



Keeping WATCH

Diana Wemyss discovers why classic wristwatches have become increasingly popular with collectors

Reminiscing about my childhood, I remembered my father had sent me off to my first day of school with the embarrassment of his old World War II Royal Air Force issue wristwatch strapped to my arm, my name specially engraved on the back. If only I had that watch today...

Wristwatches are a relatively new invention, only becoming common during World War I when they were issued to servicemen (it was easier to look at your wrist while in combat than dig around in the pocket of your jacket for a pocket watch). Like motor cars, most wristwatches have not yet reached antique status which is 100 years old, so they are referred to as classic or

TEXT DIANA WEMYSS PHOTOGRAPHS SEAN CALITZ

vintage. According to dealer Pieter van Straaten of Jewel Tree, the allure of classic wristwatches for collectors is that they look good and are a little bit different to the commercial bling available today. This is very much a male-dominated collecting field in which the collector will spend his money on mechanical rather than quartz-driven watches.

Early wristwatches were modelled on pocket watches and were always circular in shape with silvered or enamelled dials, and chrome, silver or gold cases. Very early watches are not as desirable and are of comparatively low value compared to later watches from the 1920s and 1930s, which matched the Art Deco style of the period and came in a range of shapes such as square, rectangular and octagonal. During the 1940s, watch styles began to match jewellery designs and again the war saw the armed forces being issued with robust, steel watches with black dials and luminous numerals.

What determines the price of a watch? Price, says Pieter, depends on rarity, quality, age, condition, the make, design and the case. "A big, heavy, gold-cased watch could set you back between R40 000 and R50 000." High-grade brands like Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin, Rolex, Jaeger-LeCoultre, International Watch Co., Breguet, Breitling, TAG Heuer, Omega and all the other top names will always command high prices, especially if in good, original condition.

You can buy a good quality, classic Omega standard watch for between R2 000 and R3 000, but the sky is the limit for the scarce and offbeat – the Miller's Antiques & Collectables website says an incredibly rare 1972 Rolex Oyster Perpetual Submariner British Royal Navy

stainless steel automatic wristwatch can command up to £100 000 (approximately R1 267 515).

And also, like motor cars, there is no point in owning one that does not run. "I bought a 1952 Rolex on auction for R30 000," says Pieter, "although the self-wind works, the automatic winder does not and it has not yet proved possible to fix.

"If you have a good watchmaker who can make you a part, then there is nothing wrong with such repairs. But, sometimes you have to be very patient before the right part turns up. Personally, I have no problem with good watches that have been fully restored, even if this includes dial refurbishment or even replacement with a 'new' dial, as long as it's the correct dial for that particular model," he adds.

Pieter does suggest that when buying a classic watch you make sure it is accompanied by a full condition report from a reputable watchmaker. And keep in mind that the cases of old watches are not always dust-, water- or moisture-proof; this is especially true of those made prior to the 1950s. For this reason, regular services and cleaning by an experienced and qualified watchmaker should be done as needed and will help to conserve the watch's movement and dial.

Flea markets and antique shops are usually the best places to look around for vintage watches and, of course, there is nothing like being armed with a good reference book for the necessary background knowledge. "Bear in mind, though, that watches with more complicated movements, like chronographs, repeaters, tourbillon movements and watches that indicate the day, date, month and phases of the moon, are usually much more expensive to buy initially, and when they hit the second-hand or vintage market remain

expensive," advises Pieter.

What is collected will depend largely on the age of the collector. "Perhaps younger collectors might be attracted to quartz, LDC or battery watches of 20th-century design, however, it is the classic mechanical watches that have lasting value; in fact, the biggest demand by collectors today is for post-1950s sports watches," says Pieter.

As a beginner collector, what do you look for? Usually 'one or more of each kind' is the approach that most collectors take. "In my opinion, availability and budget are usually a person's limits, so buy what appeals to you and also what meets your particular interests, and most importantly have fun," he says. **GMH**

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ● Telemetre chronograph watches, from left to right: an 18ct gold, enamel dial, single button Invar, circa 1925, worth between R25 000 and R30 000; a silver Lancet with printed dial, circa 1915, valued at R20 000. ● Three tank-style watches, from left to right: an 18ct white gold Rolex Cellini, circa 1975, worth R35 000; a stainless steel Omega, circa 1950, valued at between R5 000 and R6 000; a sterling silver Cartier, circa 1980, worth R10 000 – R12 000. ● A selection of Omega watches worth between R5 000 and R12 000 each, from left to right: an 18ct gold manual winding watch, circa 1940; a stainless steel Seamaster calendar, circa late 1970s; a Geneve, circa 1970; a 1950s tank manual winding; a two-tone gold and stainless steel Seamaster from the 1950s. ● A rare 15ct gold H. Moser & Cie. chronograph with crown and pusher in original expanding bracelet, circa 1912.

SOURCE
Jewel Tree 021 423 0744