

WATCHES AND JEWELRY

Watches & Wonders Shanghai: The future of fine watchmaking?

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Watches & Wonders staged its first offline fair of 2020 in Shanghai Sept. 9-13. Image credit: Watches & Wonders

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Watches & Wonders staged its first offline fair of 2020 in Shanghai from Sept. 9-13. The Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie (FHH) continued its collaboration with Tmall, staging a series of online experiences to reach out to a broader range of Chinese audiences.

After the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie (FHH) **cancelled** its highly anticipated Watches & Wonders offline watch fair in Geneva formerly known as the Salon International de la Haute Horlogerie, or SIHH due to the coronavirus, the event crossed oceans and landed in Shanghai this September.

Although FHH successfully took its flagship event online in April, the experience was not quite the same. Categories such as high jewelry and fine watchmaking rely heavily on physical interaction and offline experiences which makes this fair in Shanghai a welcome addition to the watchmaking calendar.

Watch connoisseurs, especially those in China, were able to discover the latest novelties from top haute horlogerie brands, and enjoy the craftsmanship of these prestigious watchmakers up close at this long-awaited event last week at Shanghai's West Bund Art Center. It featured nine Richemont luxury watch *maisons*, including A. Lange & Shne, Cartier and Vacheron & Constantin, as well as two independent luxury watchmakers, Parmigiani Fleurier and Purnell.

Grand gathering of fine watchmaking

Although this was only Watches & Wonders' first outing in Shanghai, brands in attendance did a remarkable job in showcasing novelties and classic editions for Chinese watch enthusiasts and collectors. They continued the Watches & Wonders' tradition of focusing on craftsmanship and artisanship, conveying the art of fine watchmaking to the audience through fresh experiences, lectures and forums.

This edition's array of participants also included newcomer Purnell, an independent luxury Swiss watch brand founded in 2006. It took part in Watches & Wonders for the first time in April.

Known for its tourbillons, every timepiece from the brand is equipped with (at least) one. The brand took this

opportunity to showcase its ESCAPE II collection, presenting it to the Chinese watch community and demonstrating its mechanical prowess.

First launched in 2019, the timepieces are fitted with two of the watchmaker's signature Sphérotourbillon triple-axis tourbillons.

Another event highlight was the special "Homage to F. A. Lange" anniversary edition by A. Lange & Söhne.

Launched to celebrate the brand's founding by Ferdinand Adolph Lange 175 years ago, three limited edition pieces were released in the Saxon manufacture's proprietary Honeygold material. Most noteworthy is the 1815 Rattrapante Honeygold "Homage to F. A. Lange", the only timepiece in the brand's history to feature the rattrapante complication as a standalone and its sixth ever watch to include a rattrapante function. The other two timepieces released as part of the series are the 1815 Thin Honeygold "Homage to F. A. Lange", and the Tourbograph Perpetual Honeygold "Homage to F. A. Lange".



A. Lange & Söhne 1815 Rattrapante Honeygold "Homage to F. A. Lange."
Image credit: A. Lange & Söhne

IWC Schaffhausen, another prestigious watch *maison* with more than 100 years of history, not only presented its new Portugieser collection at this year's Watches & Wonders but also unveiled the Cyberloupe in the Lab area of the fair. This innovative new tool is essentially a watchmaker's magnifying glass equipped with a camera, and allows watch enthusiasts to catch a glimpse of the beating heart of the timepiece through the watchmaker's eyes giving them a whole new level of insight into the world of fine watchmaking.

Go East, again

The fact that Watches & Wonders one of the world's two leading watch fairs is taking place in Shanghai rather than in Switzerland at this time is reflecting a shift in power of the luxury watch industry as well.

Seven years ago, SIHH chose Hong Kong to launch its first Watches & Wonders in Asia to target local consumers while recognising the city as a key market for luxury watches.

But now, **rents on Russell Street in Hong Kong which is ranked the priciest shopping strip around the world has fallen to a 12-year low**. Top brands including Rolex, Omega and Prada have departed one after another. This is in contrast to the booming market in mainland China, where **Richemont's financial results for the first quarter ended June 30** showed a 49 per cent increase in sales.

Richemont is not the only one seizing this opportunity in the watchmaking industry.

According to **Fédération de l'Industrie Horlogre Suisse**, in the first seven months of this year, mainland China overtook the United States and Hong Kong as the top country for exports of Swiss watches, with an export value of 1.033 billion Swiss Francs by the end of July.

The market has also shown remarkable resilience in the face of the epidemic, with exports only down by 4.2 per cent compared to last year. Swiss watch exports to Hong Kong, however, have fallen by 51.3 per cent.

The shift in spending power in the luxury watchmaking industry has also brought Watches & Wonders back to Asia

after an extended absence from Hong Kong.

Olivia Jiang, DLG (Digital Luxury Group)'s associate account director, who has years of experience working with luxury watch brands, said, "Holding Watches & Wonders in China represents the agility of the luxury watch industry, having spotted the rising momentum of this country in the overall watch market. Consumer confidence, supported by the good control of the epidemic, further facilitated conversions within the watch fair."



The Parmigiani booth at Watches & Wonders Shanghai. Image credit: Watches & Wonders

When it goes digital

It is worth mentioning that Watches & Wonders not only offered a mix of digital experiences to Western audiences early this year, but also tied up with Tmall to present the "Watches & Wonders Tmall Cloud Watch Show" on the largest ecommerce marketplace in China. This September, "Watches & Wonders" went digital again via a collaboration between FHH and Tmall.

This partnership reuses the livestreaming strategy inherited from the edition earlier this year. Consumers can access the "Watches & Wonders" page through channels like brand flagship stores on Luxury Pavillion, the Net-A-Porter Flagship Store, or Taobao Live, to discover novelties from brands and find out more about the history and art of fine watchmaking.

"This represents a unique opportunity for our participating *maisons* to present their creations and connect directly to the Chinese clientele, offering them a wonderful experience thanks to the exceptional engagement capabilities of the Tmall Luxury Pavilion platform," said Emmanuel Perrin, president of the Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie.



The "Watches & Wonders" presence on Tmall. Image credit: Watches & Wonders, Tmall

In today's digital landscape, leveraging Tmall as a channel goes beyond scaling up a brand's ecommerce business it enables brands to have more in-depth communication with contemporary consumers at different touch points along the consumer journey.

"Given the unique digital ecosystem in China, Tmall plays an important role in the discovery journey for consumers," Ms. Jiang said. "The integrated virtual experiences on this platform allow Watches & Wonders to tap into the digital natives in this market as well."

For consumers, assuming there are no travel restrictions, the relocation of Watches & Wonders might be like Art Basel going to Miami or Hong Kong simply a change of location for them to discover new products.

But for an industry hungry for a breakthrough, the debut of this fair in China might just have shown brands the pathway to success in the not-too-distant future.

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