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Exclusive Interview

Hugh Jackman

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ONE WISE MAN

To celebrate the tenth anniversary of MB&F, founder Maximilian Büsser has introduced Melchior, a kinetic robot that is also a 480-component mechanical table clock. The concept was developed with designer Xin Wang, using a high-end L'Épée clock movement. Jumping hours and sweeping minutes on Melchior's chest are displayed via discs bearing MB&F's signature numerals, with pointers incorporated into the breastplate, while a dial on Melchior's abdomen shows the power-reserve indicator. The clock boasts a power reserve of 40 days, thanks to five mainspring barrels, which make up Melchior's rippling torso. Limited to 99 pieces, Melchior is available in a monochromatic "light" edition or a two-tone "dark and light" version featuring black PVD-treated components. ★







Urwerk UR-110 "Torpedo" in black-coated titanium with black alligator-leather strap (from Marcus).

Grey cashmere roll-neck jumper, Anderson & Sheppard Haberdashery; black jeans, Polo Ralph Lauren.

Buco J-24 black horsehide leather jacket with mouton fur collar, The Real McCoy's, property of Revolution.



MB&F HM4 Double Trouble in titanium with hand-stitched brown calfskin-leather strap (from *Marcus*).

Vintage red checked cotton shirt, **The Vintage Store**.

AFTER HOURS

One could be forgiven for thinking that pornography was invented with the dawning of the computer age. But, as early as the 17th century, English and Swiss watchmakers were taking full advantage of the old adage that sex sells.

by **stephen bayley**

Today we hear a lot of talk about the future of wearable technology. Data-streaming glasses, 4G shirts, online tights and what-have-you. But this is not new. After all, what is a watch other than wearable tech?

And everybody, at least if he or she is honest, knows how pornographic content of one sort or another is often present in today's technology of smartphones and tablets. It would be pleasant to pretend that the creation of a global wired community was leading to more study of Virgil's Eclogues, but more people are watching screens with 21st-century versions of *Debbie Does Dallas*.

With a nice equivalence, one of the secret episodes in the history of classic horology is the erotic watch: wearable tech – even wearable porn – that is centuries old. The watch with erotic scenes, at first static enamel or engraved pictures concealed behind flaps, later evolved into complex automata with miniature figures performing in meticulous, if mindless, metronomic bliss. “A Man's Way With His Maid” would be an unsurprising caption.

The trade began in the late-17th century with exports to China: how might quiet afternoons in the Forbidden City be beguiled by a handsome watch with scenes of a rutting *gweilo*, humping in sync with the passing minutes and seconds in the Emperor's silent palace.

The development of the minute-repeater and a gong sound provided an irresistible stimulus to the erotically inclined horologist. The *moment critique* of an animated couple might, thus, be indicated by a nice bit of tintinnabulation. The genre perhaps reached

its climax in the 18th century then continued, somewhat furtively and depleted, into the 19th. And now, in a nice demonstration of the circular nature of history, demand for erotic timepieces at recent sales has come mostly from Asia. The same markets are now demanding a new generation of erotic watches.

Secret love

The history of the erotic watch is, however, obscure and the literature is thin: only one specialist book has ever been published: Roland Carrera's *Les Heures de l'Amour* (Editions Scriptor, Lausanne, 1993). Proper academic study of the subject is difficult as few intact collections exist and official records are scarcer still. These watches were collected with passion, but with a necessary secrecy that adds an additional frisson to the stimulus they were designed originally to excite.

Collections of erotica, in whatever genre, acquire additional seductive force by being kept from view. For example, in 1865 The British Museum decided to put all its “obscene” material into a collection known as The Secretum. In the absence of much documentary proof for or against, it is irresistible to think that all the great watchmakers have a Secretum of their own: treasure houses of unseen tick-tocking erotica.

There is a curious relationship between love and horology, or between sex and time (to put it a little more bluntly). Psychologists know that the intense power of the erotic impulse is rooted not in



Jaquet Droz Erotic Pocket
Watch N°24 made for the
Chinese market, circa 1790.



“The emotions of desire might be complex and contradictory, but the end result of much erotic fantasy is a simple and predictable intromittent action, which clockwork is perfectly suited to imitate.”



Far left: A Bovet pocket watch, circa 1810, sold by Antiquorum in 2015.

Left: This 43mm platinum and onyx Ulysse Nardin Hourstriker caused a stir at this year's Baselworld.

mere lubricious lust, although that is certainly a part of it, but in a larger mystical battle with the passing moment. Sex defines vitality and, at least for a moment, defies mortality. It is surely significant that the French expression for orgasm is *petite mort*, the little death that is the life-enhancing absence of all feeling.

Literature is full of references to sex and time. The poet Andrew Marvell, wooing his *Coy Mistress*, promises to: “Tear our pleasures with rough strife / Through the iron gates of life / Thus if we cannot make our Sun stand still / Yet we will make him run”. So there’s another haunting suggestion of how sex changes perceptions of time – the more we enjoy ourselves, the quicker time passes. For Carlo Petrini, founder of The Slow Food Movement, the thing eating and sex have in common is that each is best done slowly.

So the delicious paradoxes and suggestions of *les montres erotiques* are to be savoured and enjoyed. The human emotional mechanisms of sexual desire might be complex and contradictory, but the end result of all erotic fantasy is a simple and predictable intromittent action, which clockwork is perfectly suited to imitate.

Original sin

An erotic watch is, in several ways, the 18th-century equivalent of pornography in your smartphone. (Or, in a more primitive age, those cute nude ballpoints where a model’s black lace basque falls off when you invert the pen, a reliable way of livening-up the duller of meetings). One, it is advanced technology used to support and indulge very ancient tastes. Two, it is a personal secret made more pleasurable because it can be covertly enjoyed in public.

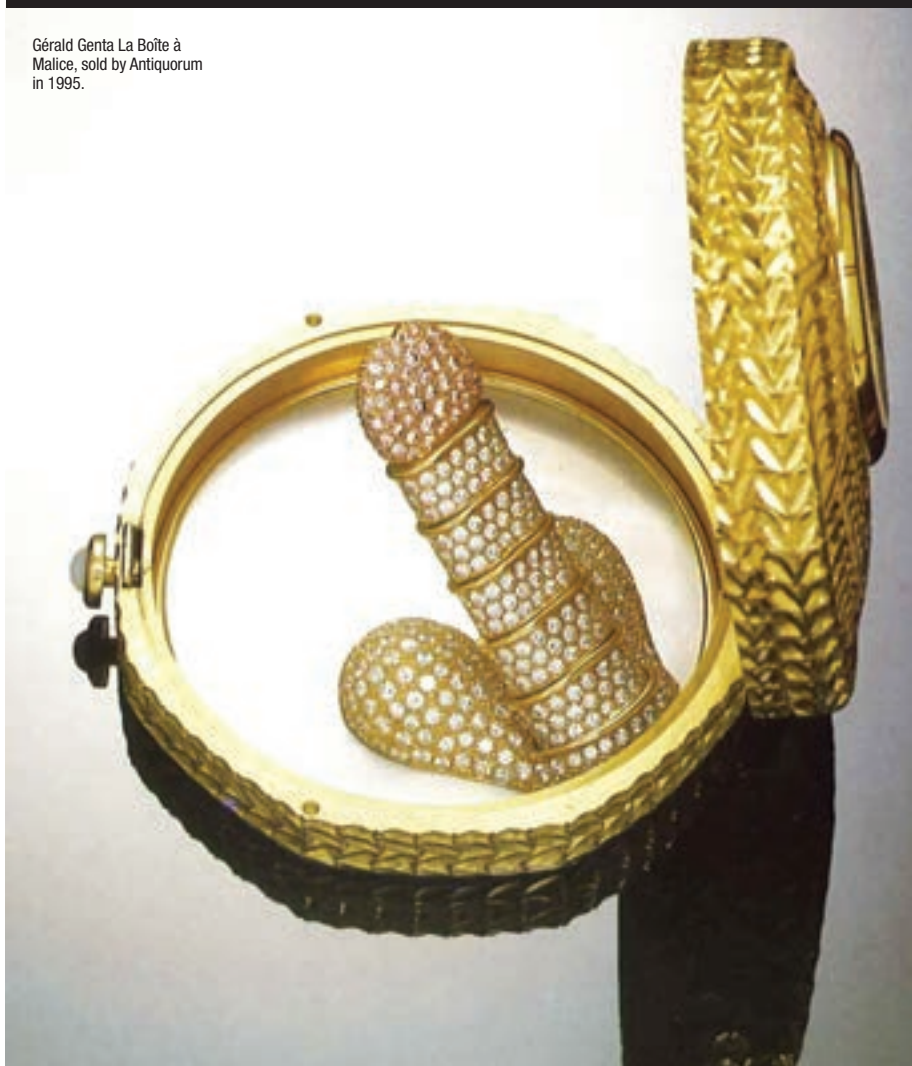
All artefacts speak of their time, betraying the yearnings and obsessions, hopes and fears, of the people who made them – and, indeed, the people who use them. Thus, we have gaudy porn on our iPhone while our ancestors had a quarter-repeater pocket watch where you slid a cover to reveal a miniature enameled scene of a partially undressed and notably inflamed priest fitting a plump, naked girl with a chastity belt. Before or after? It is difficult to say.

The development of automata in the Geneva area, by Jaquet Droz and others, was a symbolic moment in man’s historic escape from God during the period we now call The Enlightenment. An automaton’s simulacrum of life put Man in competition with the Divinity.

One Jaquet-Droz masterpiece was a duck that digested and defecated, causing astonishment wherever it was demonstrated. It was, naturally, an advertisement for his watchmaking skills. Meanwhile, his contemporaries might automate a scene of vivid lovemaking as the quarter-repeater drives the piston movement of a pink male bottom grinding through the repetitive motions of love with a clockworking girl.

Not always of the loftiest artistic intent, these erotic scenes are nonetheless all small masterpieces of miniaturism. There are certain craft techniques that lent themselves to the miniaturist’s art. Since the 17th century, Geneva had been a centre of enamelling and engraving. *Cloisonné* was a technique where compartments were made by soldering gold or silver wire to the surface and these compartments were filled with enamel powder and then fired in a kiln. *champlevé* was similar, but depended on incisions carved or etched into a surface, which then were also filled with a vitreous enamel.

Gérald Genta La Boîte à Malice, sold by Antiquorum in 1995.



“Not always of the loftiest artistic intent, these erotic scenes are nonetheless all small masterpieces of miniaturism. There are certain craft techniques that lent themselves to the miniaturist’s art.”

the sexual turbulence beneath a nun’s chaste habit.

At an adultery trial of 1796 a Mrs Errington admitted showing copies of John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, better known as Fanny Hill, to her friends. I wonder whether Mrs Errington owned a watch with similarly provocative content. *Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies* began publication in 1757 and continued for nearly 40 years as an annual list of loose women, a sort of Baedeker of bawdiness. An entry in *Harris’s List* refers to a woman who enjoys, and shares with her clients, “an extraordinary titillation in all her members”. Subscribers to *Harris’s List* would surely have been customers for erotic watches?

In a context such as this, a context where the great biographer James Boswell might, with a

condom made of a sheep’s bladder, enjoy a prostitute in broad daylight on Westminster Bridge, where prominent politicians belonged to Sir Francis Dashwood’s Hellfire Club, where the Whig leader, John Wilkes, published an *Essay on Woman* in 1763, was a context where an erotic watch was perhaps a familiar accessory. Certainly, a 2011 Antiquorum sale in Geneva included a single London-made James Cox erotic watch of 1780 showing a woman spying on a pair of lovers. If there was one, there might have been many.

Whether in England or France, the narratives and iconography of these scenes were based on well-established pornographic traditions, although the gross transgressions of the Marquis de Sade feature less often in erotic watches than do salon seductions and pastoral trysts.

Typical is a watch by the Geneva maker Henry Capt. A secret scene is revealed in gold and enamel. Two gentlemen and a woman are in an interior and about to do what two gentleman and a woman might most feel inclined when each is expecting a *ménage à trois*. The action is activated via a steel cam and, as the decisive moment looms, music plays. The technical description of the mechanism sounds like a parody of sex: full-late double-train movement with cylindrical pillars, going barrel and polished end-piece. All of this activated by twisting the pendant.

Then there was the engraving technique of *guilloché* whose intricate, repetitive patterns so readily bring to mind the weave of a strumpet’s fishnet stockings. All these techniques were used in the static or automated *tableaux* in erotic watches.

Besides Geneva, London was also a centre of erotic watch production where they were sometimes known as conversation pieces. Although this term is most often applied to the paintings of informal social groups by Arthur Devis, an erotic watch might be expected to start a conversation of a sort that did not conclude with the exchange of words and ideas...

Anglo-French relations

An already vigorous stream of native English pornography was engorged by France. Legal records reveal how familiar pornography was three centuries ago in London. In 1688, the publisher of *The School of Venus* (translated from *L’Ecole des Filles*) was fined 40 shillings at The Guildhall for publishing what the diarist Samuel Pepys called a “mighty lewd book”. Its subject was the instruction of a young woman by an older one, more skilled in the *ars amatoria*. This was a recurrent design motif in erotic watches. So too was the sexually ambitious nun who appears in *Venus dans le Cloître*, a book of 1683 intended to subvert the Church by acknowledging



Clockwise from top left:
An erotic caseback
by Chopard, sold by
Christies in 2007; Svend
Andersen's Eros 69,
sold by Antiquorum
in 2013; the limited
edition Swatch
Kamasutra watch;
Antoine Prezioso's
Sailing Dream, sold by
Antiquorum in 2007;
Roger Dubuis'
MuchMore – Cerotique
sold by Antiquorum
in 2005.





Left:
A unique Blancpain Carrousel
Répétition Minutes with engraving
on caseback.

Right:
The Jacob & Co. Caligula with
rotating dial.

Hidden desires

Although the production of erotic watches was always necessarily covert, it was commerce that reached a significant volume. So much so that, in 1817, the Consistoire de Geneve had to issue a critical edict to the watchmakers of La Chaux-de-Fonds. “Obscene jewellery has long been manufactured in your Canton!” the Calvinists nagged. The Consistoire was appalled by the popular “lewd scenes”. And it was not only watchmakers. The depraved craftsmen of the Swiss Jura were also busily decorating snuff boxes and signet rings with scenes of lust. There was a demand to stop this “wretched commerce” so as to protect the reputation of Switzerland abroad. Instead of gratifying lustful tastes, craftsmen were ordered to return to Calvinist principles.

Because of legal compulsion or changes in taste, production of erotic watches began to decline. Now, quietly, the Enlightenment tradition of erotic watches is being revived. What effect this has on Switzerland’s international standing is yet to be seen.

To animate the little amorous figures, the Blancpain Libertine adds wheels and cams to what is already a complicated repeater mechanism. As in sex, no friction or play can be tolerated. Jacob & Co.’s Caligula is claimed by its manufacturer to be the “most erotic timepiece ever made”.

Caligula promises “a scene reminiscent of any man’s greatest fantasy... revealed every hour”. The menu includes dial scene options, ranging from “boat, beach, or city backdrop with blonde, brunette,

red, black female hair”. The syntax is certainly less promising than the product it describes. Caligula’s erotic dial is either revealed or hidden, according to circumstances and need, by a crown at four o’clock. There is no mention of a drop-down menu, but perhaps such a thing would be appropriate.

Concealment and display have forever been elements in the tragedy-comedy of the erotic imagination. And concealment and display are part of the theatre of an erotic watch. That your elegant Blancpain face successfully disguises a secret, erotic interior world is doubly pleasing. Seduction, too, works like clockwork.

Again, time is an ever-present question in any discussion of sex, whether personal or horological. What is a quickie other than a bargain between passing time, opportunity and desire? Many other vernacular descriptions of sex also involve a suggestion of time. There is, for example, the French institution of the *cinq à sept*: that hiatus in the day, between office and home, when a man so inclined might visit his mistress. The French precision and bureaucracy indicated by the start time of five and the hard-stop of seven are charming, as if the waves of desire work to a timetable. Of course, he would need a reliable watch to make it on time.

Who buys erotic watches today? Elton John “*fidèle à ses goûts*”, a French report says, owns a “*montre libertine*” with two men “*en train de faire l’amour observé par un chien*”. I presume Elton is not alone in his taste for wearable porn. But the fascination of the subject is that we will really never know. ★