

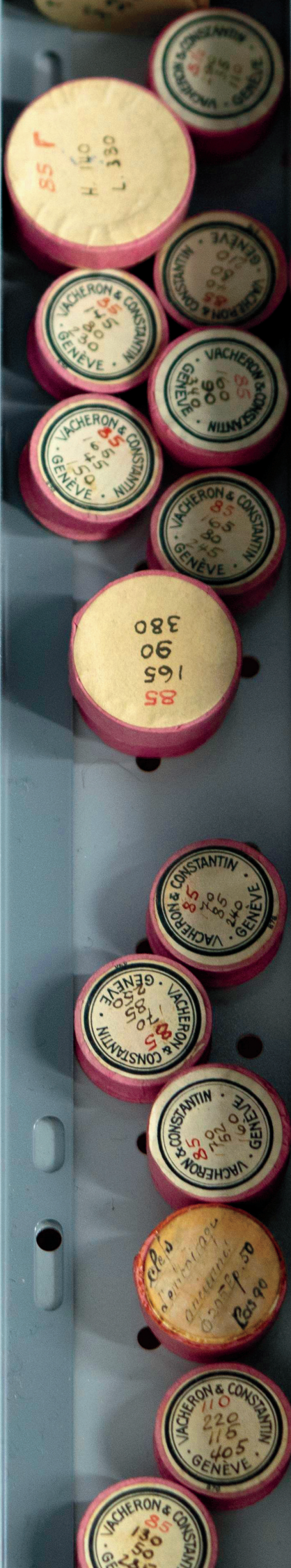


TIME KEEPERS

No longer hidden among the archives, in-house historians are propelling watch brands into the future.

By Paige Reddinger

The restoration department at Vacheron Constantin houses a trove of historical parts.



Emmanuel Breguet, the head of patrimony at the house founded 250 years ago by his ancestor Abraham-Louis Breguet. Below: Breguet Classique Souscription 2025BH, a tribute to the founder's famed 18th-century pocket watch.



On a sweltering July afternoon in Paris, the Breguet boutique on the Place Vendôme offers no refuge from the heat. Yet Emmanuel Breguet, crisply dressed in a navy jacket and pinstripe shirt, barely breaks a sweat as

he flips through the pages of a ledger two centuries old. He stops at a 1798 entry: Napoleon Bonaparte's order for a travel clock, placed just before his Egyptian campaign. Other lines record the sale of the first wristwatch to the Queen of Naples and a pocket watch thought to have been destined for Marie Antoinette.

"The history of Breguet is the history of the kings," says Breguet, the founder's descendant and the company's vice president, head of patrimony. "It's a history of Europe. It's a history of revolutions,

of political and foreign relations. It is a history of watchmaking in France, in England, in Switzerland. It's everything. It's a history with a big H."

What is extraordinary about the modern Monsieur Breguet is not his lineage (though it surely helped open the door, his family has not been involved in the company in over a century) but that he now guards one of watchmaking's most important legacies and has, in turn, become the face of the brand. Like his ancestor—founder Abraham-Louis Breguet, the godfather of watchmaking and the Steve Jobs of the 18th and 19th centuries—Emmanuel, too, has been something of a pioneer. When he left his job as an air-force historian in France's Ministry of Defense to take on the patrimony post in 1993, he was the first to hold the role at Breguet. At that time, the ledgers bearing the names of French royalty were not even safely within a vault.

Today, nearly every house has a patrimony



"THE HISTORY OF BREGUET IS THE HISTORY OF THE KINGS. IT'S A HISTORY OF EUROPE....IT'S A HISTORY WITH A BIG H."



Clockwise from bottom right: Christian Selmoni of Vacheron Constantin; the brand remade its American 1921 timepiece using authentic tools and techniques of the era; the American 1921 Pièce Unique next to its forebear; Vacheron Constantin Ref. 57260 from Les Cabinotiers.

department, but only a handful, like Breguet, have elevated theirs beyond the cloistered archives. These historians have become stars—sought-after by media and collectors alike for their expertise, charisma, and, at times, access to both vintage and contemporary pieces. The degree of knowledge required to stand out in this field is so high that a few leaders, including Breguet, have spent more than three decades at their maisons, often cycling through various departments. While heritage-director roles can vary from brand to brand, the job tends to encompass everything from overseeing the archive, certification, and corporate museums to crafting historical storylines, managing restoration projects, commissioning books, and collaborating on modern product tied to historical models. With a hand in nearly every facet of the business, they are in some cases becoming brands' single most influential executives.

At Vacheron Constantin, heritage and style director Christian Selmoni is a larger-than-life figure in more ways than one. Impressively tall and impeccably dressed in Cifonelli tailoring that conceals full sleeves of tattoos, he's impossible to miss at industry events, where collectors and journalists alike vie for his attention. For 35 years, he has touched nearly every corner of the business—including heading up purchasing, manufacturing, direct product marketing, and design—before arriving in his current post.

"Heritage directors in the field of luxury, at least watches, have quite a lot of experience before," says Selmoni, because it's not something that you can learn on the job. "I'm thinking about Pierre Rainero at Cartier, for example—I would say he's a guy a bit like me."

Rainero has been at Cartier for 41 years, long enough to remember, he says, when archiving was still done on microfilm. When he founded the image, style, and heritage department in 2003, Cartier had just two or three staff for the archive, a tiny team for the collection, and none for exhibitions. Today, Rainero oversees nearly 80 people, including seven department heads, and will celebrate the closing of an exhibition of more than 350 objects at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London on the 16th of this month.

The department is comparatively expansive because Cartier creates jewelry as well and enjoys overarching influence. "Cartier is of huge importance within the art market," says Rainero, speaking about the sheer volume of inquiries to the archive. "But also, Cartier has a specific role in the entire history of the decorative arts. It's fundamental we maintain that knowledge." His work has been so extensive, France's minister of culture awarded him the prestigious Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres this year.

If Breguet, Selmoni, and Rainero led the charge in brand storytelling, a new generation of historians is following in their footsteps with fresh visibility and palpable passion. Collectors and dealers clamor to get face time with TAG Heuer's Nicholas Biebuyck at trade shows and auctions or on tours of the brand's La Chaux-de-Fonds

Museum in Switzerland. With his scruffy facial hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and affable demeanor, the 40-year-old heritage director could make even the most die-hard Apple Watch devotee a convert to mechanical watchmaking. “When someone like Nicholas Biebuyck brings genuine knowledge, taste, and enthusiasm to the role, it makes the heritage feel relevant rather than dusty,” says Silas Walton, founder of A Collected Man, a London-based business selling vintage and independent timepieces.

Though Biebuyck has held the role for less than five years, he’s no hype man disguised as a historian. TAG Heuer’s history merges his expertise in both horology and the automotive industry. Biebuyck studied mechanical engineering and worked in the car and watch departments at Bonham’s in London and Hong Kong and Christie’s in Hong Kong, and finally as the business-development director for Blackbird Watch Manual in the same country. “I live and breathe this topic,” he says. Growing up around the automotive circuit with his father, who was an enthusiast, he attended his first Le Mans race at 10 years old and became obsessed with watches after discovering master George Daniels’s work at the age of 16. “It basically comes down to your 10,000 hours—the more time you spend obsessing over this topic, the deeper you get, and the more you learn.”

Matthieu Sauret took a different path before landing the lead gig in the heritage department of Jaeger-LeCoultre at just 33 years old, in 2020. He joined the company in 2013 as chief of staff to the C.E.O., then held senior posts in product before adding oversight of the brand’s historical storytelling to his duties. Colleagues, he says, were surprised he wasn’t pursuing a more commercial trajectory—perhaps even the traditional path to C.E.O. “It’s really important, because the story of J.L.C. is very strong,” says Sauret. “It spans almost two centuries, the story of fine watchmaking that unfolds with the story of Jaeger-LeCoultre, a maison that I love so deep in my heart, for many reasons: for its roots in the tradition of the Vallée de Joux, for its wild and endless spirit of invention, for its great creations, the Reverso and the Atmos—which are stories in themselves.”

As the first to hold the dual title of product and

heritage director at the company, Sauret still draws on his previous expertise. Led by Sauret, the Collectibles—a capsule program of vintage timepieces celebrating the company’s history—debuted in January 2023. “The launch of the Collectibles was, in my mind, what was missing in the industry,” says Roni Madhvani, a prominent vintage-watch collector based in London and Uganda, noting that he welcomes the company “embracing its heritage in a more active and progressive manner by buying and restoring its timepieces,” as well as by publishing archival material and conducting outreach to collectors.

The Collectibles was hardly the first in-house vintage program. Cartier established Cartier Tradition in 1996, and Vacheron Constantin introduced Les Collectionneurs—limited drops of restored vintage pieces—in 2008. Both houses insist the effort has nothing to do with profit, at least not in the short term. “The idea behind [Les Collectionneurs] was really 100 percent communication,” says Selmoni.

The cost of restoration can be a killer—hence the disclaimer “service history unknown” often in listings on vintage and pre-owned dealer sites, a signal you could soon be digging in your pockets again to get your purchase in working order. The real aim of selling vintage in-house is the romanticism of bur-nishing a brand’s history, but it also serves to forge a bond with collectors who don’t buy new models. “It’s very hard for a maison to connect with vintage collectors because they probably love the ’60s or the ’30s, not what is being done right now,” explains Sauret. “They always feel they have a part of the history in their collections and that they cannot be taken care of because they are not new clients.”

Selling vintage also helps houses keep tabs on historical pieces missing from their archives. “We have some collectors that probably have over 200 or 300 watches,” says Sauret. “These people, they’re a museum in themselves.” Many are intensely private, so part of the heritage director’s



Clockwise from above: Pierre Rainero of Cartier at an exhibition in 2012; two variations of the 2025 Cartier Tank à Guichets, modern reinterpretations of the model first released in 1928.





role is to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships. He recalls a “Tank Asymétrique” signed by Jaeger—the house once supplied movements for many brands, including Cartier, but this model is said to predate the debut of the Cartier design—that surfaced at Boisseau-Pomez, a small auction house in Troyes, France, in June. Estimated at about \$950, it hammered for approximately \$66,342. The buyer was Adam Victor, a New York City-based collector, who tells *Robb Report* he plans to send it to J.L.C. for a tune-up. “We tried to get it, but it went too high for us,” Sauret says. “So now we will be able to hopefully restore it for the new owner. But it’s a great way to [develop] this network, to be able to pursue the building up of our story.”

The overlap between selling and collecting for a brand’s archive can, at times, muddy the waters. Some companies have been suspected of bidding up their pieces to stoke demand or even buying them at exorbitant prices to create the illusion of desirability. In November 2021, three former Omega employees, including the ex-head of its heritage department, were accused of creating a Frankenstein watch—made using parts from multiple vintage Speedmasters of different reference numbers (allegedly stolen from the Omega archive), retrofitted with a reused serial number, and falsely authenticated with a certified extract from the company files. The watch, a supposedly rare 1957 Speedmaster ref. 2915-1 “Broad Arrow,” came under suspicion after selling at Phillips for a record-breaking price of almost \$3.4 million—the most expensive Omega ever sold at auction. The employees, along with the consignor, have been charged with engineering a buyback by Omega and pocketing the difference. The case is ongoing, with both Omega and Phillips deemed victims in the incident.

In the wake of the alleged misconduct, some brands have introduced a stricter system of checks and balances. “The Omega scandal was kind of a wake-up call for probably all the companies about

how they should have safeguards so stuff doesn’t get stolen,” says dealer Eric Wind of Wind Vintage. “I know TAG Heuer takes that pretty seriously with how they protect their watches.” At Jaeger-LeCoultre, Sauret says, the team’s members work independently to separately evaluate potential acquisitions. “We also set limits in the way we authenticate watches,” he says. “If the stakes are too high, then this will go higher in the hierarchy to make sure that everything is set.”

Ultimately, directors walk a precarious line, as the price paid at auction can alter market perception positively or negatively. “I always align with our chief financial officer and my boss, and if need be—if the pieces have sufficient value—with the C.E.O.,” says Biebuyck. “Certainly, Frédéric [Arnault, former C.E.O. of LVMH watches and C.E.O. of Loro Piana] trusts me to do the right thing. Let’s pay the right price, to not overpay and to not underpay.”

“THE OMEGA SCANDAL WAS KIND OF A WAKE-UP CALL FOR PROBABLY ALL THE COMPANIES.”

Clockwise from top left: Vintage Heuer Carrera and Autavia watch heads from the TAG Heuer museum archive; a vintage Heuer

Monaco from the TAG Heuer archive; Nicholas Biebuyck showing archival TAG Heuer F1 watches to journalists.



Knowing where to fall on that spectrum is critical for house historians. Collectors have become increasingly fanatical about pristine fresh-to-market or new old-stock watches, but Biebuyck says the reality is that such specimens are incredibly rare. “I’ve handled probably tens of thousands of watches, and I can remember clearly the moments when a watch came to market and it was totally untouched with amazing provenance from the original owner,” he explains. “In the 20 years I’ve been following the market, there’s maybe a few hundred like this out of the 10,000-plus I’ve handled.”

The extra layer of scrutiny is hitting more than product. Official brand experts have become industry celebrities, thanks to reasons that vary by company but often include a significant presence on social media, frequent deployment in the press, influence on product, and relationship-building with important collectors. Their growing fame can sometimes result in tricky internal politics. Talk to anyone about how the role is shaping brand visibility and you will hear the name Michael Friedman. Audemars Piguet’s former historian and head of complications became so well-known for his expertise and geniality that Grammy-winning artist Kendrick Lamar name-dropped him—and A.P.—on his 2022 track “Rich Spirit.” Friedman left the house the following year amid speculation he had outshone the brand. But he is now developing his own watch brand and remains a highly respected figure beyond his former stomping grounds. “Michael Friedman, whilst the heritage director at A.P., visited me and took a few vintage pieces to catalog that they didn’t have in their own collection, and that was a great experience,” vintage collector Madhvani writes in an email. “Though since then, [I’ve heard] nothing from the brand, not even an invitation to their museum or any boutique (despite owning several dozen of the vintage pieces)!”

Friedman is discreet about his departure from A.P. “You can’t have an ultimate storyteller and not expect a storyteller to attract the attention of people, right? That’s their job,” he says. But he acknowledges “it can be challenging for senior management at times to navigate” one executive getting more of the spotlight than another. As for the function of a heritage director, he insists it’s essential to a brand’s narrative. “The historic anchor is what provides the authenticity,” he says. “In an era with so many releases coming out, things often seem untethered, and it’s not enough just to have a story. There needs to be a foundation to a release if it’s going to engage clients.” He compares representing a watch brand well to being a gallerist. “[Collectors] don’t just want to be talking about the transactional side of it. You want to know about the artists. You want to know about other pieces that they have worked on, about all of the context that has become significant. The emotional quotient cannot be ignored.”

And that feeling of attachment, as Friedman sees it, is not relegated to vintage. “Contemporary watches are how we’re going to connect with people today—it’s a beautiful revolving door,” he says. “And I’ve always said, to be the best futurist, you have to be the best historian.” Case in point: The first watch



Clockwise from right: Matthieu Sauret of Jaeger-LeCoultre; a women's pendant watch mid-restoration at

the house; a Duoplan “Tubogas” Couliassante from J.L.C.’s Collectibles program of vintage timepieces.





“I’VE ALWAYS SAID, TO BE THE BEST FUTURIST, YOU HAVE TO BE THE BEST HISTORIAN.”

from his own brand, Pattern Recognition, slated to launch officially next year, is so forward-looking it feels unbound to any specific era. The intention, he says, was for it to be a combination of past, present, and future.

In interest in vintage has surged, leaving some brands struggling to strike a balance between yesterday and today. “The idea of a heritage director within the luxury business is still a very new concept,” says Biebuyck. “The role has kind of only really existed for 20 years maybe, and sometimes it’s not even been that long.” In horology years, that’s a blip; many maisons have been around for centuries. But as watches shifted from necessities to collectibles, history became a focal point—providing bragging rights, narrative, and value marker. Archives have long existed, but, as Biebuyck points out, the “forensic analysis” of timepieces is still new. “A lot of brands are still trying to work out how the hell they use this person,” he says. “Is this someone who just hides in the cupboard and checks records to make sure information is right? Or is it someone who is going out there and being a spokesperson for the brand and sharing the stories? Or is it someone who is deeply involved in product creation and design? Is it someone who is giving strategy to top-level leadership?”

At Watches & Wonders this past April, new Vacheron Constantin C.E.O. Laurent Peres sat beside Selmoni to present launches, often tying them back to history. He is also known to engage directly with the brand’s vintage collectors. Madhvani notes that while many leaders have “lost the plot,” Peres interacts with collectors firsthand. After the connoisseur posted on Instagram urging companies to “walk the talk” on heritage, Peres personally responded by inviting him to the manufacture. Madhvani says he found the C.E.O., Selmoni, and other senior figures eager to exchange ideas. “This meant a lot to me and gave a human face to the brand and reassured other collectors when I shared my experience,” he writes.

When heritage departments influence new product, there can still be a circular benefit even for the vintage collector. Vacheron Constantin, for example, embarked on an ambitious project to fully remake its original American 1921 watch using the tools and techniques from the era in a one-of-a-kind piece. The effort had long-term implications for the future. It reportedly took one restoration worker 500 hours just to find the right information to be able to begin production and a full team toil-

A vintage Jaeger “Tank Asymétrique” thought to be from the early 1930s, meaning it could predate the Cartier icon. It was purchased by a collector for about \$66,342—70 times its estimate.

ing for 15 months to finish it. Why invest so much time and effort into a single watch? “It’s now something that we are using, because if we receive a watch from 1920 which is totally damaged, we are able to restore it, and using the same techniques and exactly in the same way,” says Selmoni. “So the watch will still remain 100 percent authentic. This is really what was very important for us. . . . I think for our clients, this is really priceless.”

New watches in series closely inspired by vintage references, however, are more common. “I think for collectors, it’s nice to feel like there’s not this divorce between vintage and modern,” says Wind. In April, to much fanfare, Cartier debuted a modern version of its Tank à Guichets, first released in 1928, while Breguet unveiled the *Classique Souscription 2025BH*, a wristwatch reinterpretation of Abraham-Louis Breguet’s famous *Souscription* pocket watch from the late 18th century. Both are faithful tributes and stunning reminders of the simple beauty and deep history of each brand. Cartier’s offering was capped at 200—in other words, a V.I.P.-only release. Breguet did not limit its wristwatch, but the first piece to come out of that production has been reserved for Sotheby’s *A Celebration of Breguet’s 250th Anniversary* auction on November 9. The sale is the largest of its kind dedicated to the brand in over a quarter century. “It will feature remarkable pieces dating from the era of the Breguet family, as well as other periods, and we intend to make some purchases!” says Emmanuel Breguet, who’s on the hunt for an early Breguet *Sympathique* clock from the late 18th century for the museum.

But even for a descendant with the monetary backing of the brand, there’s no guarantee he’ll

be able to bring his ancestors’ work back home. Sources tell *Robb Report* he has been outbid on Breguets in the past by the likes of Patek Philippe, which wanted a piece of its competitor’s history for its own museum. Independent watchmaker François-Paul Journe is also known to own some historically significant pieces from the house. “Sometimes we find ourselves competing with other important collectors and even with museums belonging to other brands,” says Breguet. “That’s not a problem; on the contrary, it’s extremely flattering. It proves that Breguet is *the* benchmark in the world of watchmaking.”

Within the next decade, the secondary market is projected to rival the primary. In the U.S., tariffs could accelerate that timeline. Knowledgeable and savvy heritage directors will be even more critical if brands are to survive. Beyond a marketing tool, heritage has become a form of capital, its influence felt across design, storytelling, and value. “What you create today is going to have an impact on tomorrow, and what you created in the past is going to have a strong impact on what you are doing today,” Sauret says. Now, more than ever, history may be the industry’s most valuable asset—less a relic than a safeguard for the future. ●