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A master at work

Those fortunate enough to acquire a Philippe Dufour are in luck in more ways than one.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIELS ACKERMANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

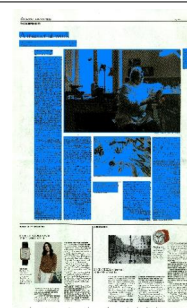
One at a time

Philippe Dufour in his workshop in Le Solliat, Switzerland, where his fans often make pilgrimages. Each bench has a function, and each is piled with the hundreds of tools needed to perform it.

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LE SOLLIAT, SWITZERLAND

BY KATHLEEN BECKETT

It is extremely difficult to get a watch made by Philippe Dufour, whom peers often refer to as a "living legend" or "the pope of watchmaking." Internet forums are filled with questions from collectors asking how they can obtain one.

Mr. Dufour, who makes each watch by hand, says he has a waiting list with almost 200 names. Since each watch takes months to make, the 67-year-old may not be able to work his way through the list — and that harsh reality only serves to make his watches more sought-after. Those who are fortunate enough to buy a Philippe Dufour watch are in luck in more ways than one. "Most watches, like cars, depreciate in value the second you own them," Mr. Dufour said. "Mine double or even triple in value."

One of his Duality watches, originally 70,000 Swiss francs in 1997, the equivalent of about \$70,500 today, was sold at a Christie's auction 10 years later for 180,000 francs. And in 2012 Sotheby's sold a Grande and Petite Sonnerie wristwatch from 1992 for \$620,720. (The entry level price for one of his Simplicity watches — "should I decide to make it" — is about 90,000 francs.)

But the appeal of a Philippe Dufour watch is not just its rarity, but its beauty.

The Espace Horloger, the watch museum of the Joux Valley in Switzerland, showcases one of Mr. Dufour's Simplicity watches as the most superb example of modern watchmaking: elegant and refined on the outside, a marvel of hand-made complications inside.

He "is known and respected worldwide for his art and craftsmanship," said Vincent Jaton, the museum's director. "Philippe has his way of doing, working his movement, to prepare his watch so that it becomes perfect in every detail: technical and finishes. One could say that the watch is a work of art."

Hodinkee, a website that reports on the watch world, says he is considered "the greatest living watchmaker." The French magazine *Le Point* has called his watches "masterpieces." And to *Forbes* magazine, Mr. Dufour is, quite simply, "the god of watches."

Watches made entirely by one person, start to finish, are increasingly rare, Mr. Dufour said. "The more centralized watchmaking becomes, the less know-

ledgeable are the people," he said. "Young people know how to make this part or that, but very few know how to make everything."

"At factories they need more machine operators than they need watchmakers. So the schools don't teach it," he continued. "Filing is done by machine now, so there's no need to teach how to file."

Things were different in his day. Mr. Dufour was born in 1948 in Le Sentier, a village in the Joux Valley, the heart of Swiss watchmaking. "When I finished at the local school, I crossed the street and went to the École Technique," he said. "It is there I learned how to make a watch."

Upon graduation, he worked down the street at Jaegar-LeCoultré with the promise that the company would send him abroad. The 1968 riots in Paris prevented his being sent there, so he was posted to London, where "I trained employees so they could service watches." He also worked two years overseeing watchmaking in Ste. Croix, and he and his wife traveled around the United States in a van for six months.

Back in the Swiss valley, he did stints at Gérald Genta and Audemars Piguet, then went on his own and restored watches for five years. It was a pivotal experience. "I learned so much doing that, seeing what the old people did, and they did it with less equipment," he said. "I was inspired to make my first Grande

Sonnerie movement." He eventually made a Grande Sonnerie Minute Repeater pocket watch. "It took me 2,000 hours to make it — a whole year. But I couldn't sell it because nobody knew me."

So he took it to Audemars Piguet in the neighboring village of Le Brassus and the house ordered five watches — five years of work. But the agreement bothered Mr. Dufour: "I wasn't allowed to say I made it." So he made his own Grande Sonnerie Minute Repeater but with a new twist. "I made it wristwatch size," he said. "It took me 2.5 years. I took it to Basel in 1992, under my own name."

A star was born.

On a drive around the cluster of famed watchmaking villages — Le Brassus, Le Sentier, Le Solliat — housing the biggest names in watches, Mr. Dufour talked about growing up here, amid the modest farmhouses and grazing cows.

His memories were tinged with sadness as he recalled how some of the big watch companies had taken over small-

er ones owned by the watchmakers he and his father and grandfather, all working with watches, had grown up with.

Watchmaking began in Switzerland, Mr. Dufour said, when farmers had little to do in the dead of winter and turned to creating movements. You can tell which farmhouses harbored watchmakers, he added, by looking at the windows. "See," he said, pointing to a farmhouse, "there is a stretch of windows" under the eaves. "That's a watchmaker's atelier. You need good light to work."

One stretch of windows belonged to Louis François Reymond, who in 1778 made a watch for the king of France. His farmhouse is next door to Mr. Dufour's atelier, the plain gray building on the road out of Le Solliat that previously was the school building where his three daughters were educated. He shares the space with a retiree and a cheesemaker, and a discreet business card printed with "Philippe Dufour, Horlogerie Compliquée," marks his mailbox.

Inside his workshop are a number of work benches, each with a function and each piled with the hundreds of tools needed to perform it. "This one is for filing, that one for pivoting," yet another for gem cutting.

There also are dozens of cabinets with tiny drawers holding thousands of parts and tools. One belonged to Reymond; another, to Mr. Dufour's grandfather, and is filled with his tools. His photograph is on a wall nearby, next to a window with a view of snowy hills.

When Mr. Dufour had assistants, each had his own desk. "But they come, they learn and they lose motivation and leave," he said.

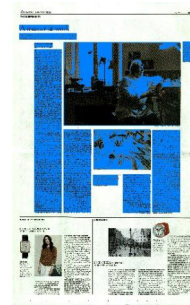
His daughter also worked for him for a while, but the arrangement didn't

work out. "I was her father at home," he said, "but her boss in here." She now works for Patek Philippe.

Recently, a former colleague at Audemars Piguet has worked with Mr. Dufour with the sole aim of training new workers. "I'm tired of training," Mr. Dufour said.

And fans often make pilgrimages to the atelier. Some bring offerings, including expensive pipes because he loves to smoke.

Photographs he keeps in a folder document the customer anecdote he considers most touching. A doctor in Japan,



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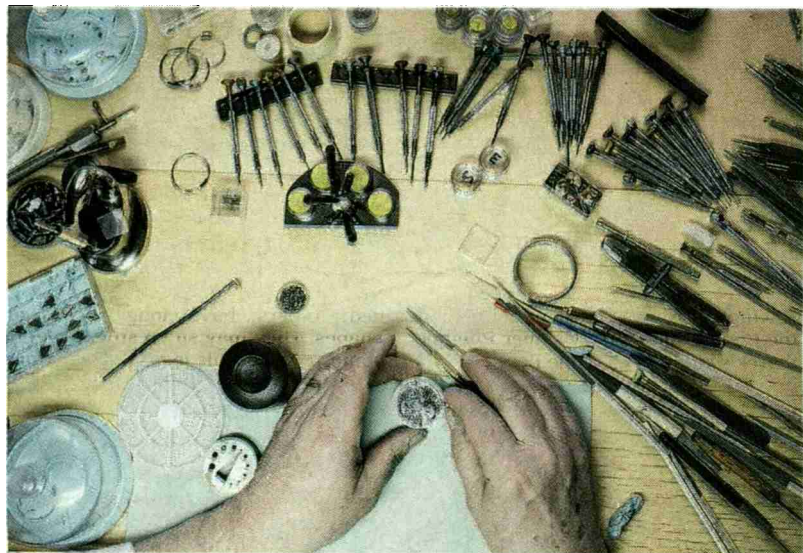
who has decorated his waiting room with photos of Mr. Dufour's watches, allows his cancer patients to wear his own Simplicity watch. He has sent the watchmaker photos of them with the watch strapped to their wrists, big smiles on their faces.

Mr. Dufour is wary of visitors; the atelier was broken into in May and he believes it was done by someone who had been in the workroom before. Some old parts he had on display were taken, as well as one of his Simplicity watches that later turned up on eBay being sold from Romania. One of Mr. Dufour's collectors bought it and returned it to him as a gift.

Luckily he had kept his current work in progress locked up in a safe: a Grande Sonnerie Minute Repeater wristwatch, 11 months in the making, only the seventh ever made.

What comes next? "Maybe I sell my business to the Chinese," he said. "Maybe I collaborate with a big house."

He said he isn't ready to retire. "When I no longer get pleasure from what I do, I will stop." For now though, he still loves making watches: "I come to my atelier every day, even Sunday. I may not stay all day, but I have to go if even for just an hour or two." He smokes his pipe and listens to Mozart and works.



"When I finished at the local school, I crossed the street and went to the École Technique. It is there I learned how to make a watch."