



MILLE AND AIRBUS CREATE A WATCH FOR HIGHFLIERS

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At first glance, watchmaking and aviation would seem to occupy opposite ends of the manufacturing spectrum. And yet the watchmaker Richard Mille, whose Swiss brand is best known for fashioning avant-garde timepieces from space-age materials, found enough similarities between the two worlds to co-design a watch with Airbus Corporate Jets, or ACJ.

As the ACJ managing director, Benoit Defforge, put it: “We have the same kind of customer.”

The result of their two-year collaboration, introduced at the Salon International de la Haute

Horlogerie in Geneva in January, is the 30-piece limited edition RM 50-02 ACJ Tourbillon Split Seconds Chronograph, available exclusively at Richard Mille boutiques for a staggering \$1.05 million.

The relationship between the two brands, neither of which had ever engaged in a partnership of this nature, began after a friend of Mr. Mille's put him in touch with Mr. Defforge. For the French watchmaker, teaming with the aircraft manufacturer based in Toulouse, France, was something of a fantasy. "I'm totally mad about Airbus," he said. "I've been a hundred times around the globe. Still, when I see their aircraft I am like a baby."

The challenge was "to identify the parts of the plane that you could bring to a watch," Mr. Defforge said. "We wanted to give the feeling that this watch is an Airbus Corporate Jet, not a watch with Airbus Corporate Jets written on it."

Sylvain Mariat, head of ACJ's corporate design studio, took the first stab at creating a lightweight skeletonized model. He constructed a case from a titanium-aluminum alloy, the same material Airbus uses for jet turbine blades, added a ceramic bezel shaped like an airplane window, and then replaced Richard Mille's signature screws with Torq-Set screws used by Airbus.

Mr. Mariat, working in concert with Julien Boillat and Salvador Arbona at Richard Mille, translated the massive structures used to attach wings to the aircraft engine into pushers on the sides of the watch and finished the timepiece with a jet engine-inspired crown marked with the Airbus logo.

The complex split-seconds chronograph movement inside the case boasts numerous concessions to energy efficiency: The titanium reduces internal friction, and several of its bridges have been treated with an aeronautical coating used to protect engine and chassis parts from corrosion.

Beyond promoting the timepiece at aviation industry events, such as the European Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition in Geneva in May, Mr. Defforge said Airbus would let Mr. Mille handle distribution and sales. And even though the luxury watch industry is facing a tough economic environment this year, Mr. Mille does not appear concerned by the prospect of selling 30 million-dollar timepieces.

"Sometimes I feel guilty, because 2015 has been incredible for us," he said, speaking from a health clinic in Germany, where he was on a 15-day fast with his American business partner and distributor, John Simonian. "Every day we have soup at lunch, every night he is pushing me for deliveries."

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