

# COLLECTORS' CHOICES

## WHAT IS YOUR HOROLOGICAL GOLDEN AGE?

BY STEPHEN FOSKETT / GRAIL WATCH

For some collectors, it's the Roaring Twenties, when the wristwatch was really just emerging – exactly one century ago. For others, it's the conservative 1950s or the free spirit of the Swinging Sixties, when the sky was the limit. Others keep coming back to the creative destruction of the Seventies. Maybe more than in any other industry, the best-selling timepieces of today were imagined a long, long time ago. We've asked a set of passionate collectors what is their own personal "golden age" of watchmaking. Their answers are as divergent as they are enlightening.

From Hollywood to comic books, every field has a so-called "golden age" when the greatest examples were produced. But watch enthusiasts have not yet settled on a definition of the golden age of horology. Was it the raucous competition after World War I? The confident 1960s or the radical 1970s? Perhaps it was the re-birth of mechanical watches in the 1980s or the emergence of independents a decade later? That's the question we put to a variety of insiders and collectors. What period would you consider to be the "golden age" of vintage watches? And is there one watch that best represents this period to you?



Stephen Fosskett asked a group of watch collectors to name the golden age of vintage watches.

### The Roaring 20s

Zach Blass, watch enthusiast and Deputy Editor at Time+Tide Watches, picked the so-called Roaring 20s as his "golden age". According to Blass, "one of the creative plagues of today's marketplace is the homogenisation of watch designs." He sees brands "playing it safe" instead of "truly shocking and extending the imaginations of watch enthusiasts around the world." And yet this was not an issue in the 1920s, when wristwatches were just emerging and there was no established language to draw upon.

"Once upon a time, brands really pushed the envelope when it came to watch design. The decade leading up to (as well as during) the Roaring 20's in particular had some very distinct creations, a prime example being the watches introduced by Vacheron Constantin in that era. This art deco period

brought forth various case forms, with more cushion, barrel, lozenge, and other shape forms from the brand. One reference in particular, the Ref. 10347 from 1913, has always caught my eye due to its interesting bezel. I personally can't recall many examples of a brand doing this, but Vacheron Constantin, with this piece, set white enamel into the yellow gold bezel to create a Grecian frieze motif that is really striking. With revivals and reinterpretations very trendy in the industry today, I would definitely love to see the brand revitalise such a design."

This period was perilous for the industry, sandwiched between the post-World War I overproduction crisis and the impact of the Great Depression. Many watchmak-



Zach Blass picked the roaring 1920s.

ers failed or changed hands after the Great War, but a new generation of watchmakers and designers was emerging with a focus on wristwatches. Companies like Glycine, Niton, Vulcain, Movado, Election, and Tissot were creating radically innovative wristwatches for ladies and gentlemen in association with case makers like Robert Gyga and the Stern brothers. There was innovation in watch movements as well, with new chronographs, automatic winding, and innovative multi-plane designs appearing for the first time.



This Art Deco Vacheron Constantin exemplifies the era.

## The War Years

For Eric Wind, owner of Wind Vintage, the development of chronographs with pump pushers in the 1940s was the golden age. As the depression ended and the world looked to war, companies like Leonidas and Venus worked to develop cheaper cam-based chronograph mechanisms, even as Valjoux dominated the high end. Most companies had adopted two-pusher designs by this time, though there was still some variation, and hour counters and full calendars were on the rise as well.

"I love the chronographs from the 1940s," says Wind, "particularly those early chronographs with pump pushers instead of rectangular/square/olive pushers. The thick cases with beautiful lines, intricate dials, and handmade feel to these watches makes them my favourite pieces as a category. I have a Gallet Clamshell and Heuer reference 407 that I particularly love from the early 1940s. A grail for me would be a Patek Philippe reference 1463 Tasti Tondi chronograph in steel with Breguet numerals in original condition from the 1940s."



Eric Wind sees the 1940s as the golden age of vintage.



The classic good looks of pump pusher chronographs like this Gallet are the focus of many vintage watch collectors.

The chronograph industry boomed immediately after the war but collapsed nearly as quickly. Although returning airmen and engineers prized these timers, the market was quickly saturated as Breitling, Heuer, Universal, Gallet, Omega, and others ramped up production. This drove greater cooperation among former rivals, resulting in the automatic chronograph race of the 1960s. But the classic “pump pusher” chronographs of the 1940s are prized today for their vintage flair.



Bill Sohne loves post-war watches.

This vintage Omega features their chronometer Cal. 30T2SCRG.



## The Baby Boom

Watch collector Bill Sohne sees the 1950s as the golden age of watches. “Post World War II and into the 1950s,” says Sohne, “top class Swiss finishing and chronometer potential in manual watches comes to mind.” With the Swiss franc held artificially low by the global monetary arrangement known as Bretton Woods (see article, “Debunking the Quartz Crisis”) the Swiss watchmaking industry was making money like never before, free to explore new movement, case, and dial designs and finishes. “It was always some combination of these three elements,” continues Sohne, “and when that sweet spot was hit, I would buy it.”

Attorney and watch collector H. Jane Chon also picks “the classic 1950s” as her choice for the golden age of vintage watches. In the 1950s, “luxury meant something well-made, even for simple things,” says Chon. “Dress watches, which were time only and elegant, represent this idea of luxury to me. Designs that withstand trends are classic designs, and the continuing appeal of watch designs from this era today are testament to the good design principles followed.” And yet mass manufacturing had not yet come to Swiss watchmaking. “One reason I feel watches from this period outshine many created today is that they were made, and finished, mostly by human hands,” continues Chon. Although automatic winding was then capturing the public imagination and market share, hand winding watches hold a special place for Sohne. “I always look forward to winding my watch every morning right before I put it on,” he says. And his collection reflects this fascination. “I seem to have a lot of manual wind chronometers, starting with an Omega 30T2RG that I bought back in the 1990s. I did not know it at the time but that manual wind chronometer was just my first step,



H. Jane Chon is inspired by classic 1950s dress watches.

though I told my wife it was my last. I then started looking for the larger size, screwback case construction, clean dials, and so on. Some of the ones that I still have include an Audemars

Piguet Ref. 5072 with a VZSSC movement in a killer 37 mm gold case, a Zenith Captain with calibre 135 in a 36.5 mm steel case, and an orphaned Longines manual wind chronometer calibre 27 O.S. which I married with a steel screwback case. But to top it off was an Omega 30T2SCRG in a 35 mm steel screwback case with a 14k rose gold bezel. I would consider any of the above a favourite and they all stand tall in my book.”

The Calatrava Ref. 2526 is seen by many as the finest watch Patek Philippe ever produced.







For Chon, the best example of the classic 1950s is Patek Philippe's Ref. 2526. "This is the watch I would pick to be exemplary of the era, and a personal icon to me," says Chon. "It's a classic design at 36 mm, mostly produced in yellow gold, with a double-fired vitreous enamel dial impervious to the usual afflictions, apart from cracking, with an early water-resistant case." There is some appeal to the more advanced movements appearing in the 1950s as well. According to Chon, Cal. 12-600 AT is "a movement par excellence: The first self-winding movement put into production by Patek, with 30 jewels, a Gyromax balance wheel, and a swan neck regulator that allowed the movement to be adjusted to 1 second in 24 hours." But it is the impeccable finishing of the movement that appeals to a collector like Chon. "The finishing was above all that had come before, although it was meant solely for a watchmaker's eyes, as this was decades before sapphire casebacks came into use." It is difficult to argue with the selection of the ultimate Patek Philippe Calatrava as the iconic golden age watch.

The classic watches of the 1950s coincide with the golden age of American television and comic books and represent a time of prosperity and a focus on urbanity. But the Swiss watch industry was facing new competition in the 1960s with the Bulova Accutron and electric watches blazing new technical and Modernist design trends. Thus, this potential golden age of watches came to a close.

## The Swinging 60s

Engineer, writer, and CronotempVs Lounge host Dr Tim Lake picked the 1960s as his golden age. "It is often said that you are living in a golden age, you just don't realise it," says Lake. But the 1960s were "a golden age of chronometry, when improving the timekeeping of mechanical watches was still a noble, urgent and important goal in itself." He cites the clamour to outdo others at observatory competitions bringing developments in manufacturing methods and materials and the development of higher-beat escapements. "The learnings and the new ideas of Zenith, Omega, Longines and Seiko never found a commercial home then, but their legacies benefit us today," says Lake.

A parallel trend in the 1960s was the resurgence of chronographs. As Lake says, "the difficulty in producing an accurate, reliable and durable chronograph movement is underestimated as an horological complication. Independent design and manufacture of these is rare to non-existent for very good reason. This period was when the manufacture of low volume,



Dr Tim Lake sees the 1960s as the golden age of watches.

This Zenith features the chronometer Cal. 135.



and expensive construction designs evolved to more efficient and higher production volume compatible designs. The fact that this was mastered so well during this period is the reason I believe chronographs are so taken for granted today."

Given these views, it is no surprise that Lake's picks for grail watches are chronometer movements that were not intended to go into real watches. "The best combination of movement aesthetics and chronometry would have to be Zenith's Cal 135," says Lake. "Apart from the obvious NASA-selected Omega Speedmaster, I would pick Breitling's Ref. 2005 as the best chronograph of the time. Amongst a sea of otherwise similar solutions its function-led design of quirky centre minute dive watch configuration and size is novel and visionary and only possible with the industrialisation of the chronograph."

The technical innovation of the 1960s is undeniable, with the emergence of electronic, quartz, and high-beat movements and advances that created the automatic, chronograph, and thin movements that we still rely on today. It was also an era of practicality, with the emergence of "tool watches" for racing, flying, diving, and engineers that remain staples of today's lineups. But the financial crisis that struck in the 1970s disrupted the industry, ending this period just as it was heating up.



Carson Chan  
selected the 1970s.



New designs  
and materials  
defined the 1970s,  
from the famous  
Audemars Piguet  
Royal Oak to  
the Omega  
Speedsonic to  
these Porsche  
Design black  
PVD watches.  
(*Europa Star*,  
1974)

## The Disruptive 1970s

Although the watch industry was facing unprecedented challenges, both financially and technically, the 1970s also saw the rise of some of the most iconic watches in history. This is why "Watch Professor" Carson Chan picked the 1970s as the most interesting period of vintage watch development. "Vintage watches had a real purpose," says Chan, "and it is fascinating to think of how the original owner used the watch to its design." People still needed a wristwatch in the 1970s, but the traditional Swiss watchmaking industry was rapidly changing. By the 1970s, says Chan, "technology had improved, micro machining had begun, manufacturing capability had risen, and the industry could produce many challenging designs that were previously impossible."

When asked about his favourites from this golden age, Chan points to the icons: "The Royal Oak by Genta, the 1973 Speedmaster 125, the 1974 Omega Speedsonic, the 1972 Porsche Design Chronograph 1 (first black PVD watch), and the 1975 Seiko 600M 6159 grandfather tuna can diver. These are all thinking outside of the box design yet fully intended for their proposed usage." The fact that so many modern watches pay homage to these designs shows just how important the 1970s were to watch design.

If you are attracted to innovative designs and materials, a look through the pages of any issue of *Europa Star* from the 1970s is a gold mine. In addition to the watches mentioned above, you will see the first coloured plastic watch cases, the rise and fall of LED and LCD watches, and the ultra-thin quartz watch war of 1978. If struggle drives innovation, the 1970s should indeed be the vintage era of choice.

## The Golden Ages

This exercise makes it clear that there was no one golden age of vintage watches. An argument can be made for nearly any period, from the development of the wristwatch in the 1910s to the rise of independents in the 1990s. My own eye so often turns back to the 1960s, when brands like Enicar brought modern design to the masses, Zenith set the stage for the 1970s with the Defy, and Seiko produced the King and Grand Seiko models. But my collection is not limited to these, and I find something to love from many eras. Perhaps the golden age is in the eye of the beholder, or represents a personal connection. Whatever the definition, it is hard to ignore the pull of vintage watches. ♦



Stephen Foksett  
sees the period  
between 1965  
and 1975 as the  
golden age of  
vintage watches,  
as exemplified  
by his King  
Seiko 56KS.