



Refined: Breguet watches are worn by men with an understated, discerning style

Telling times

If you thought watches were simply for telling the time, you are very much mistaken. Today, a watch says as much about who you are as any other accessory. **Ayden Peach** looks at the images on offer.

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Today, a watch is much more than a timepiece; it is part of a man's appearance, his jewellery in a sense. Alongside the right car, the right tailor and the right cobbler, the right watchmaker helps create the impression a man wishes to portray.

Margot Warman, a fashion historian who sells men's watches from her boutique in New York, believes it is essential to find the correct watch. 'You need to be sure that what you put on your wrist says the right thing. Nothing ruins a carefully crafted image like the wrong watch.'

Changing times

Careful craft is something integral to the allure of mechanical watches. The tradition and cultural prestige that centuries of innovation and expertise provide is not easily reproduced.

Since the first wristwatch was commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte's sister Caroline Murat, the Queen of Naples, in the early 19th century, the manufacture of ever-more accurate timepieces that were small enough to be worn on the wrist dominated the horological establishment, until 1969 when the Japanese brought the first quartz watch, the Seiko Astron, onto the market. This revolutionised the watch industry, with the emergence of digital watches as well as analogue, and it seemed to mark the end of the mechanical watch as perfected by the Swiss manufacturers.

The toll was heavy and Switzerland was fast surpassed as the world's largest exporter of watches by Japan and then Hong Kong, which still produces more watches than anywhere else in the world.

However, the Swiss are making a comeback, producing fewer watches, but of higher value. The high end of the watch market is buoyant and offers a wide enough choice of watches to match any style.

Choosing your timepiece

Choosing a watch that fits your crafted presence might seem difficult, but there are a couple of easy steps to guide you. First, the luxury watch market is evenly split into two halves: the smart and the sporty. It is a choice between an aura of sophistication and the image of an adventurer.

The smart watches include brands such as Breguet and Patek Philippe, and their reputations are built on heritage and elegance. Sporty watches include Jaeger-LeCoultre, Ulysse Nardin and Ernst Benz, and have developed from adventurous histories as timepieces for sailors or pilots where the ability to function under extreme physical stress was essential.



Boris Becker wears an IWC

Cultural capital

Another distinction is between Swiss watches and everything else. Warman says 'the design aesthetic is vital when choosing a watch, but it needs cultural capital to make its artistry worth anything at all. Pieces crafted in Switzerland are leagues, if not centuries, ahead in those stakes.'

Although Swiss-made watches earn a lot of respect, there are brands in the non-Swiss category that also carry a lot of clout. Names such as Cartier or Ernst Benz, French and American respectively, are highly respected and make their own unique statements.

In much the same way as a Scottish single malt whisky commands respect as the original article, few would suggest that there are no Irish and American whiskeys worth drinking. Your personal choice, whether for whisky or whiskey, Swiss or non-Swiss, will say something about who you are.

If cultural capital is important to you, Swiss manufacturers, such as Breguet or Patek Philippe, will elicit appreciation from the horologically aware, as their history and high standards are unrivalled. Breguet, in particular, has captured the throne of classical style. Choosing Swiss watches is a bit like buying all your wine from Bordeaux; it is difficult to go wrong but can seem a touch unadventurous.

The very first wristwatch, commissioned by Catherine Murat, was a Breguet, and the manufacturer occupies an unrivalled cultural position, having been used as a synonym for sophistication, precision and luxury in the writings of Hugo,

Pushkin, Balzac and Dumas, among others. John Fowles, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, refers to a Breguet as 'an instrument from the bench of the greatest of watchmakers'.

Sporting elegance

Some men like their watches to be more hard-wearing, complementing a sporty life, or at least indicating one. Watches can be made to withstand the pressure of thousands of gallons of water, the shocks suffered when falling from a galloping horse, the cold temperatures at the top of the world's highest mountains or the G-forces generated in the cockpit of a fighter jet.

The idea of a watch being capable of taking a few knocks was first suggested by a group of polo players living in India in the 1930s. Jaeger-LeCoultre took up the challenge and came up with the Reverso watch, combining the excellence of the company's tradition with the ability to withstand a tumble.

Since then, big and bold watches that convey durability and strength as well as accuracy have become an essential counterpart to a life of adventure.



Left and opposite: IWC watches are worn by men with a sense of adventure

IWC: A ROGUE ELEMENT

IWC has long been synonymous with some of the world's more high-profile sportsmen, particularly those who embody a certain sort of manliness, combining a roguish quality with underlying strength. Boris Becker has worn IWC watches for many years and even inspired the Portuguese Chrono-Automatic Boris Becker watch. These watches have also appeared on the wrists of Colin Farrell and Jamie Foxx in *Miami Vice*. It's just this sort of mix of authority and mischief that IWC represents.

Ernst Benz is another manufacturer who has expanded into this area, creating chunky watches that aren't scared to make people sit up and take notice of them. To wear a watch from Ernst Benz is to show your confidence and adventurous spirit. In fact, large faces are becoming more popular, with almost every manufacturer now producing large-faced watches.

Today, sports watches are leading the way in making the technological developments in micro-engineering that have always been part of the watchmaking craft. Such innovation encourages a sense of risk, associating the wearer with the new and exciting.

Patek Philippe balances its tradition with accuracy, ensuring that innovation is central to its creations. It has developed a new silicon-based balance spring to accompany the silicon escapement launched in 2005. Silicon is three times lighter than conventional steel and offers smoother surfaces for enhanced action within traditional mechanical structures. Wearing a Patek Philippe makes it clear that precision and accuracy are essential parts of the wearer's character.

Not to be outdone, Ulysse Nardin is now making micro gears out of thin diamond sheets in its Freak series of watches. The Freak series is completely original: with no hands, the movement itself tells you the time. Choosing a watch like this makes it clear that you are interested in cutting-edge technology and are aware of what's on offer.

People watching

It is important that you know what you want your watch to say about you. Ever since Sean Connery wore a Rolex as James Bond it has come to represent the epitome of wrist statements.

However, wearing a Rolex is not something to be taken lightly; confident, successful and expressive men would be comfortable in a Rolex while a more restrained man is better suited by understated manufacturers, such as Breguet.

Although the different personalities of various watches are in part determined by their histories and traditions, a major defining factor is who wears the watch. In fact, manufacturers choose patrons to promote their watches with almost as much care as patrons take in choosing their watches.

Checking out the watch on a celebrity's wrist can tell you a lot about how they wish to be perceived. At the same time, their personality can be associated with the watch, adding to its aura.

For example, John F Kennedy received watches from his wife Jackie and his friend Marilyn Monroe, both style icons in their own right. While Jackie gave him a Cartier, Marilyn gave him a Rolex, indicating their personalities.

Both Winston Churchill and Napoleon Bonaparte wore Breguet, which suggest history and tradition, while Brad Pitt has often been seen with a Rolex, the watch of a man unafraid to make a statement.

Watches have so much history and identity connected to them that it is impossible to wear a watch without making some sort of a statement. Whether your style is refined sophistication or sporting adventure, you can find a watch to tell you the time and others who you are. ■



Far Left: A Breguet stands for Swiss quality
Left: Men with active lifestyles favour Ernst Benz

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