

S I M P L E M O D E R N C L A S S I C



In these modest times - all things being equal - the task of a commercial enterprise has become just that little bit more challenging. Getting us to buy stuff is not as easy as it was. With this in mind, any retailer with an interest in exchanging our harder earned cash for their wares has to convince us their product boasts some vital attributes, chief among which is this: usefulness. Step forward the humble - but undeniably purposeful - chronograph.

Robin Swithinbank

So, it is not biggest-ness or best-ness that consumers are looking for - these are arbitrary qualities, and of most interest to us when times are good and we feel like rewarding ourselves for being so very excellent. Usefulness is a brilliant motivator, whatever the weather, but particularly when shininess, blingy-ness and fanciness suddenly seem, well - useless. Backed up by quality and reliability, a useful product remains an attractive proposition even under intense scrutiny.

What does this mean then, when it comes to watches? Swiss timepieces haven't always offered usefulness, as shown by mid-Noughties trends of gargantuan case sizes, Martian materials, excessive application of precious stones and complications that fascinate, but don't necessarily serve a purpose in the real world. In 2010, there are signs that these whims may be evaporating, leaving behind only what *is* useful. Once your watch has successfully told you the time and the date, there are only - in my opinion - two other functions a watch needs to be genuinely of use: a device for measuring unique units of time, and the capacity to tell the time in more than one time zone (assuming some level of water-resistance and durability are a given).



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Brushing to one side GMT and world time watches for now, this brings us to chronographs, which enjoyed a renaissance at this year's Basel and Geneva shows. Patek Philippe stole my attention with the magnificent 5170J column-wheel chronograph and the devastatingly beautiful cushion-shaped 5951P split seconds chrono and perpetual calendar. Zenith introduced the El Primero Striking 10th, which harnesses its seminal El Primero chronograph movement to power a central seconds hand that completes a

full rotation of the dial in 10 seconds and measures time to the nearest tenth.

All impressively useful, and I could go on. But if I did there's a high chance you'd run out of money - these are exclusive, high value pieces, even without a smattering of diamonds. Not to despair, though. That doesn't mean there aren't some excellent chronographs out there that won't blow a hole in your safe. Here are three:



Sinn Sports Chronograph 144 St Sa

Sinn has been quietly going about its business making solid, reliable mechanical timepieces since 1961. The company was bought out in 1994 by Lothar Schmidt, who inspired an era of innovation that has seen the collection embrace a number of pioneering developments, including de-humidifying technology that slows the ageing of lubricating oils; TEGIMENT finishing that gives stainless steel cases a surface hardness of 1200 Vickers; and the game-changing DIAPAL technology, which employs materials that work together without requiring lubrication. If this all sounds very German, it's because it is - Sinn is based in Frankfurt.

Not surprisingly, the 144 looks rather Teutonic too. It's equipped with a stainless steel bead-blasted 41mm case and bracelet, a no-fuss black dial, anti-reflective coating on the sapphire crystal, a day-date aperture and three sub-dials. One of these is a jumping 30-minute counter, which, like the hour counter and central seconds hand features an easy-to-read red hand. The result is a calm, clinical watch that looks like it could bring order to even the most chaotic schedule.

Sinn manufactures its watches in-house and retains exclusivity over its watchmaking innovations, but as with the vast majority of reasonably priced mechanical chronographs, the 144's beating heart is the ubiquitous but bulletproof ETA 7750 movement, a Swiss import, of which more in a moment. Medics will be interested to know the 144 also features a Pulsometer around the outside of the dial. Everyone else will be interested to know this engagingly taciturn piece is available for a very reasonable £900.

From the beginning, Sinn's emphasis was on creating special purpose instrumental watches that performed under adverse operating conditions and the brand remains dedicated to solving typical problems of mechanical watches.

Ball Watch Company Fireman Ionosphere

Now this piece is slightly more showy, if only because like all Ball watches, the Ionosphere comes alive when the lights go out. Nineteen self-powered micro gas lights illuminate the dial in the dark, glowing up to 100 times more brightly than luminous paint, with a lifespan of 25 years.

Like the Sinn, Ball's Ionosphere is powered by the ETA 7750, a base movement that since its launch in 1974 by blank movement factory Valjoux has breathed life into chronographs made by timekeeping luminaries including Breitling, Omega and IWC. Simple, reliable and adaptable (to include flyback or split seconds functions), the 7750 is a utility movement, which sounds unromantic, but it's Swiss made and subject to exacting quality controls, which should still tug on the heart strings.

It's not merely this dependable movement that makes the 43mm stainless steel Ionosphere a trustworthy companion. Ball's proficient-looking watch is also shock-resistant to 5000Gs and water-resistant to 100m, but what makes it really interesting is that it was designed in collaboration with engineer and NASA astronaut Dr Owen Garriott, the scientist-pilot for the 1973 Skylab 3 mission. An engraving of a spacesuit on the caseback is a nice little reminder of this, and a pub talking point too. Also remarkable is that it's yours for just £1,300.

Astronaut Owen Garriott - the first scientific pilot to be sent into space with the Skylab 3 mission - worked with Ball's designers on developing this timepiece with central hour, minute and chronograph seconds, day and date at 3 o'clock, small seconds at 9 o'clock, 30-minute and 12-hour counters at 12 and 6 o'clock respectively.



Longines Sports Collection Conquest

Higher profile than both Sinn and Ball, this piece is also a chunkier proposition. With this comes greater water-resistance (to 300m), but thanks to its silvered dial and gently sloping polished steel bezel, the overall effect is less aeronautical engineer and more invite-only soirée with the ambassador.

Elegance is at the heart of the Longines brand message, so perhaps this is to be expected. Smooth lines and small details make the difference. Note the way the 30-minute counter sub-dial cuts through the Arabic numeral at 12 o'clock and how the crown and push pieces are integrated to create a neat finish. The bracelet features a triple safety folding clasp and a push-piece opening mechanism. Stainless steel rarely looks this graceful.

The Conquest is powered by Longines' L667 automatic movement, which is a tweaked version of the 7750 and brings a healthy 46-hour power reserve to your wrist. All told, it'll set you back £1,110. Great value for a chronograph with a Swiss made mechanical movement that is, above all, a very useful bit of kit.

The 41mm Longines Conquest marries steel with ceramic and features an automatic movement, resulting in timeless style in a model that meets the requirements of the most demanding sportsmen and women.

