



The Art of Breguet

Abraham-Louis Breguet attached particular importance to the decoration of his creations. His timepieces all exhibit different motifs that enhance the beauty, not only of their movements, but also of their cases and dials. This desire to present something technically superior and exquisitely beautiful is still evident at Breguet today. While the watchmaker is central to the manufacture of each timepiece, each one requires the careful hand of some thirty or so specialised artisans who represent the Manufacture's centuries-old expertise. The reason for decorating a watch is not simply to enhance its beauty and desirability, the aesthetic enhancement originally stemmed from a practical need to prevent the timepieces from becoming prematurely tarnished, or to help overcome the fragility of matt or polished surfaces which could be easily scratched, grazed or damaged. Today the reason for adornment is primarily an aesthetic one, and each magnificent piece, is in and of itself, a work of art. Breguet's exceptionally skilled artisans include bevellers, engravers and engine-turners and it is these master craftsmen who lend their skills to add beauty, while continuing to add to a remarkable legacy of ancestral expertise, worthy of the greatest watchmakers of all time.

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Bevelling

Bevelling, also known as chamfering, is characterised by its complexity and is a distinguishing feature of a superior quality watch. It occurs when the artisan polishes and rounds off the edges of the component parts of watch movements, typically at a 45-degree angle, in order to remove imperfections and traces of machining that could interfere with the efficiency and accuracy of the movement. The role is primarily aesthetic though, creating a subtle interplay of reflections between the satin-finished surfaces and sharply-cut polished angles. Each surface of a timepiece is re-worked, embellished and painstakingly burnished with a range of tools and abrasive materials that seem to have survived from a previous age. The resulting angles have either sharp external edges or narrow internal ones, and their edges are straight, curved or rounded-off.



Guilloché dials

Engine-turning is a form of raised engraving and is a technique that has been particularly prized by master watchmakers from as far back as the 16th century. An engraver painstakingly prepares his own tools for use in his decorative art. He ever so carefully carves the finest of materials by hand, aware always that the slightest tremor can destroy days of work in just one moment. The resulting engravings give Breguet timepieces an unrivalled refinement and unique identity, rendering them instantly recognisable. Abraham-Louis Breguet's innovative thinking saw engine turning used, not only to enhance the beauty of watchcases, but to fashion the dials as well. In 1786, he began fitting his watches with engine-turned silver or gold dials of his own design. Breguet's hand-made dials are an unmistakable hallmark of the brand, and are the finest reflection of the infinitely patient artisans who expertly create them.

The process today is still a closely guarded production secret. With skills passed on through generations of families, the craftsmen work in the traditional style, using engine-turned lathes designed and built over a century ago. The artisans work carefully, on a lathe for circular motifs and a in a straight line on a machine for linear patterns. With a precision of a tenth of a millimetre, they engrave intricate patterns reflecting their uncommon virtuosity. From start to finish, engine turning depends essentially on the craftsman's sharp eye and steady hand, of which the lathe is but an extension. Initially, the 18-carat gold or mother-of-pearl smooth disc is worked with a graver and the borders obtained reveal the different zones that will show the various time displays, such as the power reserve, the moon phase indicator, the small seconds, and date window. Then the dial will be decorated, giving it a textured, non-reflecting matt surface and the artisan will also mark out the zones with a variety of motifs such as clou de Paris, flinqué, grain d'orge, wave or basketwork design. Once the dial plate has been meticulously engine turned by hand, it is silver-coated using techniques developed over two centuries ago: powdered silver is delicately brushed on the plate with circular or linear movements, depending on the type of satin-like finish desired.

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Cameo Carving

The ability to innovate and collaborate is one of the hallmarks of a progressive organisation that shows promise of sustainability. Besides their ability to produce wonderfully innovative designs, Breguet also collaborates with the very best masters of cameo carving.

Cameo-work brings with it more than four centuries of history and tradition, and is one of the most remarkable forms of craftsmanship in the world. Through the centuries, cameos have typically reflected scenes of Greek and Roman mythology, or portraits of royalty and important figures. Cameos were made from semi-precious gemstones such as onyx and agate, stone, roman glass and shell. At Breguet it is practiced using shells that present strata of contrasting colours. Breguet is careful to select only the noblest shells that feature the most refined tones, from suppliers who comply with ethical principles that respect the marine fauna. The artisan uses a graver, which he has made himself to work the interior layers of the shells that are only a few millimetres thick. Each piece is carefully carved and filed to achieve the perfectly rounded forms, and then the outline of the craftsman's future creation is carefully traced on in pencil. Then the engraving begins – the most delicate and artistic stage of the creative process – and a sculpture of exceptional delicacy is produced. Once cleaned and polished, the cameo reveals itself in all its splendour. ■

