

Feature

AINIE RIZVI



Is Horology's Cultural Awakening Here?

The watch world's cultural calibration feels long overdue. As Dubai Watch Week spotlights regional releases, a deeper question emerges: when maisons draw from local narratives, do they truly resonate with collectors — or merely skim the cream?

Luxury has found its most persuasive muse in regional culture, absorbing not just motifs but ways of seeing, building, and believing. Yet cultural inspiration is delicate: sometimes it lands with rare intelligence, sometimes it settles for spectacle. In watchmaking, where restraint is a virtue and permanence a promise, the line between meaningful design and decorative borrowing is sharply visible. As maisons draw from a region's soul, it is vital not only to infuse culture into watches, but also to depict what holds true meaning for collectors.

Fashion codes have long demonstrated how culture shapes structure more than surface. Recently, Prada introduced its Santal Chai fragrance, which was not merely referencing India through a name, but evoking the spiced depths of shared rituals. Similarly, Patek Philippe's Calatrava line channels European neoclassicism through its hobnail *Clous de Paris guilloché*: a disciplined geometry that echoes architectural façades rather than ornamental excess.

Perhaps, jewellery offers the clearest lessons. Cartier's Tutti Frutti collection, rooted in Mughal traditions, used carved emeralds, rubies, and sapphires to reshape Western stone-setting practices. Doing justice to cultural undercurrents, thus, became a conscious act.

CULTURE AS BLUEPRINT

The learning curve for haute horology is steeper. At the recently concluded Dubai Watch Week, cultural interpretation took centre stage with a wave of Middle Eastern exclusives. Bvlgari's Octo Finissimo collaboration with Mattar Bin Lahej integrated Arabic calligraphy into the watch's architectural language. Zenith followed with Middle East editions of the Defy Skyline, while Roger Dubuis unveiled the Hommage "Sukoon Al-Layl", an emotive tribute to night, stillness, and reflection. Together, these watches pointed to a promising direction: culture as mood, philosophy,

and spatial balance rather than literal iconography. The question remains, do their designs hit the sweet spot?

Nearer home, several releases have carried a more considered resonance for Indian collectors. While global designs continue to dominate the market, some brands have moved beyond their maker's mark to introduce subtle inflections of Indianness. Among them was Seiko's 'Made of Glory' collection, unveiled to mark India's 75th Republic Day. Draped in tricolour accents across the dial quadrant between 12 and 3, the watch was offered in two variants and reflected a measured, audience-aware approach.

Further, brands have turned to India's cultural passion points, most notably cricket. Audemars Piguet's collaboration honouring Sachin Tendulkar stands as a thoughtful, if not flawless, expression. The Royal Oak relied on discreet dial cues and calibrated colour accents that resonate deeply with those attuned to cricket fandom in India. For the initiated, these details feel personal and intimate; for others, they may verge on excess. It reminds us that cultural cues often speak best to a narrow, knowing audience.

SYMBOLISM ON DIALS

India's design ethos holds a powerful place in the global luxury imagination, inspiring brands with its depth, symbolism, and emotional resonance. Yet admiration, as ever, invites reflection on interpretation. The Jacob & Co. Epic X Ram Janmabhoomi is one such example, a timepiece that elicited diverse responses among collectors. Defined by its bold narrative intent, the watch sparked debates for the way it depicted religious symbols through watch design. Speaking to *GMT India*, watch designer and founder, Jacob Arabo shared, "We have created this piece with inputs from Ethos Watches, who guided us with relevant elements, design references, and cultural cues to help us approach it thoughtfully." While the release was closely aligned with market insights from India's premier luxury watch retailer, Ethos, at ▶▶

Left to right: Seiko 5 Sports Forest Green Sunrise - India Limited Edition, Mattar Bin Lahej x Octo Finissimo Special Edition watch



the same time, it prompted a more contemplative dialogue — is direct iconography the most resonant way to interpret a culture as layered as India's? Perhaps through symbolic gestures, such as reimagining hands as metaphors, much like Timex's Weekender, which playfully employs Snoopy's bat as a design flourish rather than a literal motif.

Could the brand have used subtler cues to convey an equally meaningful connection? A parallel can be drawn with Chopard's L.U.C XP Urushi Ganesha. The use of Japanese urushi lacquer reflects exceptional craftsmanship, and the intent to honour wisdom and auspicious beginnings is sincere. Yet here too, the direct depiction invites reflection on whether abstraction or metaphor might deepen the emotional dialogue. In watchmaking, after all, design often speaks most powerfully when it reveals itself gradually, allowing meaning to unfold with time, rather than announcing it at first glance.

CULTURE, DISTILLED IN FORM

Jacob & Co.'s broader regional efforts tell a more layered story. The Astronomia Art India, for instance, incorporates miniature figurines of the Taj Mahal, Lotus Temple, India

Gate, and Qutb Minar, monuments translated into horology's most extravagant theatre. Similarly, the Epic X Sher-e-Punjab Edition leans into bold blues and a lion motif to evoke regional pride. These watches are undeniably eye-catching and speak directly to recognisable Indian sensibilities. Yet this very approach underscores a crucial challenge: designers must move beyond assembling cultural symbols, and instead seek to capture the spirit of a region as layered and diverse as India.

This tension is hardly new. Historically, watches bearing regional accents were often commissioned as honorary gifts, by governments, royalty, or ruling families — imbued with diplomacy, storytelling, and personal narrative. Today, while the intent may remain intact, execution can falter, occasionally mistaking visual recognition for cultural resonance. In contrast, Seiko has approached India-focused editions with greater sensitivity. Its Seiko 5 Sports India Limited Editions draw inspiration from forest greens and the country's wilderness, referencing landscape rather than iconography. The lush green dials, legible layouts, and highlighted hands echo the dense canopies of the Indian subcontinent that feels more organic than declarative.

Seeking a finer balance still, Franck Muller has iterated its celebrated Vanguard line for India-focused editions in olive green, long associated with Indian jewellery and architectural detailing. The choice anchors the design with cultural intelligence and a tangible sense of place. Yet repetition carries its own risk: across brands, from Franck Muller to Hublot's Big Bang Integrated Titanium Green Limited Edition, the reliance on green begins to reveal its fragility. Rich in symbolism, the colour can quickly slip into shorthand when overused, diluting meaning where depth was originally intended.

INDIAN WATCHMAKERS RAISING THE BAR

Some of the most compelling cultural interpretations come not from global giants, but from Indian brands themselves. Delhi Watch Company's Devanagari Chronograph replaces Arabic numerals with Hindi script, moving towards linguistic intimacy. Its Havelock diver pays tribute to India's island territories and naval associations, grounding design in lived geography. Similarly, Jaipur Watch Company has carved a niche by incorporating historical Indian coins into watch dials. These timepieces blend numismatics with modern horology, allowing history itself to mark the hours. Here, culture is not referenced; it is physically embedded.

There are a handful of legacy maisons that have approached Indian cultural expression with restraint, allowing meaning to surface through design logic rather than literal imagery. Vacheron Constantin has long shown this sensitivity in its Métiers d'Art creations for India and the wider region, where hand-guilloché, enamelling, and miniature painting echo cosmology and ornamental rhythm without overt iconography. Rolex, though famously conservative, resonates with Indian sensibilities through the Day-Date in yellow gold — its gravitas, permanence, and precious-metal presence aligning with India's ceremonial relationship with gold. Completing the trio, Jaeger-LeCoultre offers a historically rooted connection through the Reverso, born of polo culture in British India; its reversible case and disciplined geometry speak to a colonial-era sporting ritual that became a timeless design code.

BEYOND SURFACE, TOWARDS SENTIMENT

The message is clear: cultural influence in luxury watchmaking must move beyond surface charm to shape form, construction, motif, and function. Designers gain more by gauging culture through context and patience, resisting political or visual shortcuts, and engaging collectors as individuals rather than markets. A watch is not merely an object, but a personal statement — a quiet assertion of identity worn against the pulse.

When brands listen, interpret, and translate rather than imitate, cultural design becomes timeless. In borrowing from a storied civilisation like India — or any region — they must seek not the loudest symbol, but the one detail that strikes the deepest chord. ■

Zenith Defy Skyline Skeleton Middle East Edition



Jaipur Watch Company - The One

