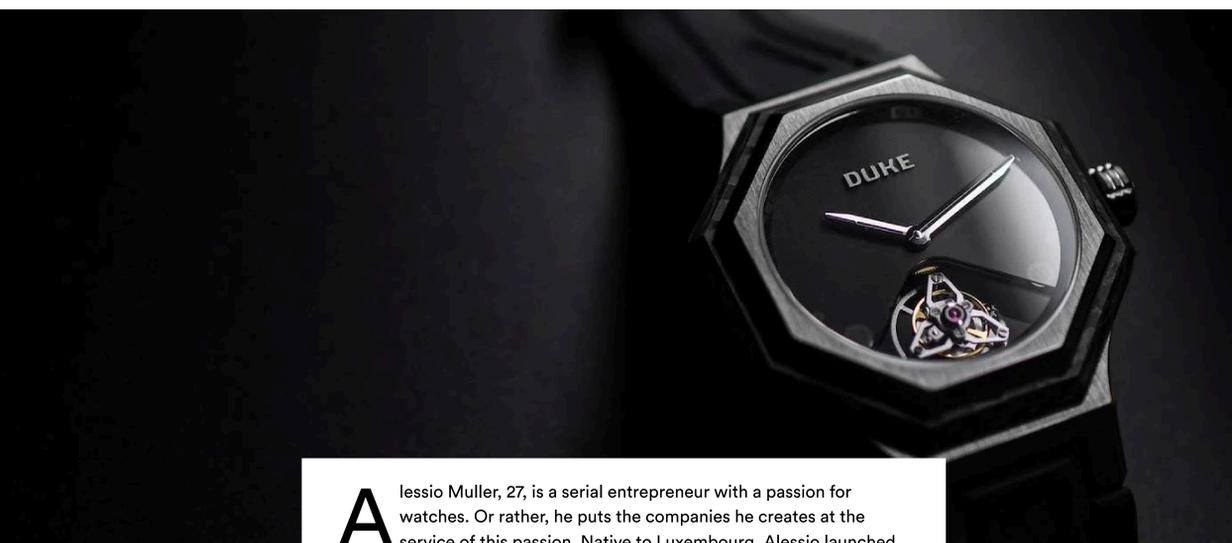


NEW WATCH BRANDS

DUKE BRINGS HAUTE COUTURE THINKING TO WATCHMAKING

Français
 By Serge Maillard
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A recent arrival in the Haute Horlogerie segment, Duke can count on the services of Manufacture Grand-Ducale. It also benefits from the considerable experience gained in Haute Couture by the father-and-son duo at its helm. They bring this fresh perspective to the watch segment and have teamed up with one of the industry's most highly regarded names, Vianney Halter, for their first models.



Alessio Muller, 27, is a serial entrepreneur with a passion for watches. Or rather, he puts the companies he creates at the service of this passion. Native to Luxembourg, Alessio launched his first startup when he was 17, selling it two years later. At 19 he set up Cosmerre, delivering a range of services to the cosmetics sector. This provided the finance to make his horological dream a reality with the creation, in 2016, of Manufacture Grand-Ducale, which now has workshops in Luxembourg and La Chaux-de-Fonds, followed last year by the debut model from his brand, Duke.

Like father, like son: Denis Muller, the other half of this family enterprise, has solid experience of the luxury and fashion industries, in particular Haute Couture. As a specialist in events organisation, he has staged exclusive Haute Couture shows across the globe. In the 1990s, he started to invite master watchmakers to these runway presentations: the likes of Daniel Roth, Gérald Genta, Vianney Halter and Antoine Preziuso.

Luxembourg's first watch brand

Alessio's curiosity was piqued and it wasn't long before he began to show an interest in the profession. Vianney Halter took him under his wing. In fact this year has seen the release of a Duke "by Vianney Halter" watch: the second series in the young brand's portfolio to date. Alessio Muller is nothing if not determined: "I met several independent watchmakers, including Vianney Halter who agreed to help me get started. I was 18 and for the next few years travelled back and forth between Luxembourg and Switzerland on a weekly basis."



Duke's first model, the First Edition Clarity Tourbillon, is a limited edition of eight.

At the same time, Alessio trained as a polisher under the experienced eye of Bekim Fifaj, who went on to join Manufacture Grand-Ducale. Over a period of six years, between 2016 and 2022, he mastered the expertise and tools that would lead to the First Edition: the first watch from Luxembourg's first watch brand, manufactured as two series of eight pieces.

This debut model, a 44mm tourbillon, was a long time coming. Alessio Muller put pencil to paper in 2015 with the idea of creating a minimalist design, inspired by the Art Deco style, but with more pronounced, more contemporary angles. One thing he was certain of: this wouldn't be a round watch! The case is forged from carbon fibre, produced at the atelier in Luxembourg, with titanium inserts.



"My long-term objective is to do everything in-house, with the exception of sapphire crystals, jewels, balance springs and rubber straps," he explains. What about designation of origin? "Swiss-Made wasn't really relevant to us and Made in Luxembourg isn't targeted enough for a brand such as Duke, so we decided to create our own label, MGD, short for Manufacture Grand-Ducale."



Lessons from Haute Couture

Most of all, father and son aim to bring their experience of Haute Couture to watchmaking. “We come from a sector that sets a standard in luxury practices, with high expectations with regard to customer service and bespoke,” notes Denis Muller. “An Haute Couture client can invest 300,000 euros and attend several fittings for a dress which, ultimately, she will only wear once. It’s a different mentality and we want to provide this level of service and good practices in watchmaking.”



The second model from the young brand, Duke by Vianney Halter was created in collaboration with the master watchmaker.

Fresh from Qatar and Kuwait, and briefly touching ground in La Chaux-de-Fonds before flying off to Asia, father and son personally deliver each watch to customers around the globe. The first edition, priced at 98,000 euros, has sold out. Adding to the exclusive nature of each series, a movement will never be used again for a different line and production will not exceed 25 pieces a year, with a medium-term objective of one hundred.



Calibre 9600 is an automatic tourbillon movement whose patented sapphire oscillating weight allows every detail to be clearly seen. Power reserve is 72 hours.

Denis Muller explains how “our objective is to meet the few hundred genuine major watch collectors in the world, through our personal contacts in the fashion world, by word of mouth or through selected intermediaries. We don’t want to see our watches for sale in stores. We maintain a highly exclusive approach.”

This desire for exclusivity is evident in the opportunities for bespoke. Customers are encouraged to consider Duke’s watches as a “canvas” to be filled according to their wishes. By producing its own carbon fibre, Duke can fulfil requests to include gold or titanium inserts, for example, or a specific colour, or more: a Japanese customer fell in love with the movement but asked the two entrepreneurs to design him a different case. Which they did.

Alessio and Denis Muller are determined to take their time, hence the decision not to reach out to third-party investors. Their brand identity is rooted in a powerful design language, but also the alliance of traditional crafts – “no watch without hand-finishing” – and contemporary materials, with the state-of-the-art machinery required to work carbon or sapphire.



“Vianney Halter once told me that if I’d been through traditional watchmaking school, my design choices would doubtless be very different,” notes Alessio Muller, whose habit of doing things differently has also given rise to an invisible (and patented) sapphire oscillating weight. “We put the launch back a year just so we could incorporate this innovation into the movement. Which is really a luxury in itself.”



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