Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1961)

Heft: 1394

Artikel: Watchmaking Curios

Autor: Guye, René P.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691730

The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Advisory Council: R. DE CINTRA (*Chairman*), O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO, GOTTFRIED KELLER, R. J. KELLER, A. KUNZ, A. STAUFFER, G. E. SUTER.

EDITED BY P. HOFSTETTER WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SWISS COLONY IN GREAT BRITAIN.

Telephone: CLERKENWELL 2321/2. Published Twice Monthly at 23, LEONARD STREET, E.C.2. Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

Vol. 47. No. 1394 FRIDAY, 29th SEPTEMBER 1961 PRICE 11D.

WATCHMAKING CURIOS

by RENE P. GUYE

A watch being an instrument designed to tell the time, one would naturally expect it to do so as clearly and legibly as possible. But it is surprising how often this requirement is not fulfilled, in so many watches the clear indication of the time being of somewhat secondary important. A glance at the history of watchmaking reveals that from the very early days of this art, which later grew to be an industry, watchmakers in collaboration with goldsmiths and artists went in for the creation of novelty watches, in many cases little marvels that were real gems, worn to adorn feminine and even masculine attire, rather than merely to indicate the time.

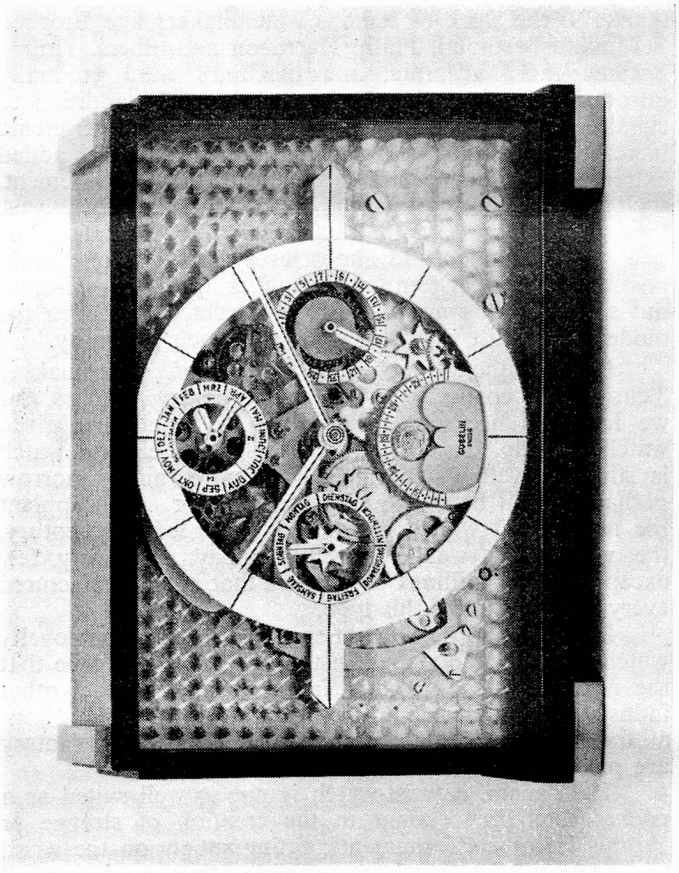
From the study of collections of old watches and the paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries, it is obvious that in those days watches, made of precious metal, were luxury objects, richly adorned with engravings, chasing or precious gems. Noble and wealthy patrons ordered them from a master watchmaker who, for the decoration of the case, could give free rein to his imagination as well as a free hand to the goldsmith and the jeweller working for him; he made the whole movement of these watches, which are often marvels of ingenuity.

They were extremely varied in shape. Those that can be called "classical" were in the shape of spherical or oval balls, cubes or rectangular parallelepipeds or even the frustrum of a pyramid; some were made to look like lockets. The surfaces of the cases were embellished with chasing or engravings, or adorned with precious stones. Worn for the purpose of adornment they were hooked on to a watch-guard or tied at the waist by means of a cord or small chain.

Real Curios

But very often, the watchmaker and even his customer — who was sometimes a Maecenas to him — were no longer contented with geometrical shapes; they wanted something more personal, something completely original; between them, the watchmaker and the goldsmith created fine watches, some of which are real curios. They are not only jewels worn about the person but are used to adorn precious objects, often in the most surprising manner: small boxes, cases and even the hilts of daggers; among the collections of old watches one finds remarkable curios of this kind, in which the indication of the time is of comparatively minor importance.

There are many other curios: in some the movement of the watch is fitted in a small cross or even a crucifix of precious metal, rock-crystal or even ivory; or again, the case is in the form of a tulip — the favourite flower of the 17th century — the head of a dog or a lion. The macabre "death's head" or "skull" watches are well known to collectors; they are made of silver or gold, often embossed in order to reproduce the details of the skull more faithfully.



Swiss watchmakers introduced this unique clock at the 1961 *Basle Fair* (15*th* - 25*th April*). *With a working life of* 400 *years, the clock will give the exact time of day, the day of the week, the moon phases and the month. Not only will it tell us when we are in a leap year — it will adjust itself accordingly.*

The years pass; about the middle of the 18th century, the use of watches became more widespread; watchmakers became more numerous; thanks to their professional knowledge, the watches they manufactured were more precise, the decoration of their cases and especially of their movements evolved, certain fashions were created.

The enamels, those of Geneva in particular, became small masterpieces. On the whole, watches kept their classical form; but in the reign of Louis XVI novelty watches began to appear once again, some of them being real curios.

Song birds and moving figures

Combined with snuff-boxes, watches provided the finishing touch to objects of great beauty in silver or tortoise-shell — often inlaid with mother-of-pearl or ivory, or adorned with precious stones. This period also saw the beginning of the craze for automatons. The Jaquet Droz. Leschots. Maillardets and many others of the day amazed not only their contemporaries, they astonish us, too, with their masterpieces of mechanical ingenuity; these men were clever enough to reduce the size of the mechanisms required to work the automaton sufficiently to fit them into watches, snuff-boxes and ornamental objects. Song birds, moving figures and scenes decorate both big and small watches, making them real curios, each completely unlike any other; collectors of old watches are proud to possess examples, particularly when signed by one of the big names of the pleïad of artists of the 18th century.

The watch mechanisms, too, grew more perfect, thanks to the work of famous watchmakers like Breguet, Ferdinand Berthoud, Philip Harrisson and others. Timing became more accurate, and machines were gradually introduced into watchmaker's workshops. In addition to classical and jewel watches, watchmakers began to create increasingly complicated watches; the most skilful added extremely ingenious extra mechanisms to the movement, such as devices for striking the hours, repeater mechanisms, mechanisms for perpetual calendars, for indicating the phases of the moon and almost everything else one could possibly imagine. Often these watches are so complicated but so beautifully and cleverly constructed that even the modern specialist is lost in wonder at their ingenuity.

It is rather difficult to speak of watchmaking " curios " in connection with contemporary watches, for we lack the necessary perspective to brand any given watch a curio. To-day, for example, the electric watch is still a novelty — but hardly a curio, and tomorrow perhaps it will be on equal terms with or even supplant the mechanical watch. At the beginning of this century, the wrist-watch was a novelty; to-day, with very few exceptions, the millions of watches that are manufactured every year are all of this type.

It might also be thought that the " curio " or novelty watch is less popular than in the past; it is also true that the rationalisation aimed at in watchmaking as in other industries is hardly conducive to the creation and above all the manufacture of curios; mass-production and fantasy are poles apart.

Then again, a wrist-watch is not so well suited as a pocket-watch or pendant to the creation of strange or curious forms and ornaments; fitting snugly on the wrist, the back of the watch is invisible, thus rendering all decoration (enamel, engraving, precious stones, etc.) superfluous.

Nevertheless, recent exhibitions and trade publications have shown that the novelty watch and its corollary, the " curio ", are still sought after, and the success met with by some has far exceeded the expectations of their creators.

Pocket-watches are still worn; they are becoming more and more thin: flat, extra-flat, say the advertisements; the mechanism of some is so thin that it can be fitted into a coin, a gold coin of course, This is definitely a curio.

The strange-looking astronomical watches, although refined and slenderised, have retained the bulky shapes of the 19th century; on the dials, the hands indicate the mean time, sometimes the true solar time; in the windows automatically appear various astronomical data.

First produced about the middle of the 19th century, the watches known as chronographs tell the time and measure intervals of time by means of extra hands; the dials, graduated in various ways, evaluate speeds and distances, check the pulse of patients, count parts and perform a thousand-and-one other useful tasks; they are technical watches, but their complicated and precise mechanism is a curiosity for the layman. The pocket chronograph has also become a type of wrist-watch and met with a great success in this form during the last war.

Shapes of the past

The pendant watch, worn by women, has revived certain shapes of the past: ball or semi-ball watches, flowers corollas and many others besides, enhanced with brightly coloured enamels as well as fine and elegant chasing. The watchmakers and jewellers of to-day produce many unique luxury objects and beautiful curios of this type.

Other curios include watches attached to the chains or braided cords of car keys, and watches fitted into the handles of sunshades, 1900 fashion.

Let us now conclude by mentioning some wrist-watches which fully deserve the name of " curios ". The combination of precious bracelets and tiny luxury watches has given us some unique marvels, some of which have been on display in the big exhibitions, such as a platinum wrist-watch studded with large diamonds, which one would believe straight out of The Thousand and One Nights. An even tinier watch is the one adorning an attractively designed gold ring.

Leafing through catalogues or trade journals, one occasionally comes across some really out-of-the-ordinary watches. There is, for example, a compass watch with a very rounded bulging glass in which a small cavity is hollowed out of the thickest part in the middle to hold a tiny compass. In a similar watch, the compass is replaced by a bimetallic thermometer for measuring the surrounding air — or the arm.

Watches have been specially created for deep-sea divers, an ingenious pressure gauge fitted in the glass indicating very clearly the diver's depth. Frequently efforts have been made — mostly it must be admitted without much success — to make a device with moving figures to replace the hands on the dial; in 1958, one firm showed a watch, which is not without interest; the rectangular dial has two scales similar to that of a thermometer in front of which move two black lines driven by the movement; one indicates the hours, the other the minutes.

While alarm wrist-watches are no longer a novelty, since several factories now make them, the same cannot

be said of the musical alarm-watch; in addition to the very small movement, the case contains a tiny musical box mechanism with its needle-studded drum and vibrating comb.

The trace of a smile

The present logical fashion tends to reduce the visible surface of the case to a minimum so as to show the maximum of dial; there have been many attempts to decorate the dial without detracting from the legibility of the time, by chasing, enamels, engravings, etc. An interesting creation, which had the effect of giving life to the dial, might also have been termed a watchmaking curio on its first appearance in 1953; it caused quite a stir in fact. This watch and all its imitators are now quite commonplace. Like a perpetually moving kaleidoscope, the dial seems alive with continually changing figures in the form of rat-tailed vipers, projected from the centre towards the edge; the optical effect is given by two superimposed perforated, coloured disks, revolving at the same speed as the hands. In spite of this device, the time is very clearly indicated by the tips of the hands.

Let us bring our survey of watchmaking curios to a close here, for the measurement of time is a serious matter with little room for fantasy . . . And yet, looking at certain " unusual " watches, one cannot help imagining the trace of a smile on the lips of the creator — as though he had done what he was commissioned to do, but with his tongue in his cheek.

LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

As was rightly pointed out a short while ago by a leading figure of the Swiss economic world, the idea of aid, like that at present being given to a number of African and Asiatic countries, is a very old one as far as Switzerland is concerned. Even during the last century, many of this country's technicians and merchants settled abroad and often contributed decisively to the discovery of hitherto unknown markets and the economic development of the countries in question. At a somewhat more recent date Switzerland began to grant credits and loans to numerous under-developed countries, thus allowing them to purchase industrial plant, build electric power stations and means of communications, etc., in fact to lay down sound foundations for their growing economies.

While, generally speaking, the whole idea of aid to these countries has changed considerably since then, it is nevertheless possible to say that Switzerland continues to lend her assistance, in accordance with her traditions of independence and neutrality. The form of this collaboration may change to keep pace with the evolution of the countries concerned and the new circumstances; but this adaptation in no way alters the general idea or the policy of the Swiss government, which has no political axe to grind in this instance — which, moreover, is one of the reasons why Switzerland enjoys such confidence among these countries.

In actual practice, Switzerland's aid to under-developed countries takes several forms. Originally it consisted mainly in co-operating in the various multilateral aid programmes organized by the United Nations ("Ordinary programme ", " Expanded programme " and " Special fund "), and financed by some eighty countries. This co-operation was accompanied by a more direct contribution in the form of bilateral aid. However, thanks to the existence and creation of individual Swiss organizations, for the most part the work of private enterprise (" Swiss aid to Extra-European countries ", " Swiss Foundation for Assistance in Technical Development "), Switzerland makes a direct contribution to certain concrete projects, such as the foundation of vocational training schools, to quote but one example. Generally speaking, the Swiss have already done a considerable amount of work towards helping those peoples interested in building a viable and productive economy for themselves.

It was to further this work that the Federal Chambers recently voted a new credit of S.Fr. 60 million. In addition to her contribution to multilateral aid programmes which will be raised to S.Fr. 8 million annually, Switzerland's bilateral co-operation during the next three years will amount to S.Fr. 12 million. This sum will be used to meet the needs as they develop. But as, in addition to the esteem in which the country is held on the political level, Swiss schools and teachers have always enjoyed an excellent reputation throughout the world, teaching constitutes one of Switzerland's main contributions. The country has already offered scholarships to a number of African and Asiatic students; in order, however, to be able to achieve really positive results in the field of education, she hopes to be able to send these countries more and more teachers of secondary school and higher level, in addition, of course, to technicians and scientists, and this in spite of the fact that Switzerland herself is short of qualified staff in all branches of education.