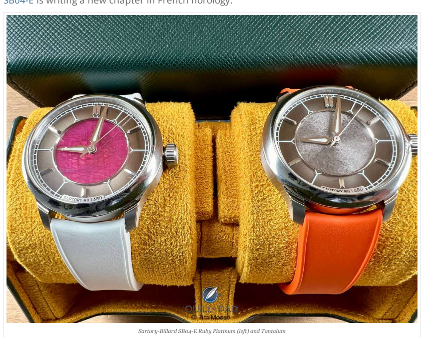
New Sartory-Billard SB04-E: an Eye-Catching High Quality watch from an Independent is More Affordable than You Think

by Tim Mosso

French-built watches are historically pivotal but recently scarce. As with many former watchmaking powers, France's era of volume production and engineering leadership lapsed long ago. But at the indie level, its watchmaking is experiencing a renaissance.

French watchmakers in Switzerland such as Daniel Roth, F.P. Journe, and Denis Flageollet helped to blaze a trail of invention that's led back to the mother nation itself. Watches made in France are no longer the sole domain of historical texts, and the 2025 Sartory-Billard SB04-E is writing a new chapter in French horology.



Sartory-Billard SB04-E Ruby Platinum (left) and Tantalum

French industrial designer Armand Billard has made most of his recent headlines with a relentless march upmarket. 2023 and 2024 were all about tourbillon regulators, precious metal cases, and five-figure price points.

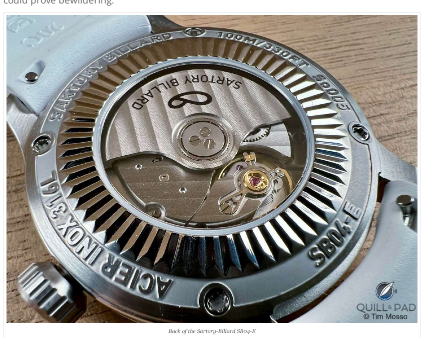
It was impressive on ambition alone, but the €90,000 tourbillon market is a tough one, and Sartory-Billard still needs volume models to connect with rank-and-file collectors. To that end, Billard revisits his breakthrough watch with the 2025 SB04-E.

Sartory Billard SB04 Titanium Blue

2019's SB04 was a transformational watch for Sartory-Billard. Like many creators, ranging from Rexhep Rexhepi to the Grönefeld brothers, Armand Billard premised his 2015 brand launch on design instinct rather than canvasing the market. S-B's initial three models had their fans, but the styles were best described as idiosyncratic.

In contrast, the SB04 hit all the right notes with a round case, classical lines, smaller size, and a focus on dial customization. It was the right move, and Sartory-Billard expanded its appeal to a broader audience.

With the SB04-E – the "E" is for "evolution" – Billard has taken yet another round of requests to heart. New dial options and a 100-meter water-resistant case add fresh life to the collection and a measure of standardization to a model whose prior range of custom options could prove bewildering.

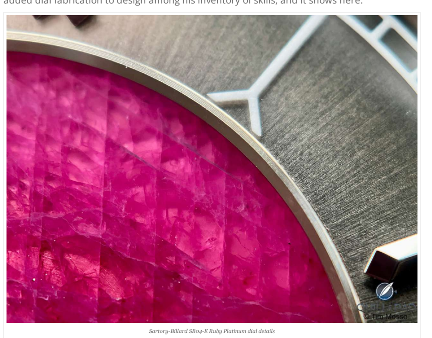


Back of the Sartory-Billard SB04-E

La Joux Perret's automatic caliber G101 returns from the prior SB04 as a competent 68-hour drop-in surrogate for the ubiquitous ETA 2892-A2.

Sartory-Billard SB04-E Ruby Platinum

The flagship of the new series is the 150-piece "Ruby Platinum" edition. Armand long ago added dial fabrication to design among his inventory of skills, and it shows here.



Sartory-Billard SB04-E Ruby Platinum dial details

At center, a disc cut from a Tanzanian ruby boulder pops with color and crystalline texture. A lapidary in Germany fashions the disc for installation, and Armand handles the cutting of metal hands, indices, and the chapter ring separating the hour track from the center dial.

There's layering and complexity to the ruby core that only a natural material can produce, and the stone's fragmented matrix of detail ensures that no two dials among the 150 will be identical.

Diamond-cutting techniques ensure sharp breaks between metallic faces of the hands and indices; the degree of detail is stunning.

Sartory-Billard SB04-E Ruby Platinum features sharp-cut hands

At center, even the counterweight of the seconds hand is faceted and split between polish and satin.

Sartory-Billard SB04-E dial detail

Outboard, a sapphire ring 0.3mm in thickness sits atop a platinum-coated metallic substrate that has been radially-brushed and gradient-shaded. Blue Super-LumiNova blazes on the hour ring and hands, so this watch is an am/pm option.

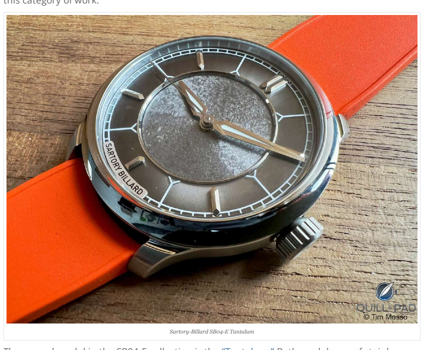
Sartory-Billard SB04-E lume

Sartory-Billard SB04-E crown by day and lume by night

The clean breaks between diamond-polished surfaces reveal Armand's proficiency with micromechanical finishing, and it's stunning to realize that he was only introduced to the craft after creating the S-B brand.

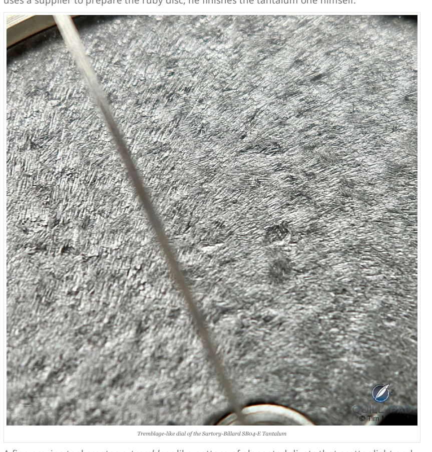
Sartory-Billard SB04-E Ruby Platinum

Despite their status as prototypes, both of the watches examined in this survey were indistinguishable from retail products. In qualitative terms, Armand's work with metal dial hardware on these watches compares favorably to Grand Seiko's underrated virtuosity in this category of work.



Sartory-Billard SB04-E Tantalum

The second model in the SB04-E collection is the "Tantalum." Both models are of stainless-steel construction, so the "tantalum" in this instance is the heart of the dial. While Armand uses a supplier to prepare the ruby disc, he finishes the tantalum one himself.



Tremblage-like dial of the Sartory-Billard SB04-E Tantalum

A fine graving tool creates a *tremblage*-like pattern of elongated divots that scatter light and make the most of tantalum's distinctive blue-grey glow.

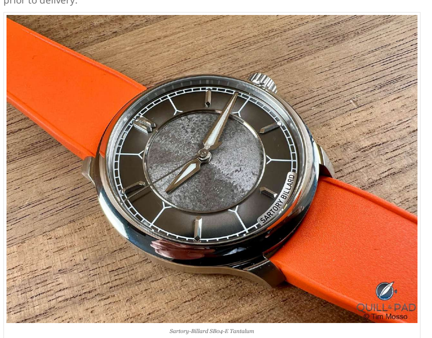
As with the ruby, the tantalum center's fine details reward close viewing. The dial furniture, sunburst outer ring, and luminescent features closely parallel those of the "Ruby." There's no denying that the series production "Tantalum" model is a more conservative option than its ruby kin.

From a critical perspective, the author notes that small accents of color would enliven this model. It feels stark, cool, and almost Teutonic – not French in any classical sense. Rose gold plating the indices, chapter ring, and hands could help. Alternatively, introduction of colored lume or a colorful metallic grain below the hours would relieve some of the austerity.

Cack of the Sartory-Billard SB04-E back (steel prototype)

Externally, the SB04-E looks similar to its predecessor but changes in almost every detail. Starting from the reverse of the case, there's a circumferential fluting that replaces the fluted rotor on 2019's original. This differentiates the new model but also provides a concrete benefit by slimming the case 1mm.

Caseback finish is more nuanced than the SB04 thanks to the application of polished, brushed, and blasted details. Movements are undecorated but are adjusted by Armand prior to delivery.



Sartory-Billard SB04-E Tantalum

Topside, the new case declares itself with a concave bezel that contrasts with the original's domed gadroons. The newer design accentuates the slimmer case and segues nicely to the shallow dips between lugs and bezel.

First-series SB04s featured slightly stepped lug profiles and a media-blasted mid-case; both features are missed on the newer model.

Lug and caseband of the Sartory-Billard SB04-E Ruby Platinum

That said, the "E" does feature a delightfully subtle lug-shoulder bevel that runs end-to-end across the case band.

The SB04-E appears to serve two trends underway in the watch marketplace. First and most clearly, there is the move towards smaller cases; it's partly a shift in tastes and partly an acknowledgement of ever more numerous female collectors. Second, there – appears – to be an incipient fatigue with integrated bracelet sports watches.

"All-around" options that combine the elegance of a dress watch with the durability of a sports watch are looming on the horizon. Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin, and Audemars Piguet – among others – have prominently added more steel dress watches to their collections. These weren't designed with tuxedos in mind, and owners are wearing them accordingly.

If there's one factor that limits the addressable market for dress-style watches, it's water resistance, but that's changing. Patek's recent declaration that its universal "30-meter" rating is a **true** 30 meters has added some momentum to the idea.

Initially, I thought the "E" in "SB04-E" stood for "*etanche*," the French term for water-sealed. Truthfully, it's "Evolution," but the 100-meter case in a dress watch format is another datum auguring for a new age of genre-splitting versatile models.

The SB04-E offers many of the traditional benefits of the indie buying experience, including exclusivity, a unique vision, and the pleasure of knowing your watchmaker. At the launch prices of €3,500 and €4,700, the Tantalum and Ruby Platinum, respectively, are proof that you don't need an F.P. Journe budget to buy independent.

Truth be told, these aren't for movement snobs, brand snobs, or people who want to dive the wreck of the *Andrea Doria*. But for the rest of the watch collector landscape, it will be refreshing to see that the elan and eccentricity of a true artisanal experience can still be experienced for Oris money.

For more information, please visit https://sartory-billard.com/product/sb04-e-ruby-platinum/ and/or https://sartory-billard.com/product/sb04-e-tantalum-hand-engraved/

Quick Facts: Sartory-Billard SB04-E
Functions: Hours; minutes; seconds (hacking)
Edition: Launched in 2025; 150 pieces "Ruby Platinum"; "Tantalum" in regular production
Case: 316L stainless steel; 39.5mm diameter; 10.3mm thick; 44.6mm lug-to-lug; 20mm between lug horns; dipped lugs; 100 meters of water resistance; screw down crown with luminescent graphic insert
Strap: Delugs rubber with pre-scored sections for cutting to length; colors optional
Clasp: Steel double deployant claps with leaf spring tension to open or close
Dial: Ruby Platinum: heart of ruby center dial with platinum-plate gradient fade sunburst outer ring and superimposed sapphire hour track; diamond-cut hour indices and hands.
Tantalum: engraved tantalum center dial with metallic plated sunburst gradient fade outer ring and superimposed sapphire hour track; diamond-cut indices and hands. Luminescent hands and sapphire hour track discs.
Movement: La Joux Perret G101; automatic winding; 68-hour power reserve; 4Hz beat rate; 24 jewels; stop seconds; adjusted prior to delivery
2025 New Retail Price: €3,500 "Tantalum" – €4,700 "Ruby Platinum," both before V.A.T.

* Tim Mosso is the media director and watch specialist at The 1916 Company. You can check out their very comprehensive YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/@the1916company.

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