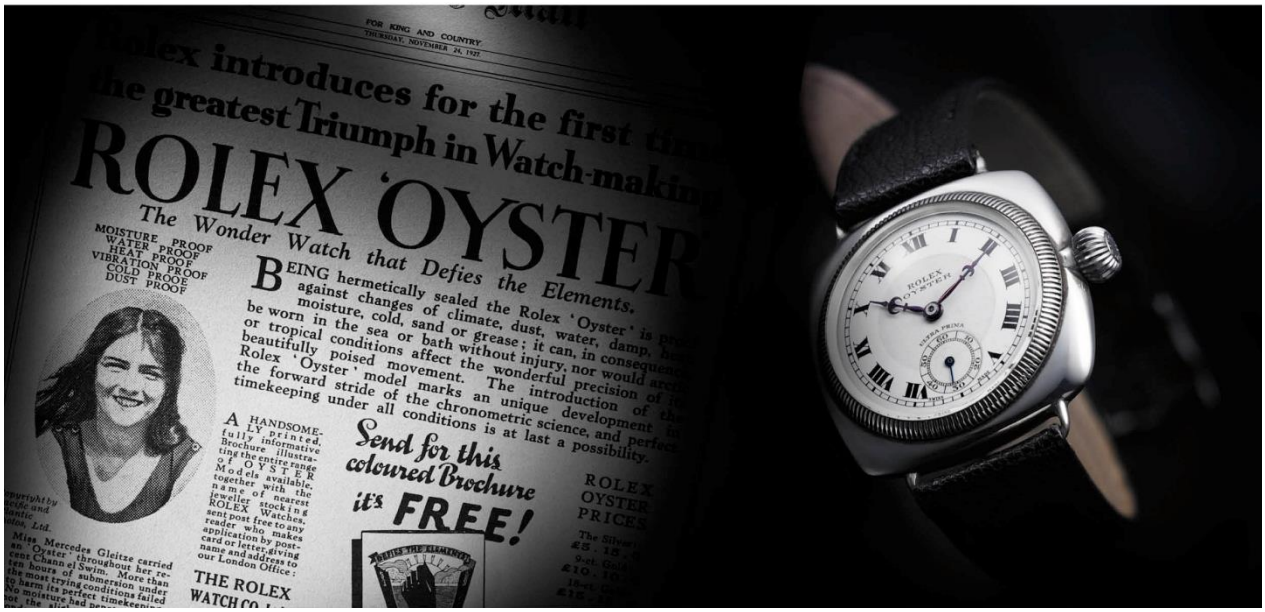
ROLEX



HISTORY OF ROLEX

Rolex's status and identity are products of a history driven by a passion for innovation and a constant quest for excellence. A succession of pioneering achievements encompassing a watchmaking, industrial and human adventure, this story is interwoven with the history of the Oyster, the first waterproof wristwatch. Launched in 1926, the Oyster was the starting point for a collection of legendary watches.

The success of Rolex is inextricably linked to the extraordinary spirit of enterprise of its founder, Hans Wilsdorf (1881-1960). Through his visionary genius and uncommon capacity to embrace all fields of the company's activities – technology, communication, organization and distribution – and as the head of the company for more than 50 years, Hans Wilsdorf set the course for an adventure which has given rise to exceptional watches and an unparalleled brand. Today, his personality and his work continue to inspire the company and permeate its corporate culture. The entrepreneur's influence is also evident in the aesthetics and principal characteristics of the watches that remain faithful to the original Oyster, as well as in Rolex's ability to draw on its prodigious heritage to continuously advance towards new horizons.

HANS WILSDORF AND HIS VISIONARY GENIUS

The Rolex adventure began in the early 1900s. Born in Bavaria, Germany, Hans Wilsdorf started his career in watchmaking in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland. In an era when pocket watches were the order of the day, he was quick to see the potential of the wristwatch for the 20th century, despite their not yet being very precise and being generally considered to be items of jewellery of particular appeal to women.

Hans Wilsdorf foresaw that the wristwatch was destined to become an everyday object – for men as well as for women – provided that he could prove it to be a precise, waterproof, robust and reliable instrument. His stroke of genius was to anticipate this evolution, which is now taken for granted.

CHRONOMETRIC PRECISION AND WATERPROOFNESS

In 1905, when living in London – then the economic and financial capital of the world – Hans Wilsdorf founded with his partner the firm Wilsdorf & Davis specializing in the distribution of wristwatches in Great Britain and the British Empire. The watch components were produced by Swiss partners selected for their expertise. Among them was the Maison Aegler in Bienne, which would eventually become the Manufacture des Montres Rolex S.A. Hans Wilsdorf regarded it as the only manufacturer at the time able to produce the small, precise movements he needed for his wristwatches. Observing the remarkable rise in leisure time and the practice of sports, Hans Wilsdorf wanted to prove to a still sceptical public that wristwatches and chronometric precision were compatible.

In 1910, a Rolex wristwatch – Hans Wilsdorf had invented the name 'Rolex' to sign his creations in 1908 – obtained the first certificate in the world granted to such a watch by the Official Watch Rating Centre in Bienne, Switzerland. Four years later, in 1914, a different Rolex model received from the prestigious Kew Observatory in England the first 'Class A' certificate accorded to a wristwatch, a

distinction until then reserved for marine chronometers. This was proof that wristwatches and chronometric precision could go hand in hand. The next challenge was waterproofness. The precision of a wristwatch would be seriously compromised if its case did not keep out water and dust. Hans Wilsdorf would once again draw on his spirit of enterprise and his energy to make the wristwatch waterproof.

THE INVENTION OF THE NAME 'ROLEX'

Foreseeing the importance of the brand concept, Hans Wilsdorf decided very early on to use the name of his choice to sign his creations. The criteria he used to come up with the name 'Rolex' still sound very modern today. He sought a name that would be:

- short, five letters maximum;
- easy to pronounce in any language;
- pleasant sounding;
- easy to remember;
- possible to inscribe elegantly on the dial and movement of his watches.

A SPIRIT OF ENTERPRISE WITHOUT BORDERS

Hans Wilsdorf left England in 1919 to settle in Geneva, Switzerland, where he founded Montres Rolex S.A. in 1920. This brought him closer to his supplier in Bienne and allowed him to optimize their collaboration. The international reputation of Geneva and its venerable watchmaking tradition also played an important role in his decision.

OYSTER: THE FIRST WATERPROOF WRISTWATCH

In 1926, Hans Wilsdorf's efforts to achieve waterproofness proved successful with the unveiling of the Oyster, the first waterproof wristwatch in the world. Thanks to an ingenious patented system consisting of a screw-down bezel, case back and winding crown, the case was hermetically sealed, thereby offering optimal protection for the movement.

The fluting of the bezel and the case back served a functional purpose. It was used to screw these components onto the middle case with a specific tool invented by Rolex. The fluting also gave the watch its visual identity and unique personality. Today, the bezels on watches in the Oyster Perpetual collection are no longer screwed down onto the case. However, the bezels on some models still feature the characteristic fluting, which has become one of the brand's signature aesthetic styles.

Thanks to the Oyster and its totally innovative waterproof case, Rolex stepped firmly into watchmaking history. In addition to the know-how Hans Wilsdorf demonstrated, his keen sense of communication gave the company an admirable head start.

BIRTH OF THE TESTIMONEE CONCEPT

In 1927, Hans Wilsdorf showed his creative skill for communication in spectacular fashion. He decided to test the Oyster by subjecting it to an ordeal that would prove its robustness and demonstrate that it was waterproof. That year, equipped with an Oyster watch, a young Englishwoman named Mercedes Gleitze swam the English Channel. After more than 10 hours, the watch emerged from the water in perfect working order. To celebrate the feat and make Rolex expertise widely known, Hans Wilsdorf published an advertisement on the front page of the *Daily Mail* proclaiming the success of the waterproof watch and announcing “the triumphant march of the Rolex Oyster around the world”.

This event marked the birth of the Testimonee concept and the beginning of a long and fruitful association between Rolex and exceptional personalities whose accomplishments bear witness to the excellence of Rolex watches. These privileged ties went on to develop in fields as varied as exploration, sports and culture. They are based on a strong relationship of trust between the brand and its Testimonees.

THE PERPETUAL ROTOR

As long as a wristwatch had to be wound – daily – by hand, its crown had to be unscrewed, compromising its waterproofness and therefore its precision. To remedy this, Rolex developed the Perpetual rotor, a self-winding system with a free rotor for the wristwatch. Patented by the brand in 1931, it was the precursor of contemporary self-winding systems.

The Perpetual rotor consists of a half-moon-shaped oscillating weight that rotates whenever the wearer moves their wrist, winding the mainspring. This innovation provides the watch with constant and stable energy, thereby maintaining its precision. As the winding crown is now only used to set functions or to wind the movement manually if it ever stops, it spends the majority of the time screwed down. The Perpetual rotor therefore contributes to the waterproofness of the watch, while at the same time making it more convenient to wear by freeing the wearer from the need to manually wind the movement.

THE ROLEX CROWN AND ROLESOR

Two other fundamental elements of the brand's identity emerged in the 1930s: the Rolex crown and Rolesor.

The Rolex crown, the logo of the brand, was registered in 1931. It appeared for the first time on Rolex dials during the 1930s, then on the winding crown in the early 1950s, when it also began to replace the 12 o'clock hour marker on the dials.

In 1933 the name 'Rolesor' was registered to designate the combination of two different materials, gold and steel, on a Rolex watch. This was first used by Rolex in the 1920s and has since become one of the brand's distinctive aesthetic characteristics.

EMBLEMATIC WATCHES

In the 1940s and 1950s, Rolex created watches that would very rapidly become timeless classics of the Oyster Perpetual collection.

The year 1945 saw the launch of the Oyster Perpetual Datejust, the first self-winding waterproof chronometer wristwatch to indicate the date in a window on the dial. A watch of great distinction, equipped with a fluted bezel and a specially created Jubilee bracelet, the Datejust was immediately recognizable. Initially designed for men, various versions became available for women in the course of the following decade.

In 1956 the Oyster Perpetual Day-Date made its debut. It was the first calendar wristwatch to display, in addition to the date, the day of the week spelt out in full in a window on the dial. Available only in 18 ct gold or 950 platinum, its crystal featured a Cyclops lens for easy reading of the date. This innovation, another Rolex mark of distinction, was later extended to other models in the Oyster Perpetual collection that displayed the date. Worn by many of the world's political figures, directors and visionaries, the Day-Date is instantly recognizable, in particular thanks to its emblematic President bracelet, which was created specially for the watch,

THE WORLD AS A PROVING GROUND

As of 1926 and the invention of the Oyster, the world became a proving ground for Rolex to validate the intrinsic qualities of its watches under real conditions. By entrusting them to intrepid explorers, wherever extreme conditions prevail, on the seas or in the depths of the oceans, on the highest mountain tops or in polar regions, Rolex has continuously been able to test the precision, waterproofness, robustness and reliability of its timepieces.

Speed is another area of experimentation for the brand. In 1935, at the wheel of his car *Bluebird*, an Oyster watch on his wrist, Sir Malcolm Campbell became the first driver to break the 300-mile-per-hour (483 km/h) barrier. In 1947, Charles Elwood 'Chuck' Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier, at the controls of a rocket-powered aircraft, was also wearing an Oyster. In both cases, the watch was subjected to extremely fast acceleration and strong vibrations without suffering any negative effects.

From the 1930s, Rolex watches were worn on numerous Himalayan expeditions. In 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, members of a British expedition equipped with Rolex watches and led by Sir John Hunt, were the first to reach the summit of Mount Everest. The two men joined the list of extraordinary people who, by their perseverance and will to achieve, demonstrate qualities that are highly valued by Rolex.

DEVELOPING THE PROFESSIONAL WATCHES

As part of the close relationship with the world around us and the emergence of new areas of endeavour such as civil aviation and underwater exploration, in the 1950s Rolex developed 'Professional' tool-watches. These timepieces featured particularly useful characteristics for activities in demanding and often extreme environments that required robust and reliable equipment.

The series began in 1953 with the Oyster Perpetual Explorer, created following the first ascent to the summit of Everest, and the Oyster Perpetual Submariner divers' watch, guaranteed waterproof to a depth of 100 metres (330 feet), then to 200 metres (660 feet) in 1954, and equipped with a rotatable graduated bezel to display immersion time.

In 1955, Rolex launched the Oyster Perpetual GMT-Master, a watch capable of displaying both the local time and the time in a different place in the world simultaneously thanks to its additional 24-hour hand and rotatable 24-hour graduated bezel. It became the official watch of Pan American World Airways, the celebrated American airline better known as Pan Am.

In 1956, Rolex presented the Oyster Perpetual Milgauss, designed to resist magnetic fields. This model was worn by scientists at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva.

Rolex watches continued to be associated with major exploits. In 1960, in the Pacific Ocean south-west of Guam, the bathyscaphe *Trieste*, piloted by Swiss oceanographer Jacques Piccard and U.S. Navy Lieutenant Don Walsh, descended 10,916 metres (35,814 feet) into the Mariana Trench, the

deepest point of the oceans. Attached to the exterior, an experimental Rolex watch, the Deep Sea Special, withstood the colossal pressure equivalent to a weight of more than one tonne per square centimetre. When the bathyscaphe returned to the surface, the watch was found to have kept perfect time – proof that it had kept working for the entire dive.

In 1963, Rolex introduced the Oyster Perpetual Cosmograph Daytona. This watch, equipped with a mechanical chronograph movement, can be used to measure time intervals or calculate average speeds thanks to the tachymetric scale on the bezel.

In 1967, the brand introduced the Oyster Perpetual Sea-Dweller. Waterproof to a depth of 610 metres (2,000 feet), this watch was designed to meet the needs of professional deep-sea divers. The case was equipped with a helium escape valve, patented by Rolex the same year, so that during divers' decompression phases in hyperbaric chambers, excess pressure built up in the watch case could be released.

MATURITY AND CONSOLIDATION

The year 1960 was marked by the death of Hans Wilsdorf, who left a considerable legacy. In Geneva in 1945, he had created the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation, which became the owner of the company. Rolex could therefore pursue its expansion and perpetuate its founder's values with total independence.

André J. Heiniger, who succeeded Hans Wilsdorf in 1963, took over the reins of Rolex, continuing his legacy. With the benefit of vast experience in the field, this true commercial strategist accelerated the development of the company and reinforced the presence of Rolex worldwide, transforming it into a renowned international watch brand.

In 1968, Rolex created the Cellini collection, which brought together all the non-Oyster Perpetual dress watches offered by the brand over the years. The name Cellini was inspired by the great Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini, sculptor and goldsmith to the popes. A name that befittingly evokes the refined classicism of these elegant timepieces.

With the arrival of quartz in the late 1960s, Rolex participated actively in the development of the first Swiss quartz movement, the Beta 21. In 1977, it launched the Oysterquartz model equipped with a 100 per cent Rolex quartz movement. But the company dismissed the promise of this new technology and made the strategic choice to remain faithful to the mechanical watch, its domain of excellence.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the dawn of a second generation of Oyster Perpetual Professional watches. In 1971, Rolex presented the Oyster Perpetual Explorer II. Dedicated to polar explorers and speleologists, this watch allowed the wearer to distinguish daytime hours from night-time hours thanks to its additional 24-hour hand and fixed 24-hour graduated bezel. In 1978, a new version of the Sea-Dweller appeared – the Sea-Dweller 4000 – waterproof to a depth of 1,220 metres (4,000 feet). And, in 1982 Rolex released the GMT-Master II – distinguished from the GMT-Master thanks to its movement, which enables the hour hand to be set independently of the minute and 24-hour hands.

PIONEERING PARTNERSHIPS AND A COMMITMENT TO A BETTER WORLD

The 1960s and 1970s gave rise to pioneering partnerships between Rolex and institutions, exceptional sports personalities, and world-famous artists. These privileged ties contributed to the emergence of cultural and sports sponsorship.

In 1976, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Oyster, André J. Heiniger created the Rolex Awards for Enterprise. These prizes provide financial support to individuals who seek new ways to increase knowledge of our world and improve the quality of life on our planet.

VERTICAL INTEGRATION

The year 1992 heralded the arrival of the Oyster Perpetual Yacht-Master, a watch that embodied the privileged ties forged between Rolex and the world of sailing since the 1950s. The Oyster Perpetual Pearlmaster, designed specifically for women, was also presented.

That same year, Patrick Heiniger succeeded his father at the head of Rolex. In the mid-1990s, under his guidance, Rolex radically changed its structure and made the strategic choice of vertical integration, purchasing its principal suppliers in order to maintain its independence and entrepreneurial freedom. This step was accompanied by a decision to group all of its activities in Geneva and Bienne on four industrial sites specifically built or remodelled for the purpose. Impressive in size, these sites are technological watchmaking gems. Rolex thus ensured control over the production of all the main elements of its watches – movement, case, bracelet and dials – while at the same time giving itself the means to take its passion for quality even further, thanks to exclusive equipment.

Independent and vertically integrated, Rolex was now equipped with exceptional industrial facilities in which designers, engineers, watchmakers and other specialists could work in close collaboration on the design and manufacture of the watches. Within this context, the company also decided to install a foundry in which it could create its own gold alloys.

SUPPORTING THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

In 2002, at the behest of Patrick Heiniger, the brand created the Rolex Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative to encourage the development of arts and culture around the world. This initiative supports promising young artists by pairing them with a renowned master in their discipline for a period of mentoring and creative collaboration. Thanks to the enriching dialogue between artists of different generations, cultures and disciplines, the brand helps to ensure that the world's artistic heritage is passed on.

A NEW ERA FOR THE OYSTER

From the early 2000s, the spectacular reorganization of the production facilities propelled the Oyster Perpetual watches into a new era. Combining more than ever traditional watchmaking expertise and cutting-edge technology, innovations were introduced for watch architecture as well as materials and manufacturing processes.

In 2000, Rolex launched a new Oyster Perpetual Cosmograph Daytona, a true distillation of expertise. From then on, the model benefitted from a new chronograph movement that was entirely developed and produced in-house, and equipped with a Parachrom hairspring manufactured by Rolex. This composite of niobium, zirconium and oxygen has the advantage of being up to 10 times more precise than a traditional hairspring in case of shocks and is insensitive to magnetic fields. The Parachrom hairspring will be progressively introduced to movements on the majority of large diameter watches in the Oyster Perpetual collection.

In 2005, Rolex launched a new Oyster Perpetual GMT-Master II. Subtly redesigned, this watch was also equipped with a Parachrom hairspring and featured a bezel with a Cerachrom insert in black ceramic, another innovation patented by Rolex. Entirely developed and manufactured in-house, the Cerachrom insert is made of extremely hard, virtually scratchproof ceramics whose colours are unaffected by ultraviolet rays. In addition, thanks to its chemical composition, the high-tech ceramic is inert and cannot corrode.

In 2007, the Oyster Perpetual Milgauss, a watch designed to resist magnetic fields, was relaunched. The movement in the new Milgauss was protected by a magnetic shield, just like the 1956 version, and also featured the Parachrom hairspring and a paramagnetic nickel-phosphorus escape wheel. Aesthetically, the Milgauss stands out with its orange seconds hand shaped like a lightning bolt, which was inspired by the original model. One of the new versions of the watch also features a green sapphire crystal, a first for watchmaking.

Rolex continued to innovate in terms of watch functions. Also presented in 2007, the Oyster Perpetual Yacht-Master II regatta chronograph was the first watch in the world equipped with a programmable countdown with a mechanical memory that can be synchronized on the fly. The countdown's programming and setting functions are accessed via the rotatable bezel and the winding crown thanks to Ring Command, a system of interaction between the case and movement developed and patented by Rolex.

The launch, in 2008, of the Oyster Perpetual Rolex Deepsea, waterproof to the extreme depth of 3,900 metres (12,800 feet), illustrates Rolex expertise in waterproofness. This ultra-resistant divers' watch features the Ringlock system, a case architecture developed and patented by the brand. A high-performance compression ring, placed inside the case of the watch, bears the colossal pressure exerted at great depths on the crystal – which is 5.5 mm thick – and the case back, made from a titanium alloy.

The Rolex Deepsea was the first Rolex watch equipped with the high-performance Chromalight display. The hour markers, hands and embedded capsule at 12 o'clock on the rotatable bezel are filled or coated with a luminescent material emitting a long-lasting blue glow – for up to two times longer than traditional phosphorescent materials.

CAPITALIZING ON SUCCESS

From 2009 to 2011, Bruno Meier led the brand through a transition period, after which Gian Riccardo Marini took the reins of the company. Managing Director of Rolex Italy since 2000, this connoisseur of the brand and its products brought with him some 40 years' experience within the Group.

SKY-DWELLER AND ANNUAL CALENDAR

In 2012, Rolex presented a brand-new, particularly innovative model, the Oyster Perpetual Sky-Dweller. A technological masterpiece with multiple patent applications filed over the course of its development, this classic-looking watch features an impressive 42 mm case. It offers a dual time

zone as intuitive to read as it is easy to use, as well as an innovative annual calendar named Saros – after the astronomical phenomenon of the same name – that requires only one date adjustment per year as February changes to March. Like the Yacht-Master II, it is equipped with the Ring Command system. This mechanism of interaction between the rotatable bezel, winding crown and movement, developed and patented by Rolex, allows the user to select the watch's functions – calendar (date and month), local time or reference time – by turning the fluted bezel, and then to set them using the winding crown.

ADVENTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Also in 2012, true to its passion for underwater exploration, Rolex played an active part in filmmaker (*Titanic*, *Avatar*) and explorer James Cameron's *DEEPSEA CHALLENGE* expedition, in partnership with the National Geographic Society. On 26 March 2012, James Cameron descended alone on board a submersible 10,908 metres (35,787 feet) into the Mariana Trench, the ocean's deepest point, situated in the Pacific Ocean, south-west of Guam.

An experimental model, attached to the manipulator arm of the submersible, accompanied James Cameron: the Rolex Deepsea Challenge. This divers' watch was specially developed and manufactured for the occasion, confirming Rolex's expertise in waterproofness.

Both James Cameron's dive and the Rolex Deepsea Challenge directly echo the underwater expedition of Jacques Piccard and U.S. Navy Lieutenant Don Walsh in 1960. On 23 January, aboard the Swiss-designed bathyscaphe *Trieste* and equipped with an experimental Rolex watch – the Deep Sea Special – the two men reached the extreme depth of 10,916 metres in the Mariana Trench.

THE NEW CELLINI COLLECTION

In 2014, Rolex introduced a new Cellini collection that celebrates the eternal elegance of traditional timepieces with a contemporary touch. This collection combines Rolex's know-how and high standards backed by an approach that showcases watchmaking heritage in its most timeless form.

NEW-GENERATION MECHANICAL MOVEMENTS

Starting in 2014, Rolex unveiled new-generation mechanical movements at the forefront of watchmaking technology. That year, the brand introduced its calibre 2236 (with date) featuring a Syloxi hairspring in silicon developed in-house. This movement includes innovative uses of silicon technology, such as the optimized geometry of the hairspring and an efficient design of its fixation systems. It has a power reserve of approximately 55 hours.

In 2015, Rolex launched calibre 3235 (with date) and calibre 3255 (with day and date), and in 2018 calibre 3285 was introduced (with date and second time zone). These movements are equipped with a Parachrom hairspring and incorporate the Chronergy escapement patented by Rolex, which combines high energy-efficiency with great dependability. They also benefit from a new barrel architecture. The power reserve of calibres 3235, 3255 and 3285 extends to approximately 70 hours.

In 2020, the brand presented two further new movements, designed for its watches without a date: calibre 3230, with a Parachrom hairspring and a Chronergy escapement, and calibre 2232, fitted with a Syloxi hairspring. These movements have power reserves of approximately 70 and 50 hours respectively.

Consummate demonstrations of technology, these new-generation mechanical movements are entirely developed and manufactured by Rolex and have each been the subject of multiple patent applications filed over the course of their development. They offer outstanding performance in terms of precision, power reserve, resistance to shocks and magnetic fields, convenience and reliability.

SUPERLATIVE CHRONOMETER CERTIFICATION

In 2015, Rolex redefined the Superlative Chronometer certification, its iconic in-house certification for all its watches, with more stringent performance criteria.

This exclusive Rolex certification applies to the fully assembled watch after casing the movement, guaranteeing superlative performance on the wrist in terms of precision, power reserve, waterproofness and self-winding. The precision of a Rolex Superlative Chronometer is of the order of −2/+2 seconds per day – the rate deviation tolerated by the brand for a finished watch is significantly smaller than that accepted by COSC for official certification of the movement alone. The Superlative Chronometer status, held by each Rolex watch, is symbolized by the green seal and is coupled with an international five-year guarantee.

THE TIRELESS PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

Rolex is a completely integrated and independent watchmaking company, built on uncompromising values passed on by its founder Hans Wilsdorf, with unparalleled means to continue its pursuit of perfection via its Oyster Perpetual and Cellini watches. A mission that fell to Jean-Frédéric Dufour in June 2015, when the new Chief Executive Officer took on the leadership mantle from Gian Riccardo Marini.

A respected figure in the watch industry, Jean-Frédéric Dufour is the sixth CEO to preside over the brand's destiny. Mr Dufour graduated in Commercial and Industrial Science/Economics from the University of Geneva before working in the banking industry in Hong Kong. He returned to Switzerland and began a successful career managing renowned watch brands, where he gained experience in watchmaking sales, production and marketing, as well as in product development.

In keeping with his predecessors, Jean-Frédéric Dufour aims to further reinforce Rolex's status worldwide and continue a legacy that combines tradition, prestige and technology.

Rolex and the watches in its Oyster Perpetual and Cellini collections will therefore continue to write some of the most fascinating chapters in the history of watchmaking.