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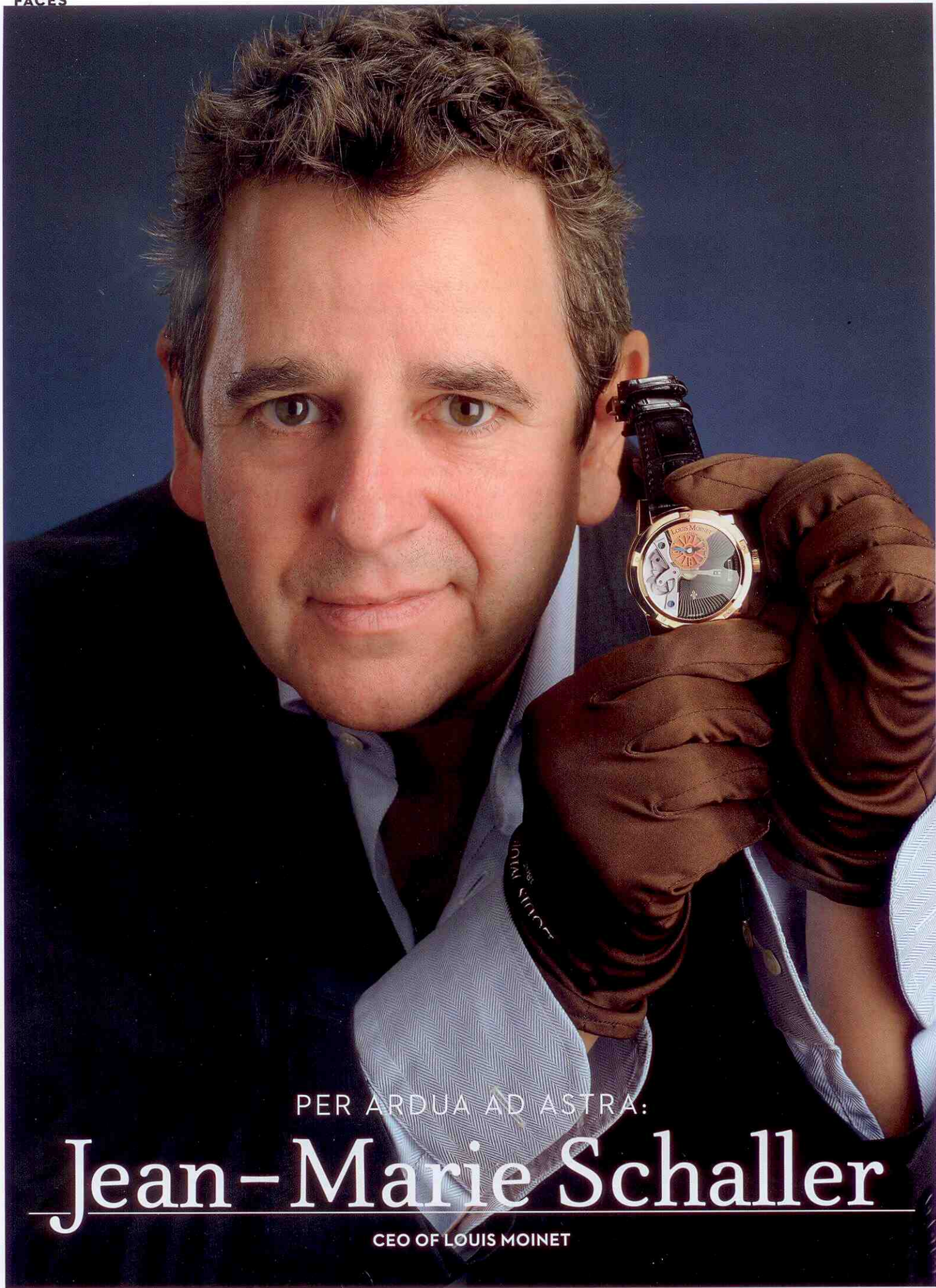
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PER ARDUA AD ASTRA:

Jean-Marie Schaller

CEO OF LOUIS MOINET

Though barely a decade old, **Louis Moinet** has made an identity for itself that reaches back to the golden age of watchmaking and the birth of the Machine Age, with a signature incorporation of rare meteoric materials as one of its hallmarks. CEO and founder **Jean-Marie Schaller** tells **REV★LUTION** about the genesis of a company that looks both to the past and to the stars for inspiration **BY JACK FORSTER**



You've been involved in the watch industry since the 1980s. How did you get your start?

When I started, I worked for a Swiss trading company based in Zurich, Siber Hegner SA. We were handling many watch brands, including Breguet, Blancpain, Vacheron, Omega... At that time, many brands wanted to begin their own distribution channels, and we lost them one after the other. I was very young, and for me, it was a good time, if I can say, because even though it was difficult, I was given the role of international projects, and my role was to look for new business partners. I met Franck Muller when he was still making watches in his kitchen! Also, Daniel Roth, whom we distributed watches for internationally. [For] Bertolucci, we created a new marketing concept — the “pebble” watches that were inspired by nature.

This was in 1986, which was perhaps still a difficult time for mechanical watches?

Well, it was not like 15 years before, when people were throwing mechanical movements into a trash bin and saying, “This is over.” By 1986, there was a market, for sure. I remember, when Daniel Roth did the tour in Asia, people were asking, “What is a tourbillon?” At that time, there were people selling watches to Russia and we thought they were mad. People thought that it was impossible to sell watches to the Russians; the big markets were Japan, the USA of course, a little bit Hong Kong and Europe. It was a time when the watch industry was still in a growing stage in terms of mechanical watches.

Why did you leave Siber Hegner?

I left because there were no more projects, unfortunately... Before I left, we developed

Perrelet for Siber Hegner. When I did leave, I bought the trademark — there was no brand launched yet. Then I found a partner, Mr Claudio Audemars, in Ticino [the company has nothing to do with Audemars Piguet — they are involved in micromechanics and electronics now, but initially, they made movement jewels for the watch industry]. I sold the name to him, and also myself, as managing director. Mr Audemars had a dream of having his own watch brand. We started from scratch, with nothing, in an office in Neuchâtel.

I stayed for five years. I went to France with my ex-wife; it was a dream for us to go there, but the dream became a nightmare and I came back, but she stayed there. I came back very low on cash, and I found a job at Lacoste, selling watches we made in China.

Some people said, “Oh, you’ve fallen to selling plastic watches.” But to me, that’s not fair. To me, the person who buys a Lacoste watch for \$100 is owed the same respect as someone who is buying a Patek Philippe for \$100,000. People in Pakistan or India, they save for a long time to spend that; it’s an expensive watch for them. It also enabled me to start my dream, which was my own company: Louis Moinet. If I had gone to work for another company, I could never have started Louis Moinet.

Was it during this period that you first got the idea to start your own company?

Actually, Daniel Roth told me during a trip to Japan — you know, his first job was a watchmaker for Breguet, when they began making watches again in 1975, I think. There was a man who came from Chaumet, François Bodet; he came to the Joux Valley and his mission was to relaunch

Breguet. And he hired a watchmaker to look in the archives and find the right models, and that man was Daniel Roth. So, he was at the start of Breguet. It was a time when Breguet belonged to the Chaumet brothers, and they came to François and told him to go to the Joux Valley and relaunch the brand for us. Daniel, knowing perfectly the Breguet archives, told me during this trip in 1997, “Jean-Marie, I know you want your own brand; you should be interested in Moinet, it’s a good name for you.” [Note: Watchmaker, painter, and professor of fine arts at the Louvre, Louis Moinet was born in 1768 and died in 1853; he worked closely with A. L. Breguet and is the author of the highly regarded *Traite d’Horlogerie*, an encyclopedia of watchmaking in two volumes.]

This makes the story of Louis Moinet very different from other watchmakers. I bought the name, I told my partners at Lacoste that I wanted to do this on the side, and that’s how I started. I had my job at Lacoste, my wife worked for Louis Moinet part-time, and we took [our] time because we needed time to find some historical documents to find the story behind the brand, which was completely forgotten.

That was in 2000. You must have already had an idea of the kind of watches you wanted to make.

I wanted to make watches that I would buy for myself. Watches that are different, watches that are not driven by commercial need, if I may say. During those years at Siber Hegner, I reviewed many marketing plans and I found that many new businesses failed because of their marketing plan. You design a marketing plan for three to five years, and inevitably the spending is bigger than you think and the income is less. So, in three to five years, the company goes bankrupt. I didn’t want this... My intention was to make watches to have fun, to really recreate something artistic. This is why I started without any financial pressure; this was very important to me. I wanted to find some kind of artistic expression, different from other watches. I’m not saying we make the only interesting watches in the world — certainly not! But I wanted to make something that is really my taste — it’s like if you’re a painter, you have to do what is right for you.

