

DEPARTURES

March 30, 2010

The Art of Fixing Watches

By Mark Van De Walle

As watches get more complicated, so does fixing them.

The screws look like bits of dust on velvet, with heads so fine that it's barely possible to fit a hair in the slot; the weights that load the spring arm are tiny ringlets of metal about the size of a couple of fingerprint ridges. The mechanical watches they're part of, no matter how big and chunky their cases may be, are incredibly sensitive. They can gain or lose minutes depending on how they're wound, or how quickly the owner swings his arm while he walks. They can change because of temperature, or because of how they're positioned at night. And magnetic fields, like airport metal detectors, can cause them to stop working altogether, springs and gears frozen against one another.

"One client brought in an old Cartier ring watch," says Dimitrie Vicovanu, owner and master repairman at Masters of Time in New York. "She would bring it in to me to be repaired, and I would fix it, and weeks later she would be back. Finally I thought about what she could be doing, and I realized that"—Vicovanu's fingers curl around and punch the keys of an imaginary BlackBerry—"the phone was magnetizing the watch!"

The story is an illustration of just how complex and delicate the mechanisms Vicovanu deals with really are. It's also an indication of the kind of detective work that makes him more than just another watch repairman, and why places like Sotheby's watch and clock department send their most difficult cases to him.

Vicovanu didn't start out as a watchmaker—he trained, at first in his native Romania, and then in Italy and Switzerland, as an art restoration expert. At the tiny shop in Manhattan's tumultuous Diamond District, where he's been for the last 21 years, he has books filled with photographs of his projects from those days: tables whose mother-of-pearl inlays, only millimeters thick, he had to cut anew; Chinese terracotta horses whose heads he re-created; Japanese netsuke carved out of ivory with such detail that he had to match the weave of threads in a fisherman's robe.

Now he turns those same skills to tasks like reproducing the grain of metal on the inside of a Patek Philippe, or invisibly replacing the chipped enamel on the face of a Cartier from the thirties. Ideally a watch would have all original parts, but when that's not possible, "the goal is to have your repair be invisible, to match things so that it looks like nothing was done to it," says Vicovanu.

Doing this kind of work takes more than just motor control, he explains; it's an ongoing research project as well. Vicovanu has books and catalogues going back for decades so that he can at least see pictures of the originals. To repair a one-of-a-kind Cartier Mystery clock whose base was carved from a single piece of stone, he had to look back to the archives to figure out how to open the piece. "After that there wasn't any more information," he says, "so once I got it open, I was on my own."

When asked if he has a particular favorite to work on, Vicovanu answers without hesitation: "The Cartier pieces from the thirties. They had the finest jewelry for the exterior and the finest workings on the interior. And everything handmade. A perfect combination." But, he says, it's not just the high-end projects that appeal to him. He had one client come in with a relatively new watch—an Omega self-winding style from the fifties—with all the parts badly corroded. It belonged to the client's father, who had gone down in the ocean during a plane crash, and the piece had been retrieved later. It wasn't worth that much money, but to the new owner the watch was priceless. "Bringing a watch like that back," Vicovanu says, "is very special, too."

Prices vary according to the age of the timepiece and its complexity. For a basic watch, one that only tells time, Vicovanu charges \$175 for a cleaning, which means taking the watch apart, cleaning all the parts, removing the old oil, reassembling it, and recalibrating the timing. He recommends a full cleaning at least once every three to four years. If the piece has a complication, like a chronograph, prices begin at \$500. The costs can go higher, too, depending on whether new parts have to be made. Vicovanu will provide an estimate before he does any work. Masters of Time is at 15 W. 47th St., Booth 8 (212-354-8463; mastersoftime.com).