

## BREGUET'S TACT WATCHES

## A TOUCH OF TRADITION

**WEI KOH GETS UP-CLOSE WITH BREGUET'S MONTRE À TACT, ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUELY APPEALING WATCHES IN HOROLOGICAL HISTORY**

Abraham-Louis Breguet is best known for dazzling the courts of the world with his high complications. His innovations in this field are singular, including the first use of wire gongs for minute repeaters, the creation of the Sympathetic desk clock/pocket watch and, of course, the invention of the tourbillon escapement that even 200 years after his death continues to dazzle. Breguet also made numerous precision instruments or 'tool watches' primarily for military use. He created military counters to help Alexander I monitor the pace of his troops on the battlefield.

He also created marine chronometers for merchant and admiralty ships. Breguet was the first to offer twin-barreled movements to maintain a constant quality of power to the escapement. He created

many Souscription watches—simple watches with a single hour hand that were popular with soldiers. Yet, there is one type of watch that Breguet created for highly pragmatic reasons. These watches were called Montre à tact, literally translated to mean 'Touch Watches'.

These elegantly simple watches used hunter cases that featured protective lids which fit over the watch's crystal. The pinion carrying the hour hand of the watch emerged through a small hole in the crystal and mated with an arbor on the back



Montre à tact started life simply as a practical alternative to the minute repeater.



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of the hunter lid. This in turn controlled a rotating hour hand attached to the outer surface of the lid. Montre à tact were often perceived to have been created for soldiers who had suffered eye injuries during the war. The rim of the case was decorated with touch pieces corresponding to the hour indices so soldiers could determine the time by simply touching the rotating hour hand on the lid.

However, there is also another belief that Breguet created these watches as a commercial and technological coup. He had the idea of exploiting the layout of the gear train of his Souscription watches, whose hand was fixed to the central barrel arbor and rotated with it. What he needed to do was create a protruding pinion that could mate with and drive the arrow on the hunter lid. Why did Breguet come up with this idea? So people could tell time in the dark.

In a world without luminous paint, watches like minute repeaters were the only devices that allowed people to tell time in the dark. But there were two drawbacks to repeaters. First, because of the complexity of the strike train mechanisms, they were incredibly difficult to create and therefore expensive. In addition, repeaters were decidedly indiscreet in that they told

Montre à tact soon became showcases for the high decorative arts



time using sound. The advantage of the Montre à tact was its discretion. And because the creation of these watches required only a small modification to the Souscription caliber, they would be far more affordable than repeaters.

Once these watches were introduced at the end of the 18th century, they were quickly co-opted by healthy soldiers and nobility alike. Montre à tact became a prevalent luxury accessory. What was created to be a purely functional tool watch soon became a forum for self-expression. Intended to be an affordable alternative to the repeater, these watches soon became equally expensive and to this day survive as supreme examples of high decorative art. The once simple engine-turned-hunter lids were soon decorated with flinque enamel. These lids first received sunray guilloché in one of several different configurations before they were layered with colored enamel. Even the touch pieces used to designate the hours were switched for gemstones and split pearls. The all-important hour hand fixed to the top of the lid was often transformed into an ornately decorated arrow, inlaid with a glittering river of diamonds. So the burning question that remains is this: Now that Breguet is in a thriving period of self-discovery and revival of its rich past as evinced by the award-winning La Tradition, when will we see a wristwatch version of the sumptuous Touch Watches?

During an exquisite exhibition of historic watches, Breguet's vice president of sales, Rudolph M. Schulthess said: "Breguet initiated a project to create a wristwatch version of the Montre à tact several years ago. One concern we had was how to create a waterproof seal around the pinion that protruded from the sapphire crystal." When asked if he thought such a wristwatch was still a possibility, he replied: "Of course, these amazing watches are part of our living history and innate to our DNA." ★