

Museum-Worthy Watches, From Pearls to Plastic

Design often catches a curator's eye.

By **Susanne Fowler**

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When is a watch considered museum quality?

There are many factors — age, condition, materials, maker — but design also ranks high for choosy curators.

Here's a look at some contemporary and antique pieces that have been deemed worthy.

A timekeeping star

Amid the hundreds of examples in the Clockmakers' Museum, a collection displayed within the Science Museum in London, are pieces by the British horologists Thomas Tompion, John Harrison and George Daniels, whose handmade designs have sold at auction for millions of dollars.

Anna Rolls, the curator of the Clockmakers' Museum, said that when talking about design, it's important to distinguish between form and function.

“Some of the watches on display from the early 17th century take the shape of recognizable objects such as flowers, fruit and birds, and in these instances their design is arguably function following form,” she said. “They were small and beautiful, but not very good timekeepers.”



A silver star-shaped verge escapement watch with one hand for the hour, created by David Ramsay, watchmaker to King James I, in London, circa 1625. Worshipful Company of Clockmakers; photo by Clarissa Bruce

Yet sometimes design “evolves as a result of the timekeeping element,” Ms. Rolls said, citing the introduction of the balance spring in the 1600s.

“Prior to this invention, a watch’s accuracy was poor enough to only warrant the use of one hand — the hour hand — on the dial,” she said, as the timekeeping could be off by as much as 20 minutes.

But designs could be intricate: The dial of a silver-cased, star-shaped piece by David Ramsay, watchmaker to King James I, and dating from around 1625, is carved with winged figures and religious iconography.

“This watch was concealed for many years behind a tapestry at Gawdy Hall, Norfolk — now demolished — and only discovered in around 1790,” Ms. Rolls said. “As a result it is in remarkable condition.”

Everyday design

About three dozen watches make the grade at the Design Museum in London, which focuses on contemporary products and architectural creations — including a plastic Casio.

“The very purpose of the Design Museum was to represent the cultural value of everyday design,” said Justin McGuirk, chief curator of the collection founded in 1989 by the retail entrepreneur Terence Conran, who died last month. “And watches are just a manifestation of that.”

The Casio F-91W is featured at the Design Museum in London “because it’s considered a successful timeless design in continuous production for so long, unchanged.”

“The *only* thing interesting about watches these days is the design,” he said. “There’s no argument to be made about functionality. I mean, you can’t tell time any more accurately with a \$100,000 watch from Breitling than you can with a 9-pound (\$11.50) watch from Casio. So that leaves us with: Who do you want to be when you buy a watch?”

One of those inexpensive Casios, an F-91W, is in the museum’s permanent display, and was included, he said, “because it’s considered a successful timeless design in continuous production for so long, unchanged.”

The watch was introduced by the Japanese electronics company Casio in 1989. Its stripped-back design “had continued in production for 20 years and went through a fashion revival, being worn everywhere around London by cool, young hipsters,” Mr. McGuirk said. “Simultaneously, it was regularly confiscated off terrorism suspects captured for internment at Guantánamo Bay.

“The reason for that is that it was so reliable: A fashion item in London but at the same time it was being used to set off I.E.D.s.”

Another watch on display is the Braun DW30, designed by Dieter Rams and Dietrich Lubs in 1978. It was included because “of its lineage: We know how much Rams influenced the work of Jonathan Ive at Apple,” Mr. McGuirk said, referring to the computer company’s chief design officer for almost 30 years. “When you look at these watches you can see that they are very aesthetically restrained, very simple-looking watches. That kind of minimalist approach is the one Apple has adopted since Ive’s tenure there.”

Motifs and whimsy

Several items in the Museum of London collection were designed for specific purposes, including a rococo-style chatelaine from the mid-1700s with chains leading to tiny flasks that could have held perfume or sewing accessories and a link to attach a small watch. There also is a pocket watch

from 1857 that was intended for a maritime client: The case was engraved with a ship, lighthouse, anchor and other seafaring symbols, and the hour hand was shaped like a trident.

An 1857 watch from the Museum of London that features engravings of a ship and lighthouse on the front and other maritime symbols on the back. Museum of London

But others seem merely whimsical, like a colorfully enameled gold piece, circa 1800, in the shape of a stylized tulip, with its watch hidden in the base. Only when all the parts are open is the watch face revealed.

Enter electronics

A Bulova Accutron Spaceview from 1966 passed muster at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York, where Emily Orr, assistant curator of modern and contemporary American design, considers it a groundbreaking watch.

The Accutron Spaceview model, from 1966, “has turned the watch inside out.” Smithsonian Institution

“Accutron was the world’s first electronic watch,” she said, “and the Spaceview model allowed the user to have a full view of its inner workings, including the electronic circuitry and tuning fork whose accuracy won the watch its name.”

The stainless steel watch “shows us an entirely new design opportunity for what a watch can look like,” she said. “Accutron has turned the watch inside out, revealing and encouraging us to marvel at what we do not typically see. A far cry from jewelrylike watches of decades prior, this one celebrates the watch as an object of technology.”

Transformative style

Watches can also be considered works of art in their own right, according to Alison Fisher, the associate curator of architecture and design at The Art Institute of Chicago.

Famed for its art collection ranging from the Impressionists to Grant Wood, the museum also houses 15 watches, Ms. Fisher said.

The LunaTik watch kit, 2010, designed by Scott Wilson. The Art Institute of Chicago;
photo by Minimal

“We collect watches when they have a transformational role,” she said. “We’ve never set out to collect watches as a type so it’s more about finding pivotal examples: thinking about experimentation and designs that break the mold.”

That was the case with the museum’s pieces by the Chicago-based industrial designer Scott Wilson. His LunaTik watch kits turned “very small iPod Nanos into wearable smart technology” long before Apple came out with its Watch, she said. “You kind of had to put it together yourself. The milled aluminum and glass case was split in two to sandwich the Nano together.”

The Nano screen could then be set to show a clock face and keep time.

“His design transformed a small wearable technology into something that could be part of your wardrobe, your everyday way that you interact with technology,” Ms. Fisher said. “This was, for us, a really exciting design to acquire: a local designer, one with an incredible global impact in technology and the evolution of watch designs.”