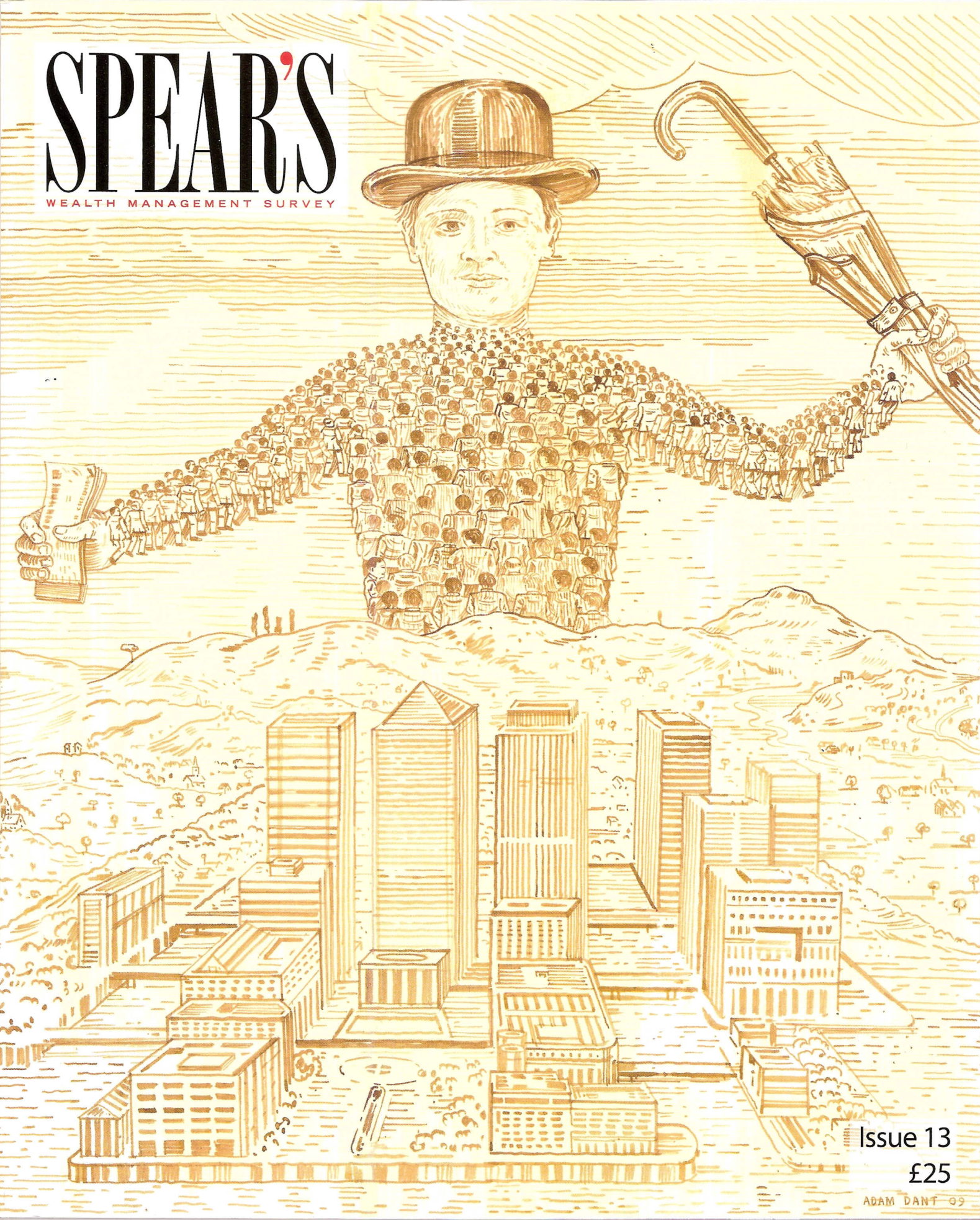


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WEALTH MANAGEMENT SURVEY



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TWENTIETH CENTURY OF YOU



TICKING OVER NICELY

Ten years ago Richard Mille initiated a French Revolution in Swiss watchmaking — one that shows no sign of winding down, says James Gurney

The debut of Richard Mille's eponymous watch label in 2000 was the spark that ignited the luxury-watch boom of this decade. He, however, blames the support of friend and collaborator Laurent Picciotto, the owner of Chronopassion, Paris's most beguiling trove of fine watches.

Taking the train to Paris just for lunch seemed to be pushing the limits of indulgence in a not very 2009 way, but Richard Mille is a phenomenon in the watch business and always excellent company. Besides, the point was to talk with him and Picciotto about the idea they hatched over many lunches in Paris, so Alain Ducasse's restaurant at the Plaza Athénée seemed a perfectly reasonable rendezvous.

Normally, freewheeling is neither a watch-making term nor a word that applies to your average guardian of the highest traditions of horology, but it does capture Picciotto (aka 'Lou Lou') and Mille's style. Ask any of the current generation of independent makers and brands, from Urwerk to Max Busser and Lionel Ladoire, and they will happily acknowledge the fillip that Mille's arrival on the scene gave to their own ambitions. Mille demonstrated that the world was ready for watches that went beyond the traditional limits in technique, ambition, style and price.

How this project came about, though, is a product of place and time. While the Swiss watch houses were following conservative (and successful) paths, the undoubted genius for luxury that infects Paris prompted Mille to think in new directions. It was in 1999, during the process of leaving Mauboussin on Place Vendôme, that Mille began a series of discussions with Picciotto about a new watch project.

'Lou Lou is a phenomenon, a mercenary, controversial and instinctive,' says Mille. Picciotto was also a retailer of some genius who had built a clientele that came to him for the charm, surprise and challenge he presented. 'But there is certain complicity between us; I still work in an atmosphere close to the early stages of RM. We were far from the Swiss way of working, with meetings, agenda and rules. This is not our style. We go for lunch, power-nap, then start working. There is no inertia. It is a melting pot of concepts, combining technique and architecture.'

Which is all very well and a great advert for the value of lunch, but more importantly Mille and Picciotto understood that they needed to come up with an approach to designing





*Opposite: Richard Mille, watch-making phenomenon.
Left: Mille and Laurent Picciotto proudly display their latest creation*

watches that was not just more relaxed than the Swiss way but also genuinely different and better. As Picciotto put it: 'When Richard came to see me to say that he wanted to create his own brand I told him, "You are crazy, but it would be an interesting premise to create a brand that is beyond what we already know and is beyond the standards we already know." I knew we had to aim for the truly excellent.'

Admirable sentiment became concrete when Mille approached Renaud & Papi (a sort of McLaren or Cosworth of the watch-making world) with his ideas. This company was used to seeing new brands arriving, but before being bought by Audemars Piguet they expected to generate their own ideas and wait to see who would buy, so they were not really in step with what the world beyond was looking for or was prepared to buy. Mille's approach was completely different. He came with very precise and demanding challenges — though the process was not purely a one-way street.

'The adventure was rewarding for Renaud & Papi because this time instead of having someone saying, "You do it and then we will take what we like," it was "let's compare our ideas and come up with a joint specification". Also, we like to play it smart. At some point, when they said it would cost a fortune, we replied, "We do not care." But then obviously the moment came when we had to pay, and at that point maybe Richard more than me had a doubt. He said that if we do this we will create a model that is amazing but

extremely expensive compared to the market — a Breguet Tourbillon is sold at €80,000 whereas an RM Tourbillon will cost €170,000. Going back would have been a compromise... Besides, I think that a watch that has no history but is an extraordinary object is better than the opposite.'

Rewinding back to the Basel fair in 2000, when the watch was first shown to the wider world, it is almost impossible to re-create the impact it had. Here was a virtual unknown who wanted to sell a tourbillon for double the amount that Breguet would ask and, more than that, he would happily demonstrate its robustness, built in with Renaud & Papi's help, by throwing it against the wall. Everyone wanted to see the mad Frenchman and, by the end of the fair, Mille had an order book that he would take years to complete.

The rest is a history that has seen Mille become a much revered, if wilfully unpredictable, character in the business — how many watch-makers do you know who get asked for autographs? Too inventive for either his production capacity or his audience ever to catch up entirely, Mille affects a blasé approach to marketing, which in his case is more about expectation control than drumming up interest. What this really means is that he has belief, charm and humour enough that you never want to think you are being sold to. 'Mille bravos,' as his friend Lou Lou says. *J*

Richard Mille opened in Harrods this summer