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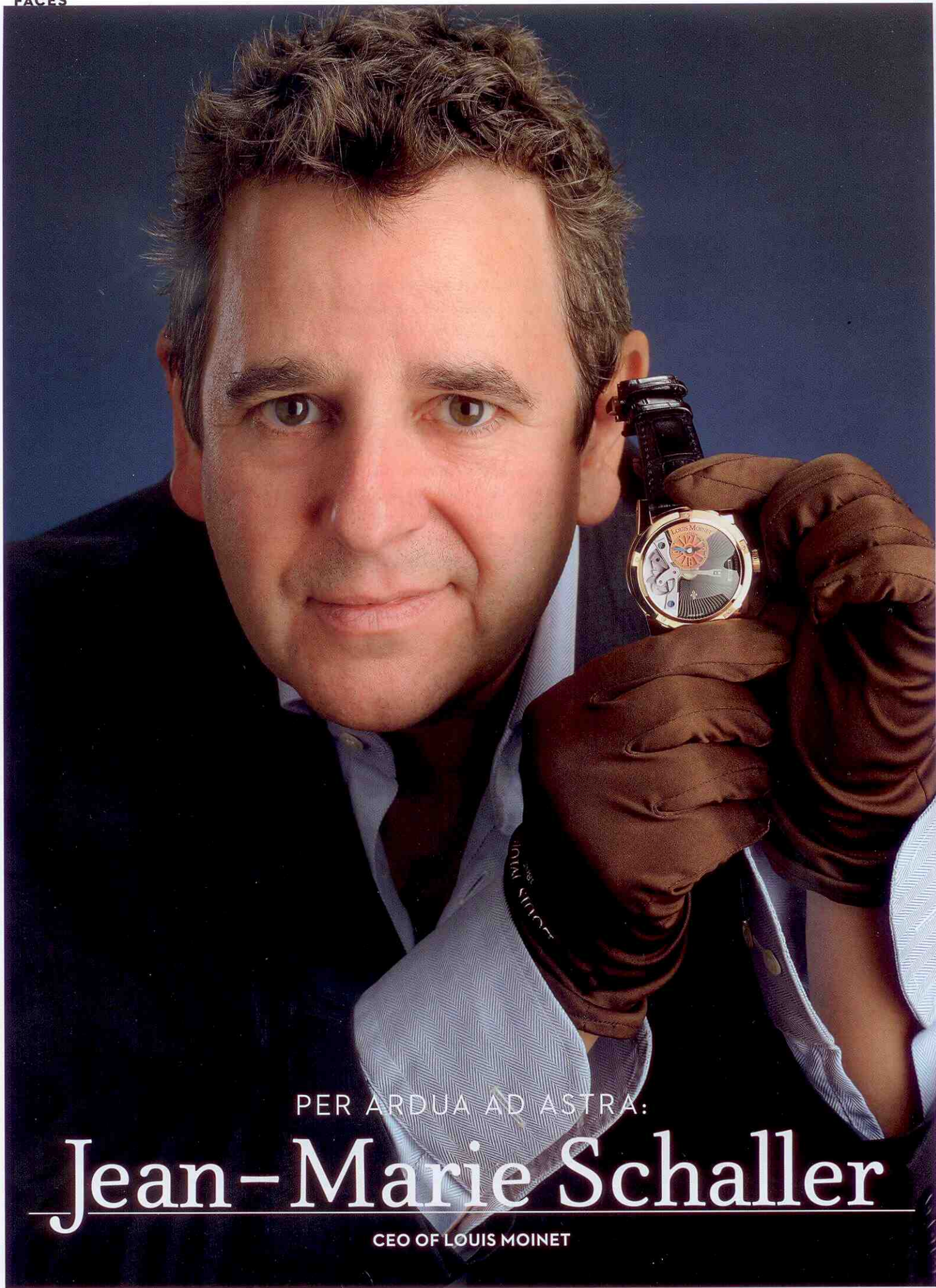
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PER ARDUA AD ASTRA:

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.



The Louis Moinet Jules Verne Instrument 2 (above), with its unusual chronograph levers, is part of the brand's ongoing quest to establish an unshakable identity, as are the 'dewdrop' hands (right) which are inspired by the familiar Breguet hands. Earlier incursions into tonneau territory (bottom) were not deemed strong enough to anchor the brand

So in your opinion, for a luxury watch brand to be successful, it has to be able to take the time to make the right products and then let those products find the right markets. And this is not an explosive growth model.

Exactly. It's like being a farmer. Our first watch was a chronograph called Olympia, with a Lemania 1873 movement. It sold out quite quickly. The Olympia was a steel model with a tonneau shape. [The tonneau shape] worked well with the Olympia, then I thought it would not be a future for us, for the simple reason that Franck Muller has been so strong with this shape. You can only be number two if that's the way you go. So, the new models are more powerful in terms of their own DNA.

How did the design codes of Louis Moinet evolve?

This year, we have introduced our own hands, the "dewdrop" hands. We wanted to find hands that were in line with the history of Louis Moinet. His period was one in which most watchmakers used the pomme [apple] hands, like Breguet. We created our own hands based on a little bit of history but also a bit of modern thinking, and we came up with this dewdrop shape. Four years ago, we started our own dials, with the Côtes de Jura, because we didn't want to use Côtes de Genève, and came up with the idea of a wave starting from the center. And the cases, that was more recent; three years ago, we came up with the idea of a round case with two bezels — one top bezel and one on the bottom, with the six screws. And also, if you look at the crown, we have a patented system with the plate with four screws that hold the crown tube. This is a patented system [with] technical advantages. Normally on a case, you have a tube which is soldered, and in this tube you put the stem, and then you put the crown on the stem. What happens if the tube is broken from the case is that you have to disassemble, look for a new case, and reassemble. So instead of having that, we have a floating tube which can't break, and is held in place with waterproof gaskets. And the whole thing is positioned by the plate with four screws. It was three years ago that we applied for a patent on this system.

Tell us about the "secrets" of Louis Moinet watches: the distinguishing design details that bring emotion to the watches.

When I started this company, it was to try to create something as artistic as we could. So, we are in a position where we are not pressured by the market or by investors to launch new models and to achieve certain goals. That means when we have a new one, like the Geograph, we could take an extra six months to create the details we wanted... We want to bring poetry to the person who buys it. Therefore, it was not very easy, but on the back of the case, for instance, it has some engravings, chemically etched — which doesn't sound very sexy, but the people who make it for us are probably the best for this sort of work and they didn't think they could get the level of detail we wanted at first, and it was quite difficult. We put two engravings from people who were contemporary to Louis Moinet; the first was from the Montgolfier brothers, who flew the first hot air balloon in 1783. The second was James Cook, the explorer, [who was] once again a contemporary of Louis Moinet. The rotor is shaped like a sextant and when you see it rotating, you have a feeling that it's pointing to a destination. This is the kind of thing we like to do — to go into all the details we can to give as much emotion as we can.



In the Jules Verne, we have a new way to activate the chronograph. That's a mechanical detail. We've also applied for a patent on this mobile lever system. You unfold the lever on the top to start the chronograph, and then you can stop it with the same finger; and if you want to zero the chronograph, you use the bottom lever. For the mechanisms themselves, we have a few examples such as the Astralis. This movement which we have introduced this year, is a triple complication: a rattrapante chronograph, tourbillon and what I call a planetarium. This planetarium is a disc, revolving once per day, and on the disc you have four different meteorites: from the moon, from Mars, possibly from Mercury, and from an asteroid close to the sun. There, you have a really beautiful movement, based on an old Venus movement but newly made.

It almost seems as if Jules Verne is sort of a second father to Louis Moinet watches — the expression of time, the acknowledgement of the depth of time in the use of these meteoric materials, the styling of the watches — there's a real optimistic celebration of the possibilities of the machine world.

For me, it has always been a dream to do something with this magical name. I called my lawyer one day and asked him to check if the name was still protected, and he told me the protection had not been renewed by its Chinese owners — the brand registration that is. So I told him, "Please, register