



MATERIALS

Dials with different styles

Whether inlaid or embroidered, sturdy or smooth, textiles such as leather and silk present their own set of challenges in watches

BY JOSHUA HENDREN

Among the precious metals, enamels and ornamental stones often used to create watch dials, traditional textiles such as leather and silk have been gaining ground as unconventional accents.

Early this year, Hermès introduced a new, limited-edition model with a leather dial, following Hublot's foray into the trend last year. In 2024, the Belgian brand Ressence also introduced a watch face of hand-dyed indigo silk. And Harry Winston has a whole timepiece collection devoted to embossed silk dials in its *métier d'art* range.

"It's such a beautiful and unique craft," said Benjamin Chee of the Singapore-based watchmaker Celadon, which has produced watches with dials of hand-embroidered Suzhou silk since 2017. (The silk is created in Suzhou, a city in China's Jiangsu Province, which for centuries has been a center of silk weaving and embroidery.)

Founded in 2012, Celadon today offers a bespoke service that allows collectors to design their own embroidered silk-dial timepiece that includes the brand's in-house CH5 movement (\$30,000).

"Historically, the luxury goods China produced were porcelain and silk," Mr. Chee said in a video call from Singapore. "Suzhou silk is a very fine expression of silk, so I thought that would be a very good art form to incorporate into my watches because the dial is so small that it allows a high level of embroidery without being absurdly expensive."

He noted that Suzhou silk embroidery, a millenniums-old tradition, typically is done as single artworks of about 15 inches by 40 inches that are attached to a larger silk brocade backing and framed in wood. So given the small surface of a watch dial, "we had to invent many of the processes," he said.

A team of embroiderers makes the silk dials exclusively for Celadon, hand-stitching each design onto a large silk cloth, which requires about two months to complete. Each cloth accommodates eight to 10 dial designs, which are then cut out and affixed with an adhesive to a brass base before being installed in a Celadon timepiece.

Classical bird-and-flower motifs are Mr. Chee's most popular embroidery request, he said, though he has created one for himself featuring his pet dog.

While silk lends itself to customization, it presents challenges. "Within two to three years, sometimes the glue can begin to come apart from the dial or dis-

color, leading to long-term issues," he said. "Another challenge is making sure the silk doesn't peel off from the dial base. The adhesive was a tricky formula that took many iterations to perfect."

Mr. Chee is not alone in his devotion to silk. Some of the most notable examples of silk watch dials — according to Alexandre Ghotbi, deputy chairman and head of watches for Europe and the Middle East at Phillips auction house — have been produced by Christian Klings, an independent watchmaker in Dresden, Germany.

"In the past 10 years, we've had a few of Klings' watches pop up at auction," Mr. Ghotbi said. These pieces, from separate private collections, included a 40-millimeter white gold manual-winding model with a champagne silk dial that sold for \$251,400 in November 2023, and a 40.5-millimeter pink-gold wristwatch with a textured blue silk dial, which fetched \$262,000 in May 2022.

Mr. Klings made very few watches, Mr. Ghotbi said: "They were all custom and he's now retired. So today, if one comes on the secondary market, they do very well."

Another perhaps unexpected material for a watch dial is leather. Philippe Delhot, the creative director of Hermès Horloger, said the company was the first to use leather marquetry in watchmaking — a project initiated in 2016 that produced the Arceau Cavales timepiece in 2017.

"For a long time we were working with enamel, wood marquetry, engraving and many other crafts, but never with leather before," Mr. Delhot said in a video call from Hermès Horloger's headquarters in Brugg, Switzerland.

The French luxury house, known for its leather goods, transferred its skills and adapted its tools for producing leather straps to develop dials of leather marquetry and mosaic. (Marquetry is created with very thin pieces of leather, fitted together with no gaps, like a puzzle. At Hermès, two craftsmen create the mosaics using small cubes of leather in what the company considers a trade secret.)

This mosaic technique is showcased on the brand's new Arceau 18-3-7 watch, a model that honors the 1837 founding date of the house as well as an archival silk scarf named 18-3-7, designed by Geoff McFetridge.

"Very often, we take inspiration from the silk scarves, and this particular scarf

I really loved when I saw it because it paid tribute to the equestrian universe of the maison," Mr. Delhot said. The 41-millimeter self-winding white gold timepiece is limited to 24 pieces, each \$45,000, and features a leather marquetry dial depicting a horse race.

Leather marquetry also embellishes the brand's Arceau Pocket Aaaaargh!, a pocket watch inspired by the Hermès Aaaaargh! silk scarf designed by the British artist Alice Shirley. The 48-millimeter white gold model was produced in two one-off pieces, each accented with a cover that features a Tyrannosaurus motif of leather marquetry and mosaic — one rendered in green shades, the other in reds.

Much like silk, leather requires special steps to preserve its longevity. Hermès uses anti-reflection and anti-UV crystals on models with leather dials to keep the leather from discoloring. The brand also ensures each case is water-resistant to a depth of nearly 100 feet.

Last year, Hublot offered a leather dial model in collaboration with the luxury men's wear brand Berluti, headquartered in Paris. Limited to 150 pieces and exclusive to Japan, the 44-millimeter Big Bang Unico Berluti Nero Grigio Ceramic featured Berluti's signature Venezia leather on the dial surrounded by a polished black titanium bezel. It followed a partnership in 2021 on the 44-millimeter Big Bang Unico Berluti Aluminium (\$25,200), which featured Venezia leather treated with Aluminium, one of Berluti's signature patinas, on the dial as well as the polished titanium bezel.

It was not the first time that Hublot had incorporated unusual materials into its watches. The brand has produced models with dials of linen, velvet and tweed, a lineup that began in 2013 with the Big Bang Jeans, featuring a dial and strap of Italian denim.

"With any fabric, you have lots of small elements that could separate from the dial and limit the functionality of the hands," said Raphaël Nussbaumer, the chief product and purchasing officer at Hublot. "It's a challenge, but these models have been a great success."

Looking ahead, will Hublot continue to produce watches with fabric dials? "We are discussing a new kind of fabric style," Mr. Nussbaumer said. "It could take one or two years; we don't know yet." The appeal of these models, he added, lies in their uniqueness and the handicraft that goes into each design.



“I think, for consumers, it’s a disruptive approach that is modern and speaks to all people, both women and men,” he said. “We are thinking about imagining new kinds of fabrics in the future, because our customers love them.”



Face time

Clockwise from far left: a Hermès Arceau Pocket Aaaaargh!, a pocket watch with a cover that features a Tyrannosaurus motif of leather marquetry and mosaic; a Celadon Celestial Duo of Swallows watch with a silk dial; and a Ressence Type 8 Indigo watch with a dial of hand-dyed indigo silk.





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