

Chrono



DIGITAL WATCHES

High-end watchmakers are experimenting again with mechanical digital watches, just as Patek did in the 1950s

Words: Nick Foulkes Photograph: Patek Philippe Museum

WE ARE ALL SUBJECT to the vagaries of fashion – even clear-minded connoisseurs like you and me are not immune. It is just that we fall victim to it in slightly different ways; what impresses me is the incredible power that the passage of time has on our tastes.

Take, for instance, the digital watch. I cannot think of an automotive analogy that adequately expresses my feelings towards the standard digital watch. I view them much as one might view those small disposable-looking electric cars that give a good impression of a motorised wheelie bin and have, regrettably, become a part of the London roadscape. And yet the appeal of the digital watch is growing on me.

I must be clear here that the softening of my attitude has nothing – as yet – to do with the cheap electronic junk that is the enemy of fine watchmaking. However, there is now a generation of watchmakers for whom the digital watch is the charming remembrance of their youth rather than the technology that very nearly put the high-end mechanical watch industry out of business.

Bearing in mind that the first electronic digital watches hit the market in the early 1970s, it has taken haute horlogerie almost four decades to get its mechanical response together – but it has been worth the wait, especially as the ways that top mechanical makers have found of showing the time digitally are truly inventive.

Among my favourites is the Cabestan: a fantastical timepiece made by iconoclastic horologist Jean Francois Ruchonnet. It uses a chain, cog and triple-drum digital layout to give you the time. I like Ruchonnet and I suppose it helps to appreciate his work when you find that he is a vintage Bugatti fanatic.

Another witty example is De Grisogono's Mecannico DG, which recreates the nine integers that make up each individual digit of old-style LED (light-emitting diode) watches, but moves them mechanically. It also boasts an additional, traditional time display with



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hands, thus creating a sophisticated pastiche of the digital-analogue watches of the early 1980s. However, to recreate the electronic wizardry of 30 years ago takes a mechanism of 651 parts, which makes it a contender for the title of most complex hours and minutes watch.

If De Grisogono's Mecannico DG mimics

LED technology, then the Harry Winston Opus of 2008 set out to replicate the LCD (liquid crystal display). Winston's Opus programme showcases upcoming watchmaking talent and the piece by Frederic Garinaud was one of the more remarkable.

Garinaud is an example of the creative engineers that have been attracted to the watch industry in recent years. A graduate of the French Naval Academy, he went into the development of machinery in a galvanoplasty laboratory, before moving to high watchmaking in 2001. His watch replicates the pixels of a digital timepiece using a system inspired by 'pin' toys, which create 3D impressions of objects pressed against them.

Part of the pleasure is the satisfaction of watchmakers creating mechanical examples of the watches that nearly finished off their industry. However, digital timepieces were around long before the electronic wristwatch became popular and it is to an earlier age that the Zeitwerk, the new 'digital' watch by A Lange & Söhne, looks. Jumping hours and minutes appear in big bold numerals, but the inspiration was not from the 1970s: rather from the 19th century digital clock that is the pride of Dresden's opera house.

Indeed, today's watchmakers are finding inspiration for new digital watches in the most surprising of places. Felix Baumgartner is one of the most interesting young watchmakers and this year he brings out the Cobra. This new watch is inspired by one of the rarest Patek Philippe wristwatches, a digital watch using a system of rotating drums that was made as a prototype (pictured left) in the late 1950s but never put into production.

To my knowledge there is only one example of his hugely important timepiece and it is at the Patek Philippe museum in Geneva. Every time I see it I can't help indulging in one of those tantalising if fruitless exercises in 'what if' speculation. Had a maker of Patek's standing promoted wrist-worn digital timekeeping back in the late 1950s, who knows how the wristwatch might have developed?