It is hard to imagine a more venerable major league luxury brand than Cartier. Since being founded in 1847 in Paris, it has amassed more aristocratic clients that any other major jewelry marque; emperors, kings, rajas and princesses. And maintained a reputation for artisanal excellence second to none. Yet, remarkably the majority of its audience and clientele is that lodestone of modern marketing – millennials.
Cartier managed to achieve that unexpected sweet spot by an atypical blend of cool classicism and artistic idiosyncrasy, contradictory forces that Cartier has somehow harnessed smoothly. It's been blessed with some great creative talent and some rather special management, from the many family members who guided Cartier for 117 years until 1964, to its current CEO Cyrille Vigneron.

Though quintessentially blue blood, the brand has always had an avant-garde artistic bent. In an era when art lovers and luxury consumers are semi-permanently wowed by the great artistic centers created by major marques – Fondation Louis Vuitton in Paris; Fondazione Prada in Milan and, starting next summer, the Bourse de Commerce Pinault Collection in Les Halles – one should not forget that the first true art foundation developed by a luxury house was the Cartier Foundation, which debuted outside Paris in 1984 in Jouy-en-Josas, before moving to its current, Jean Nouvel-designed location on Boulevard Raspail in 1993.

In the process, Fondation Cartier has built up a substantial art collection of its own, which now travels the planet; and has recently inked an eight-year partnership with La Triennale, the famed Milanese art center. Plus, next year in June in Paris, Cartier will host an exhibition of the planet's most mediatic creator Damien Hirst, with his work as a painter.

So, we caught up with Vigneron recently to find out how he keeps Cartier ticking over both creatively and commercially amid an ever more competitive market. What Cartier is really doing in terms of sustainability, and how its intensive program to renovate all its stores worldwide is proceeding. And how Cartier uses its foundations and exhibitions to interact with the new generation. But, above all, his busiest dossier – revamping the brand's retail network.

“Four years ago we decided that our overall concept had aged. A bit too stiff. Women would find Cartier boutiques too masculine and men too feminine. We actually started with Harrods – when they dedicated their ground floor to jewelry. The second thing is that luxury has evolved in the past 20 years. Today, many customers find it boring that one retail concept is replicated everywhere all over the world. "If New Bond Street looks like Montenapoleone, which looks like the Faubourg St-Honoré that looks like Ginza, then why travel?" shrugs Vigneron, over coffee at Cartier’s London flagship on Bond Street.

To his mind, at least in European cities, with magnificent buildings in great cities, you have to anchor each store in that local personality. By the end of March this year, Cartier had revamped 65 stores worldwide, many designed by architect Bruno Moinard. In its Bond Street flagship dating back a century, the Frenchman painted the dark wood of Bond Street’s interiors in mat white; developed a Ruby Salon for men with a country club mood; and hung brass and glass discs like wide-brimmed hats in the haute joaillerie second-floor. A private floor, La Résidence, is reserved for Cartier's best clients and includes a bar, kitchen, dining room and lounge area.
“Old buildings can have very long histories,” stresses Vigneron, who notes that the newly expanded UK flagship reaches all the way to Albemarle street. “But if you look at the façade it had the same red color and marble of Cartier on this street. So we actually reestablished a connection.”

Though there is a definite French touch, Cartier works with international architects, like Sir Norman Foster on the noted Cartier in Motion exhibition and with happening Spanish-French architect Laura Gonzalez. Her posh, too-much-is-never-quite-enough has won her projects with Hermès and Christian Louboutin; Cartier in Paris and Madrid, along with restaurants like Noto and Manko in Paris.

Cartier is part of the Swiss-based luxury group Richemont, which includes Van Cleef & Arpels, Montblanc, IWC, Plaget, Alfred Dunhill, Chloé, James Purdey, Azzedine Alaïa, Shanghai Tang and Yoox Net-A-Porter, which is controlled by the wealthy Rupert family of South Africa. Richemont doesn’t break out each marque’s revenues, but Cartier is estimated to turnover at over €7 billion.

Revenue is retail-dominated - via owned and directly operated stores. The house has some 300 monobrand stores, and a specialist network of 266 points of sale. It still only sells its jewelry in its monobrand stores; and, somewhat surprisingly, via e-commerce, through its cousin luxe brand Net-A-Porter, with whom it began e-tailing in 2018.

“Net-A-Porter is a very powerful media with a strong customer base. And, in terms of visibility and attraction to Cartier, it has gone very well. We see that the penetration of e-commerce goes across price points and there is more and more acceptance of expensive items,” smiled Vigneron, noting that the most expensive item sold in that collab’ was €140,000 Panther full pavé diamond watch – to a UK customer.

The new flagship contains several legendary tiaras, like the Halo tiara of baguette-cut diamonds made for Begum Andrée Aga Khan and a stunning 68.93-carat peridot emerald bracelet once owned by the wife of the mining magnate Chester Beatty. All one floor above more off-beat concepts like its famous Swinging Sixties Crash watch. Hence, maintaining that blend of class with eccentricity is fundamental at this house.

“Cartier is all about dynamic tension, which is to my mind pretty British. There are different types of tension – either very classic or very, very daring. Like we relaunched the Baignoire watch and a Baignoire Allongé, a tad more rock ‘n’ roll,” he notes.

A tour of a Cartier store inside any department store, however, underlines that the backbone of the house are its entry-level Love bracelets. Designed, one wonders, to lure a new generation?
“It’s not a new generation: we constantly appealed to new clients even if we have a classical pure long-term design. It’s more a question of how to talk to that generation. Often, we find our new clients had mothers and grandmothers who loved Cartier. If you revisit Homer it seems very modern. So, we think we are releasing classics – we don’t make youngish products for young people. That’s not how we work. And by not doing that our population stays quite young. 55% of our clients are millennials in terms of number of translations. In terms of value it’s still 46%, which is remarkable when you consider that high jewelry tends to be bought by more mature clients,” Vigneron underlines forcefully.

That said, Cartier has been putting an enormous amount of effort into its Odyssey campaign, with multiple videos: meetings of MTV fuzzy edits; arty lighting and Gauloise-voiced Frenchmen explaining the brand’s iconography. Like a three-minute history of Jeanne Toussaint, the off-beat and uber-talented designer who made the panther the greatest symbol of Cartier.

“Everyone in the connected world has a mobile. Or a computer or iPad. Interaction is more and more visual. So also with social networks – everyone wants to see and share. It’s a different way to talk to the new generation. So we produce our own stories and content. Before when you went to an exhibition you bought the book before going in order to be more prepared. Now, people at exhibitions are thrilled you buy the book or catalog… as a reminder.”

Vigneron began his career with Cartier “many, many years ago” but left in 2013 to be president of LVMH Japan, “before I was called back home,” in 2016. He lives in Geneva, where Cartier and Richemont are based, since watches are a big part of the group’s operations in Switzerland.

Twice married, Vigneron has four children ranging from the youngest at 16 to 28. “I had the first kid at 30,” smiles the multilingual CEO – he even speaks Japanese - who was born in the famous “Protestant port.” His family name, Vigneron, means wine-grower, though his Vignerons were originally in cognac from Pineau des Charentes. After school in Paris and national duty in Africa in Djibouti – he became a consultant before joining Cartier in 1988.
One of Richemont’s biggest new successes has been Watchfinders.com; the pre-owned watch specialist website, which deals in valuable second-hand watches. Begging the question, did Cartier plan to enter that segment of the market?

“Watchfinders is a mid-sized operation growing quite rapidly. The biggest question is sourcing the products, which defines its growth. It has to expand out of France and into the UK; and probably to other countries. The core perception is that people like many watches – up to five – but only really wear two, so why not trade the others?” he argues.

Why has Cartier never launched a fashion collection?

“We are not a fashion brand. In watches and jewelry the designer is timeless; often in exhibition people cannot date the year. But there is a very quick cycle of fashion. So one design is structural, something that lasts, and the other fashion is very perishable. So, yes, we can do accessories – but real fashion goes too quickly,” he insists.

Hence Cartier has never had a general creative director. But instead, one director for each creative studio: high jewelry; costume jewelry; watches; and leather and accessories.

“Fashion houses need the genius in-house; jewelry needs knowledge and know-how,” the CEO laughs.

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necked as jewlery when it comes to sustainability. There is no such phrase as 'blood cashmere' or 'blood suede', but there is 'blood diamonds.' Partly due to the negative PR but mainly because of a belief that a sustainability policy is essential, Cartier has been taking steps.

"I believe that sustainability has many different aspects. From respect for the environment to the idea that we respect human rights in mining and indeed right across the chain. It was vital we made sure there we use no blood diamonds, or precious stones from conflicts. And that we respected labor laws and [avoided] child labor. But we have for sure been late in communicating this and we have been doing many things," he concedes.

Due to an extensive program with its factories, Cartier will soon be a net energy producer. “We already buy carbon credits from companies doing reforestation. Now we can go one step further and become carbon negative. We cannot stop transporting products – that’s the largest element, so we have to compensate with carbon credits. The other key concern is pollution coming from plastic which we use in for packaging – so we now try to recycle," he explains.

Cartier’s fund for philanthropy has invested 55 million Swiss francs in four areas: women, education, emergencies and children.

“We have 30 programs in 30 countries that we follow year after year. Like ‘Educate Girls’ in India in rural areas..."
we have 30 programs in 20 countries that we follow year after year. Like Educate Girls in India in rural areas, where poor families don’t send their young girls to school. The boys, yes, but the girls are meant to get married quickly. Convincing parents to do so is very important. So, we supported this, and along with the UN, Educate Girls has managed to put together 60 million dollars and can scale up to help 800,000 young girls per year. It’s just fantastic,” he enthuses.

Cartier also funds Mothers2mothers in South Africa, showing HIV-positive mothers how to take care of themselves and not transmit the virus – a project that helped over 50,000 in South Africa and is now active in Botswana and Uganda. “From a 40% transmission rate it has fallen below 3%,” Vigneron notes.

In terms of turnover, Cartier’s number-one business is jewelry. How does he focus the brand on that other key current buzz word, inclusivity?

“Luxury is by definition exclusive; or something that needs time and patience. Without rarity there is no desire. It comes from Plato: you love what you desire, and you desire what you lack. As soon as don’t lack it anymore you desire it less. But you cannot be too uptight,” he argues.

Cartier attempts to get the best of both worlds, with beautiful exhibitions that are also inclusive. Like last summer’s show in Beijing’s Palace Museum inside the Forbidden City, Beyond Boundaries: Cartier and The Palace Museum Craftsmanship and Restoration Exhibition, that in two months attracted 604,000 visitors.

“A famous painter like, say, Monet could have that number, but the audience cannot really buy his work!” smiles the CEO, recalling that Cartier was the first luxury brand to create an art foundation, 35 years ago.

“In 1984! But the role has changed for Cartier and the rest of the cultural world. Not just making it more international but also producing exhibitions that can travel. Like the Cartier collection itself. After 35 years of commissioning – we have lots of large and unusual pieces. We showed in Shanghai last year in the Power Station of Art center and had over 200,000 visitors. An exhibition called A Beautiful Elsewhere.”

His latest plan – a partnership with the Triennale of Milan, that institution’s first cooperation with a private group. They have an eight-year partnership within the premises that will begin in April next year with a retrospective curated by Guillermo Pica.

“The foundation’s original role was to introduce contemporary art to the general public, at the time Impressionists or later contemporary from Andy Warhol to Bacon. Back then, public authorities were very reluctant seeing private groups going into this. Thinking that they might corrupt the art. But instead we were, within our glass wall and without any commercial activity, just creating openness to the world and going beyond boundaries,” he opines.

“Today, 30 years later, the art market is very active, and the question has changed. Art value is not just the art gallery and the art market. It’s creation, where some artists are not so well known but have super talent. And others can be famous for one skill, but have talents elsewhere like David Lynch. When he came to our foundation it was for drawing, not film.”

Next year in June, Cartier will have a Damien Hirst exhibition in the foundation of his work as a painter.

“Damien asked for that precisely. To value an artist for their ideas and not their fame and market value! That’s what the Cartier Foundation is about,” he concludes.