

SPECIAL REPORT: WATCHES

# Lip: A Symbol of France

By Alice Pfeiffer

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MARRAKESH, MOROCCO — From the day in 1867 that Emmanuel Lipmann opened a watchmaking workshop in Besançon, France, the turbulent history of the Lip brand has reflected the ups and downs of France, including moments of glory, pioneering technological breakthroughs, economic failure and resurrection.

Once a national symbol and later the stage for a historic workers' revolt, it is now finding a new place in contemporary watchmaking, blending the company's classical models, skill and technology-driven vision with youthful, cutting-edge design.

Since its beginnings, Lip has been a technological pioneer: In 1904, Mr. Lipmann developed the first phosphorescent dial in collaboration with Pierre and Marie Curie.

The company also developed a number of state-of-the-art chronometers; created the first electric watches in the 1950s; and was the first to introduce quartz technology in France. A soaring success, the company was considered a symbol of France, especially after Charles de Gaulle gave Winston Churchill a Lip watch in 1948.

Its visionary approach also applied to the design and marketing of watches: It was the first watchmaker to advertise, in 1908 and it was the first to work with freelance designers as watches suddenly went from being practical objects to being “beautiful objects to wear,” according to Lip's current president, Jean-Luc Bernerd.

Designers like Roger Talon, Jean Din Vanh and the colorist Prince François de Baschmakoff all brought a modern look to the watch, especially Mr. Baschmakoff's design of a mechanical timepiece with a digital display.

This avant-garde spirit extended to management and workers' rights at Lip: The company introduced paid vacations and allowed members of the staff to be paid while continuing their training. But such ideals did not weather the crisis that hit Lip with the arrival of Japanese quartz watches and low-priced products by the U.S. giant Timex.

“Lip was having a difficult time convincing its various associates to fund its development and its quartz research,” said Marie-Emilie Sapin, head of communications for the company, and “as sales kept dropping, the need for funding kept growing.”

The company entered a downward spiral.

Budget cuts, including reductions in workers’ salaries, resulted in growing discontent and many strikes. Workers’ unrest culminated in now-legendary events: In 1973, during a meeting with Lip’s work council, in which the employees were informed of a potential voluntary bankruptcy, some workers ripped the briefcase out of a director’s hand and discovered that the company was in fact planning to dismiss 480 of its 1,300 workers.

This led to the overnight sequestration of several managers and to an occupation of the company for 57 days. During this period, workers seized 65,000 watches, which they sold to make up for their loss of income. They also tried to put their own self-management team in place, proclaiming, “We produce, we sell, we pay ourselves.”

While management struggled to find a solution to the dispute, no deal suitable to both sides could be found. In the end, the authorities halted the workers’ takeover, and soon afterward, Lip declared bankruptcy. Despite various attempts to revive it, the company closed two years later.

“A dark period followed, where the company was passed from hand to hand,” Ms. Sapin said, referring to the various attempts to revive the company and brand.

Then, in 1990, Jean-Claude Sensemat, an industrialist from the Gers Department in southwest France, bought the company and moved it to his region, vowing that “Lip shall never die.”

Lip’s current president, Mr. Bernerd, said, “The aim today is to re-engage with the people who remember the events of 1973, but also make a younger generation aware of the brand’s patrimony.”

Production is now spread from Europe to Asia, with movements produced in Japan and Switzerland.

Lip is focusing on updating and rereleasing its classics, like the model once worn by de Gaulle, to be represented at Baselworld 2012, an international watch industry exhibition, revised as an automatic watch rather than keeping its original quartz and electronic system. Its T18 is also being introduced as extra-large and marketed as a unisex design.

True to its tradition, Lip, for the first time in 38 years, is commissioning designers to create their own Lip watches. A recent example includes a collaboration with the Moroccan designer Hicham Lahlou, who produced a watch with two curved needles that form a classical Arabic motif when they meet.

“This strengthens a little-known tie between Lip and Morocco,” Mr. Lahlou said. In 1933, Sultan Moulay Youssef ben Hassan, great-grandfather of the current king, Mohammed IV, was invited by President Albert Lebrun of France to visit Lip’s factories.

Having created a line of women’s watches in 2009, Mr. Lahlou will present men’s watches at Baselworld.