



Louis Moinet's Astralis tourbillon split-seconds chronograph (left and below, \$295,000).

Louis Moinet interprets the spirit of its original namesake with complex aesthetics.

History Channel

In 1848, French watchmaker Louis Moinet, a friend and collaborator of the well-known master Abraham-Louis Breguet, published a comprehensive watchmaking treatise that took 20 years to produce. The two leather-bound volumes detail the craft's most revered historical techniques with technical drawings and illustrations penned by Moinet, who was also an accomplished artist. This venerable reference serves as an invaluable resource and guiding force for Jean-Marie Schaller, who resurrected the Louis Moinet marque after 150 years of slumber, when he acquired the name in 2000. "When I bought it, the entire history that I had was on one sheet of paper—everything had been forgotten," he says.



He used Moinet's book as a source of inspiration rather than as a blueprint for reproduction. "We try to capture the essence of his work and translate it in modern ways," says Schaller, who has

some experience with legacy brands, having launched the Daniel Roth marque and relaunched Perrelet. "We ask ourselves, 'What would Louis Moinet do today if he were alive?'" One example of this approach is the brand's distinctive dewdrop hands, a modern adaptation of Moinet's original pomme-style hands, which have since become a hallmark of the Breguet brand.

One thing that Moinet, who learned the art of stone engraving in Florence, could never have imagined was using meteorites from outer space to decorate his dials. The Astralis watch combines a tourbillon, a split-second column-wheel chronograph, and a 24-hour planetarium displaying slices of extremely rare meteorites ►

originating from Mars, the moon, and, possibly, Mercury, in addition to a solar asteroid. The Sahara 99555 meteorite, presumed to be from Mercury, is documented to be more than 4.5 billion years old. Schaller's source for these galactic treasures is his friend, Paris-based Luc Labenne, whom Schaller smilingly refers to as a meteorite hunter. "Luc found it in the Sahara, and it was registered and determined to be the oldest known piece in the [solar system]," says Schaller, who points out that the material is so rare that one gram is more expensive than platinum, gold, and diamond combined. "The first time Luc placed a piece of the moon in my hand, I nearly cried," he adds.

Having access to such remarkable stones is just the first step. Another key partner is Daniel Haas, a master stonecutter who cuts and polishes the samples to a mere 1 mm thick on old machines that were made by his father. The process is very delicate and precise, says Schaller, who notes that some meteorites contain gas and can disintegrate upon cutting.

It was Haas who supplied the petrified palm wood for the subdials of this year's Geograph Rainforest chronograph, the proceeds of which go to preserve the Belum-Temengor rain forest in Malaysia, one of the world's oldest. Even more limited is the Jurassic Tourbillon, with 12 pieces featuring slices of 150-million-year-old fossilized diplodocus dinosaur bone.

Technical audacity rather than exotic materials sets the complex Tempograph apart, with its unprecedented 10-second retrograde display at 9 o'clock. With two patents pending, each Tempograph is produced one by one, so quantities are extremely limited. The dial is embellished



The one-of-a-kind Palm tourbillon (price available upon request).

with an engraved wave pattern that Schaller calls Côtes du Jura—essentially the brand's signature version of Côtes de Genève. And much like a metalsmith stamps hallmarks into finished works, Louis Moinet marks its casebacks with a series of symbols: a fleur-de-lis to commemorate the French heritage of the brand, two keys intended to represent creative watchmaking, a lion to symbolize art and design, a star indicating that

all pieces are limited editions, and a moon for a unique piece.

"We want to work with others in creative workshops and do something different," says Schaller of his strategy to set Louis Moinet apart in a sea of commercial manufacturers. "We are behaving more like artists as we write new chapters in the story of this brand." —LAURIE KAHLE

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