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Gentleman's Rolex Oyster Perpetual Comex Sea-Dweller, c1977. Fellows & Sons, Birmingham. July 10. HP: £37,000. ABP: £43,521.

2



Art Deco diamond set wristwatch by Cartier, Paris, c1925, silvered dial, black Roman numerals, bezel set with rose-cut diamonds, demi lune shaped strap attachments set with further old and rose cut diamonds, diamond set winding button, 4 screw case stamped '8615' to reverse, all set in white metal (assumed platinum), black strap with yellow/white metal diamond set deployment clasp. Halls Fine Art, Shrewsbury. June 08. HP: £9,000. ABP: £10,586.

3



Rare early 1970s stainless steel Omega Seamaster Automatic Professional 600 'Ploprof' (diver's) wrist watch, stainless steel Omega bracelet. Gorrings, Lewes. Feb 10. HP: £2,700. ABP: £3,176.

4



Gents 9ct gold Rolex wristwatch, 3cm enamel dial with subsidiary seconds dial, luminous hands, case No.974122, import marks for 1919. (dial hairline) Richard Winterton Auctioneers, Lichfield. Dec 11. HP: £850. ABP: £1,003.

The History of Watches

A fascinating insight into how the First and Second World Wars influenced design

By George Johnson

People wear watches to tell the time, but times have changed! Now we are beset by numerous digital devices such as iPods, mobile phones, PDA's (Personal Digital Assistant) et al and within the home we are besieged by time emanating from cookers, microwaves, televisions, DVD players, central heating systems and even weather stations. The list is endless. Despite this comprehensive repertoire of time torture a large percentage of the population still wear wrist-watches! How then do they function, apart from the obvious! In my opinion the lure of the wristwatch is that it is still a great visual status symbol and a way you can express your own sense of style. New or antique it remains multi-functional, serving a role which is not always as primary as it might appear on the surface. We wear watches as an appendage to our adornments and also to tell the time! Wristwatches have not been around for as long as you might think. They only became popular during the 1920s. Before this surge in popularity the most common personal timepiece was the pocket watch, which had been in vogue since the sixteenth century.

The first wristwatch was made by Patek Philippe in 1868, a fabulous piece of jewellery made for Countess Koscowicz of Hungary. The Patek Philippe company was founded in 1839 in Geneva by two Polish immigrants, Antoni Patek who was a businessman and Franciszek Czapek who was a watchmaker by trade. They set up a watchmaking company called Patek, Czapek & Co. but the partnership didn't last and they parted ways in 1844. It was when Antoni Patek met a French watchmaker called Adrien Philippe in Paris that things finally fell into place. Mr Philippe had invented a keyless winding mechanism which was to become one of the key technologies which helped popularise the wristwatch. When Adrien Philippe officially joined Antoni Patek in 1851 the company of Patek Philippe & Co was born. They went on to pioneer many of the great inventions in watch technology including the perpetual calendar, chronograph, split-seconds hand, and even the minute repeater in watches.

However the first major production of wrist-watches was not for fashion but for war. It was Kaiser Wilhelm I who in the 1880s decided that his Navel officers needed an easy way to tell the time for Navel exercises. He contacted Swiss watchmaker Constant Girard and got him to

produce two thousand of these wrist worn watches. It seems that war was one of the main influences on the evolution of the wristwatch. During the Great War soldiers found that carrying a pocket watch was impractical. However a wrist worn watch allowed for ease of telling the time even when one's hands were holding weapons or other tools of war. This led to the widespread use of 'Trench watches' by troops. These wrist worn watches were large and very bulky as they were made out of pocket watch parts. Most still had the winding crown at the twelve o'clock position like traditional pocket watches and was attached to the wearer's wrist by a large leather strap. A lot of the troops became used to wearing these new style wrist-watches and by the end of the Great War pocket watches had started to fall out of fashion in favour of the new wrist worn style of time piece.

One of the most recognisable names in wrist-watches is *Rolex* and this is another company with a very interesting history. It was in 1905 that two brothers-in-law decided to go into business together. Hans Wilsdorf and Alfred Davis set up the company, *Wilsdorf and Davies* and began importing Swiss watch movements into Britain and placing them into watch cases made by Dennison and other casemakers. They then sold on these watches to jewellers up and down the country with the jewellers own name on the dial. These were usually hallmarked 'W&D' inside the case back. In 1908 Wilsdorf registered the trademark *Rolex*. He decided on the made-up name as it was short enough to put on a watch face and was pronounceable in most languages. He also thought it sounded a bit like the sound a watch made when it was wound.

One of my favourite stories about the company is how they supplied watches to the British soldiers held as prisoners during the Second World War. Royal Air Force pilots had great respect for the time pieces made by *Rolex* and preferred them to the more inferior watches issued by the Air Force. Many officers purchased Rolex's to wear. However when captured they were confiscated by the Germans. When Hans Wilsdorf heard about this he took it upon himself to supply any officer being held prisoner with a new *Rolex* timepiece, if they wrote to *Rolex* with details of where they were being held and the circumstances of the loss. What makes this story even more amazing is that Wilsdorf was so impressed by the character of the British officers that he vowed he would

not take payment till the end of the war. This act of belief in these officers and the belief that the allies would win the war had the effect of raising moral and spirits in many of the officer POW camps. One of the more recognised names who took advantage of this scheme was Corporal Clive James Nutting, who was one of the group of prisoners who organised the Great Escape from prisoner-of-war camp Stalag Luft III. Nutting sent a letter to Wilsdorf in March 1943 asking if he could order a stainless steel *Rolex Oyster 3525* chronograph which cost roughly £1,500 in today's money stating that he would pay for it with wages he was receiving from working as a shoemaker in the prison camp. When Wilsdorf received the request he was very impressed with Nutting's choice of watch as the majority of officers ordered the cheaper *Rolex Speed King* model. However here was a corporal ordering a far better watch than prisoners of officer rank. Wilsdorf wasn't to know the true reason for the purchase of this watch. He sent the watch to Nutting at Stalag Luft along with a letter explaining that an English gentleman such as Corporal Nutting 'should not even think' about paying for the watch before the end of the war.

The reason that Nutting had bought this watch turned out to be one of the greatest escape stories of the war as it was used to time the patrols of the camps guards and its chronograph function was key. Wilsdorf was true to his word after the war. Nutting was sent an invoice for only fifteen pounds due to the currency export controls in force at the time in the UK. The watch and associated correspondence between Wilsdorf and Nutting were sold at auction for £66,000 in May 2007.

One type of *Rolex* to look out for is the Comex. These submariner model watches were made for the French diving company *Compagnie Maritime D'Expertise*, formed in 1961 by its President Henri Delauze in Marseille, France. These watches continue to have a huge following among divers and collectors and achieve great prices at auction.

Fig 1. To prove the point this *Rolex Oyster Perpetual Comex Sea-Dweller*, c1977 was sold by Fellows & Sons in July 2010 for a hammer price of £37,000. Sometimes a bargain can be found as it is not unheard of for someone lacking knowledgeable about the brand to price one up as an ordinary model.

Fig 2. This Art Deco diamond set square faced wristwatch with a silvered dial and black Roman numerals has the bezel set with rose-cut diamonds and the demi-lune shaped strap attachments set with further old and rose cut diamonds. It also has a diamond set winding button. The four-screw case is stamped '8615' to the reverse and is set in white metal which we must assume is platinum. It has a black strap with a yellow and white metal diamond set deployment clasp. Made by Cartier, Paris in c1925, it was sold by Halls Fine Art in June 2008 and achieved a hammer price of £9,000.

Fig 3. Some watches like this rare early 1970s stainless steel Omega Seamaster Automatic Professional 600 'Ploprof' (divers) wrist watch, on a stainless steel Omega bracelet just stand out from the crowd. It was sold by Gorrings Auction in Lewes in February 2010 for a hammer price of £2,700.

Fig 4. This gents 9ct gold *Rolex* wristwatch which dates to 1919 has a 3cm circular enamel dial with a subsidiary seconds dial and luminous hands. It was sold by Richard Winterton Auctioneers in December 2011 and achieved a hammer price of £850.

On a final note, did you know that time used to be a commodity? Before pocket and wristwatches became affordable to the masses, people actually sold the time for a small charge. Time was money in those days.



18ct gold *Oyster Perpetual Submariner* with its presentation box. *Chorley's, Prinknash Abbey Park. Feb 12. HP: £11,000. ABP: £12,980.*



Patek Philippe Twenty-4 18 carat gold and diamond bracelet wristwatch. *George Kidner, Wimborne. Jan 12. HP: £6,500. ABP: £7,670.*



Patek Philippe Nautilus stainless steel and diamond wristwatch. *George Kidner, Wimborne. Jan 12. HP: £5,800. ABP: £6,844.*



Gentleman's 18ct gold *Patek Philippe Calatrava* wrist watch, mechanical movement with time zone mechanism indicating home & local hours, ref 5034, boxed and recently serviced. *Gorrings, Lewes. Dec 11. HP: £5,000. ABP: £5,900.*



Gentleman's late 1980s 18ct gold *Omega Constellation Automatic Chronometer* wrist watch, with date aperture, on integral textured 18ct gold *Omega* bracelet. *Gorrings, Lewes. Dec 11. HP: £1,750. ABP: £2,065.*



Mid 20thC 18ct gold *Cartier Tank* mid-size wrist watch, Roman dial, deployment clasp, case back numbered 127685. *Gorrings, Lewes. Dec 11. HP: £1,600. ABP: £1,888.*



Piaget, gents 18ct gold wrist-watch, rectangular stepped bezel, white enamel dial, Roman numerals, black reptile skin strap, No.14101/197475, original presentation box, watch head 4 x 3.5cm. *Richard Winterton, Lichfield. Dec 11. HP: £1,500. ABP: £1,770.*



Gentleman's 18ct gold *Marvin* automatic wristwatch. *Charterhouse, Sherborne. Nov 11. HP: £1,500. ABP: £1,770.*



Lady's early 1980s diamond set 18ct gold *Piaget* wrist watch, bezel set 22 brilliant cut stones, on integral textured 18ct gold bracelet. *Gorrings, Lewes. Dec 11. HP: £1,300. ABP: £1,534.*



Patek Philippe watch movement with associated French case 18 jewel movement no.314135, with later dial and stylish gold and platinum curvex case inscribed 'Monte Par Janessieth, 2317', with a *Patek Philippe* black leather box and outer card case. *Gorrings, Lewes. Dec 11. HP: £1,300. ABP: £1,534.*