

A view of the EKSO  
Watches gallery.

# *A Parisian Showcase for the Art of Watchmaking*

NEARLY EIGHT YEARS AFTER  
OPENING HER EKSO  
WATCHES GALLERY IN THE  
8TH ARRONDISSEMENT,  
EKATERINA SOTNIKOVA  
FINDS A NICHE TO  
CELEBRATE (AND OWN!) THE  
CREATIVITY AND SCIENCE OF  
ORIGINAL, RARE TIMEPIECES

*by Devorah Lauter*

Ekaterina Sotnikova



IMAGE COURTESY: EKSO WATCHES GALLERY

When Ekaterina Sotnikova took apart one of her mechanical watches to see how its heart ticks, she found it surprisingly easy to do. Putting it back together, on the other hand, was another, more complicated story.

It quickly became clear that the Latvian-born Sotnikova would not excel at being a watchmaker, but that was never her intention. Instead, she directed her passion for watches into the creation of a rare horological art gallery, EKSO Watches Gallery, based in Paris, and became one of the minority of women with expertise in the field. Nearly eight years after its opening in 2011 she has established herself as a voice for true artists in Haute Horlogerie, whose names lack general recognition, despite regularly winning the highest awards in the industry. These are the independent watchmakers who invent and handcraft original designs and movements, often using 200-year-old techniques. They are the brains behind iconic pieces that define the grand Maisons of watchmaking, but have also struck out on their own, eager to sign their own names on the fruits of countless hours of creative output.

"They express themselves through mechanical pieces, like a painter who expresses himself

through paintings," says Sotnikova of the eight watchmakers she represents, as she sits in her 8th arrondissement gallery. "For me it's a completely artistic approach, which is where my idea came to create an horological art gallery, because nobody represents these people in Paris," she added.

From outside her gallery, it is hard to imagine what trove of rare timepieces are amassed here, which is just as Sotnikova would have it. With watches starting at 40,000 euros, and going up to about 350,000 euros, security is a concern. People who wish to view her stock of watches, which Sotnikova purchases herself, must make an appointment.

"These are true rarities, and that's what I was looking for" says Sotnikova who collected watches before she tired of seeing the industrially produced models. "I started this gallery for people like me, because you pay a lot elsewhere for luxury, but there's nothing truly unique about it," she said.

EKSO Watches Gallery is not a showcase of stone-studded excess (though jewel-lovers are not left dry), rather, the focus is on original thinking in design and mechanics, plus the story behind each creation. As a result, one piece might use gold for its inner movement, where it stays completely hidden, as with timepieces by Kari Voutilainen. Or there is

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Kari Voutilainen, "Twenty-8 GMT" (One of a kind).  
Price: €90,000 VAT excl. / €108,000 VAT incl.

the Antiqua QP by Vianney Halter, which has the look of a futuristic relic out of a Jules Verne novel, with its surprising, deconstructed dial faces elegantly joined together.

Here is an edited compilation of two recent conversations with Sotnikova:

**How did EKSQ Watches Gallery come to be?**

Once I accumulated a number of [watch] models, I wondered what to do next. There had to be things other than traditional brands. So that's why I went to Basel for the first time eight years ago. When I saw the watchmaking world in Basel, I wondered why we don't see all this in Paris. I ended up in the independent hall, and that's where I became interested, and met with real watchmakers. Here was real craftsmanship.

I felt there had to be customers for this, because there are people like me, who have already done the rounds of the classic market. So I did a horological training program in Geneva. It was a catastrophe. I'd lose screws ( they won't give you a new one). Sometimes you can take months to make a watch, and then when it's finished, it doesn't work, and we don't know why. We have to take everything apart, and put it back together again. I understood that I'd never become a watchmaker, but now I know how to explain a watch, and I learned how to respect this work, because I know that when it's made by hand, it deserves respect, and the prices don't surprise me anymore.



IMAGE COURTESY: EKSQ WATCHES GALLERY

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Ludovic Ballouard, "Half Time platinum" (White Dial)  
Price: €76,960 VAT excl. / €92'352 VAT incl.

IMAGES COURTESY: EKSQ WATCHES GALLERY



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*“If my approach had been reasonable, with a proper business plan etc., I surely would never have done it, because the pieces are expensive, and I have to buy my stock...”*

**What attracts you to these watchmakers?**

The hardest thing was choosing who to work with.

Watchmakers are profoundly passionate, and it's true that it's pretty contagious. I respect them enormously, and they are people who are deeply honest. If they cheat, the watch won't work. And this honesty can be felt in all aspects of their life. It's not just about the passion for beautiful pieces, but also for the person, their story, and for this field.

Often, my watchmakers are very bad at self-promotion and communication. Andreas Strehler is an absolute genius, but he's very modest and discreet. In 2014, he was entered into the Guinness Book of World Records, for his watch with the moon phases pre-regulated for 2.06 million years. Nobody had ever done that.

I have another watchmaker named Vianney Halter, who is also a legend. He is considered the Pope of contemporary horology, because in 1998, he created the Antiqua watch, which is very James Bond. When he presented the watch in Basel 20 years ago, people thought he was crazy. Then they stopped making fun of him, and understood he had a visionary spirit. I'm the only one in the world who distributes him, and I wear his watch, because I find it so wonderful. He's a real artist. He created Opus 3 for Harry Winston. Among my watchmakers, three have made the Opus for Harry Winston. Opus 6 was

Andreas Strehler, Opus 13 is Ludovic Ballouard.

I always say that the hardest thing in horology today is to have a good, original idea. Ludovic Ballouard can do it. In 2008, he started his own brand with the "Upside Down" watch, where all the numbers are upside down except for numbers showing the right time.

These are the Breguets of tomorrow.

**What makes an interesting watch?**

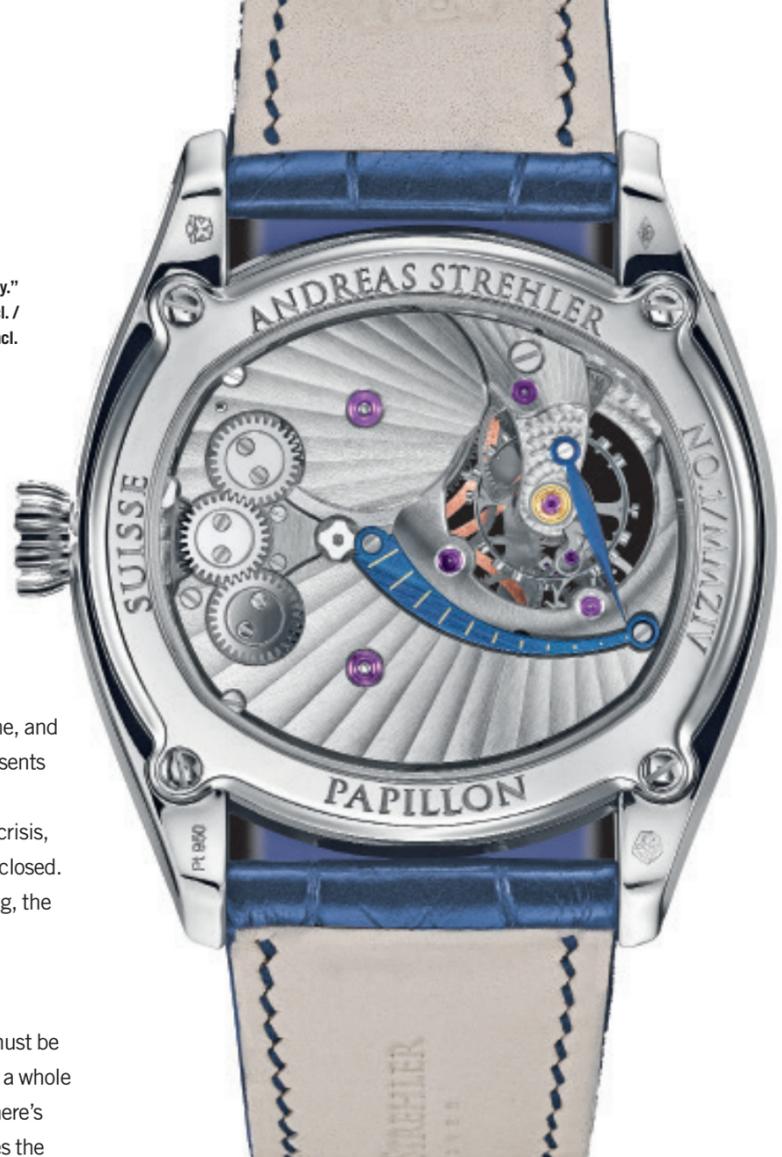
The spirit behind the creation. What pushed the watchmaker to make this piece. It's an ensemble of things: the story of the watchmaker, the story of the piece, and the quality of the finishing, the quality of execution and being made by hand.

**Is yours a difficult business to be in?**

It's pretty hard to sell independent watchmakers that people don't know. And to promote this horological culture, so that people really understand that the real watches are here, not in the big Maisons you know. They're both called watches, but it's not the same work.

If my approach had been reasonable, with a proper business plan etc., I surely would never have done it, because the pieces are expensive, and I have to buy my stock, and sometimes I buy a piece without being sure I'll be able to sell it. But that's

Andreas Strehler, "Golden Butterfly."  
Price: €113,000 VAT excl. /  
€135,600 VAT incl.



ok. That's why I say that passion guides me, and it's also probably the reason nobody represents these watchmakers in Paris.

The fact is that we're in an economic crisis, and you can feel it. A lot of resellers have closed. Most of my customers are from Hong Kong, the U.S. and abroad.

**Why do you like complicated watches?**

I don't know why I love complications. I must be complicated in my head (laughs). There's a whole world inside the small case of a watch. There's the balance wheel, which turns and makes the watch work. It's the heart of the watch. It's a living organism mechanically put together, but living, and that's what's so exciting.

**How do you experience being one of the few women in this field?**

As I woman, I didn't have much credibility in the beginning. I really had to prove that I deserved to be here. And independent watchmakers, who ferociously defend their craft, and are part of a kind of clan — they don't let just anyone come in randomly. So they looked at me with a lot of

skepticism at first, and wondered what I was doing. There are a lot of women in marketing, but there are not a lot of women who work on, and know the product. But more women are coming, and there's a new appreciation for them, because if a woman gets interested in horology, it means she knows all about it, and really loves it.

That's why women are just as welcome as men today. We're considered normal. The world of horology has become a little more feminine. I don't feel this discrimination anymore.

IMAGES COURTESY (THIS AND FACING PAGE): EKSO WATCHES GALLERY



Andreas Strehler, "Golden Butterfly." Price: €113,000 VAT excl. / €135,600 VAT incl.

**Have you seen more women customers?**

No, I still have mostly male customers, because it's true that women prefer that a watch be pretty, with diamonds, preferably, and that's usually enough for them.

The value of the watches I present is not so much in the aesthetics. It's more in the movement itself. The work of the watchmaker is of the utmost value, but you don't see it from outside the watch case. Women who are truly interested in the technical aspect remain rare. They're starting, and I think that in 10, 15 years it'll be more equal. You need only look at what the large Maisons are doing today: everyone is working on their feminine horology, so there's a real trend around this, and things are really changing.

I think manufactures are also not creative enough about it. They're satisfied to stick a few diamonds on a man's watch, to make it a woman's watch, whereas creating a real feminine complication that corresponds to women — I don't think many have discovered how. Maybe it has to be done by a woman, and for the most part, watchmakers are men. ◀