the first place. *"I'm a scientist,"* he explained. *"L'Epée was established in 1839, but its clocks were not just clocks."*



L'Epée 1839 Watch Box © L'Epée 1839

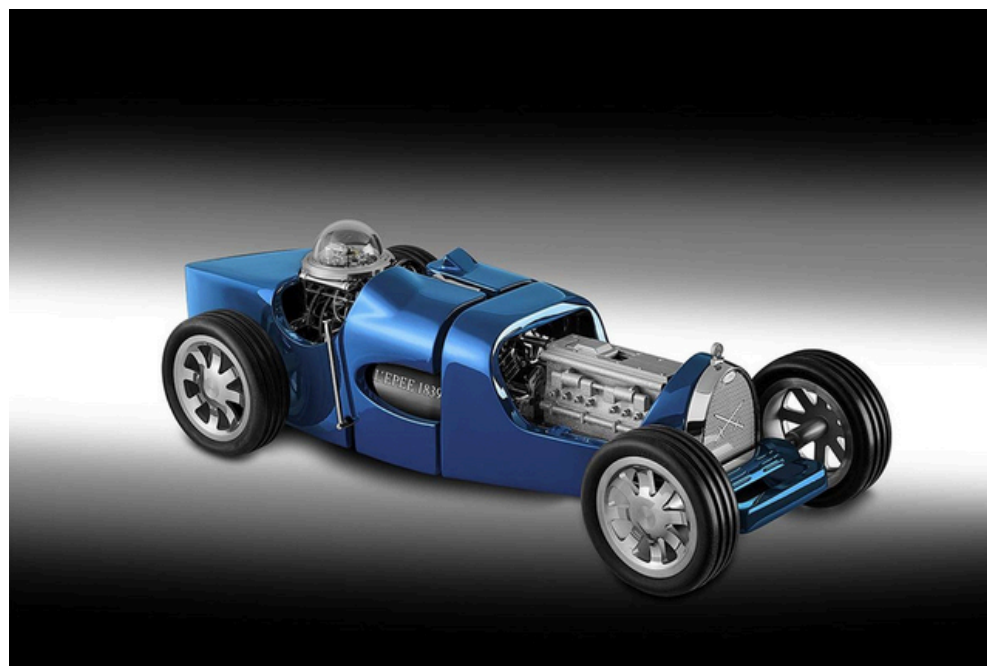
For example, founder August L'Epée's carriage clocks and music boxes won numerous technical gold awards at such important international exhibitions as the World Fairs held in Paris in 1889 and 1900, Vienna in 1892, and Hanoi in 1902.

The Maison also became the official supplier of British royalty and, later, the Concorde. These were the only clocks ever fitted in supersonic aircraft used in civil aviation, and short of spotting jet-setting celebrities, Nicolas noted that they were *"the only form of entertainment on the plane."*

More Than Time

Like the automatons of yore, L'Epée's timepieces are built for the amusement of its owner. But every object in the catalog must also solve many mechanical puzzles.

Each clock in the collection starts as a blank page, including the calibre. *"The engineer starts the project as a challenge. [For example], how can we incorporate something like a 40-day power reserve and make it kinetic,"* Nicolas explained. *"With our T35 [a series of tributes to Bugatti racing cars of the 1920s and '30s], we started by playing with the idea of the V8 engine."*



L'Epée 1839 T35 © L'Epée 1839

"I can be picky with the detail," he said, adding that seven layers of lacquer are required to create the faithful shiny and reflective finishes of the four versions of the limited edition T35 – French Racing Blue, British Racing Green, Obsidian Black, and Rosso Corsa Red.

His perfectionism carries on under the hood. Put your ear to the clock, and you'll hear a thrumming that recalls the sound of a V8 engine in effect.

Nicolas added: *"The steering wheel doubles as a key set. You can rewind it just by playing with it."* With a simple activation of the handbrake, the engine pops out V8, revealing a hidden gas-powered cigar lighter.



L'Epée 1839 Grenade by The Dial Artist © L'Epée 1839

The art part of L'Epée's creations comes from the emotions they create. Take the **Grenade Clock**, for example. *"With a real grenade, when you pull the pin, most people think of the future or past,"* said Nicolas. *"When you pull the pin on this clock, you use the pin to wind and set time. You must live in the moment."*

To make the experience even more contemplative, the Grenade Clock also has the same weight as a real grenade.

Show Business

"We are engineering playfulness and creativity," Nicolas explained. *"We are also speaking to collectors of luxury objects across the board. It's not a toy, but it's an accessory within an accessory. It's up to the owner to decide if it's a piece of art or something else."*

L'Epée has been innovative in business since the beginning. *"We are a fully integrative manufacturer,"* stated Nicolas. *"You have heard this many times, and most times, it's bullshit, but the only thing we don't do in-house is the hand-blown glass dome of the driver's helmet."*

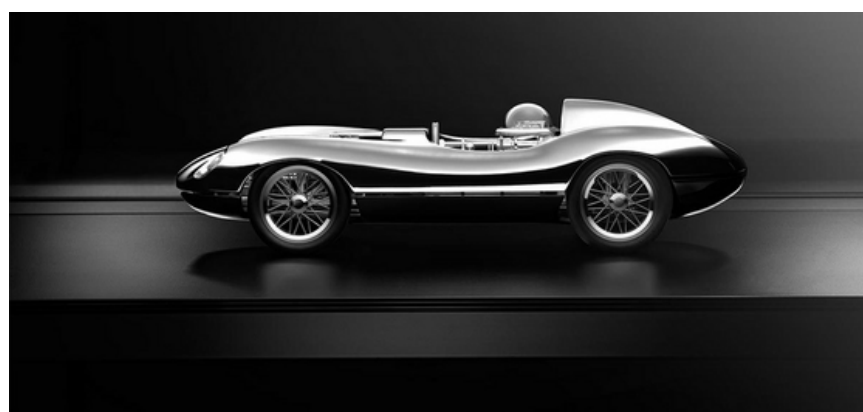
And as freewheeling as the designs may feel, *"We never go inside our DNA,"* Nicolas said. Even after being acquired by LVMH in 2024, Nicolas is still sticking to his guns (or, in L'Epée's case, its dueling swords).



MB&F x L'Epée 1839 Albatross © Pierre Vogel

"I was CEO for 15 years before, and nothing has changed," Nicolas explained. *"The first time I met Bernard Arnaud, he said, 'We're just here to help you take risks.' LVMH didn't want independence to disappear. If anything, it's a safety net for L'Epée."*

So, what's in it for LVMH? *"I think the idea is to preserve the potential and the know-how,"* Nicolas said. Considering that L'Epée's cool factor hits the right chord for luxury collectors outside of watchmaking, it is also an excellent investment for the conglomerate.



L'Epée 1839 Time Fast II Chrome © L'Epée 1839

Nicolas is as excited about the partnership as he is for his inventions: *"I've worked 15 years as an independent, but it feels like we are just starting."*