



Collecting

Part Ten: Shaped Cases (II)



We pick up the 'form watch' story immediately post-war, when art deco's influence on watch design began to give way to a host of extraordinary shapes, with equally extraordinary nicknames: Banana, Manta Ray, Ram's Horn and Lips are just a few notable collectables from the Forties and Fifties, when Patek and Vacheron ruled the roost. The second of our two-parter also suggests which modern shaped-case watches might be worth tracking down. On the current market, Rolex's new Prince and Patek's revived Chronometro Gondolo are surefire investments - waiting lists permitting, of course!

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Hourglass figures

By the late '40s and '50's, some of the most exquisite case shapes were being produced, no doubt helped by the healthy competition between Patek Philippe and Vacheron Constantin. The design departments of these two great houses went into overdrive, successively daring each other into more and more flamboyant directions. Four of Patek's most coveted 'cassa di forma' watches all come from this period. The most famous is perhaps the ref. 2441 'Tour Eiffel', after its flared square-section lugs' resemblance to the Parisian landmark's feet. If you want an original, be prepared to part with £40,000-45,000, though the ref. 5500 'Pagoda' re-edition from 1997 can be purchased for a more modest £9,000-14,000, depending on the metal (the platinum version fetches closer to £25,000 or £30,000).

No less desirable is the ref. 2442, made between 1948 and 1955, commonly known amongst collectors as the 'Banana'. It is my favourite shaped case, with long, globular lugs curving stylishly from the rectangular sides, and I'm afraid nothing less than £25,000 is now required for a yellow-gold version. The platinum example pictured actually sold for near-enough £150,000 at Sotheby's in 2003, showing the lengths collectors will go to getting their hands on these exquisite oddities.

Another fabulously named piece is the 'Manta Ray' ref. 2554 (yellow-gold versions at the more accessible end of the pre-owned spectrum, ca £10,000), whose triangular 'fins' inspired Patek's beautiful '10 Days' ref. 5100 made in limited numbers for the Millennium. Versions in gold regularly fetch £20,000-25,000. One other perennial auction favourite is the macho 'Ram's Horn' model, ref. 2471 - again one of the expensive ones, leaving little change from £35,000.

Vacheron had its own stars too, the most famous being the square ref. 6440, or 'Cioccolatone' to Italian collectors who likened its square form to a piece of chocolate. If £20,000-25,000 is a bit too much, you can always get Vacheron's modern equivalent with triple calendar and a moonphase, now marketed as the 'Toledo 1952' in their Les Historiques collection - yet another example of a watch house acknowledging collectors' revived love for quirky vintage models.

(Top) Sold at Sotheby's London last year for £22,800 (over twice its low estimate), this Patek ref. 2441 from ca 1950 is fondly dubbed the 'Eiffel Tower'. The model inspired 1997's 1,100-strong 'Pagoda' series (right) marking the inauguration of Patek's new watchmaking manufacture in Geneva. Destruction of the tools and dies used in its production ensures that reference 5500 can no longer be made. This example recently fetched HK\$165,200 (ca £10,500) at Antiquorum.



One of the most important examples is Vacheron's ref. 4775, or 'Papillon' - a fantastic piece, with beautifully designed butterfly lugs and a bargain compared to comparable Pateks (gold versions at £15,000 and £30,000 in platinum). Papillon perfectly illustrates the influence that American car design had on watches during the Fifties, and numerous other watches by Vacheron Constantin and Patek Philippe bear testimony to this trend, including VC's ref. 4984 - one of the most desirable rectangular references on the pre-owned market. Known affectionately as the 'Lips' watch, and bearing striking resemblance to Patek's ref. 1588 (as always, keen to react to market trends and compete), you can kiss one of these for a mere £5,000-6,000 in yellow gold.

It was not all Cartier, Patek and Vacheron though. Omega launched its 'Cosmic' model in a wonderful carré galbé case in 1947. This is perhaps one of the most aesthetically perfect watches ever designed; all aspects of the watch, from the bombé glass to the curved case and wonderful lapidated teardrop lugs, are magnificent. It is one of the most sensual watches I have ever seen and worn. Thanks to Omegamania, values have risen dramatically, and yellow-gold versions with the original black dial are now theoretically worth £10,000-12,000 (we must wait to see whether this value holds though). You can acquire a modern version as one of the De Ville models, the 'X2', but sadly without the complication.

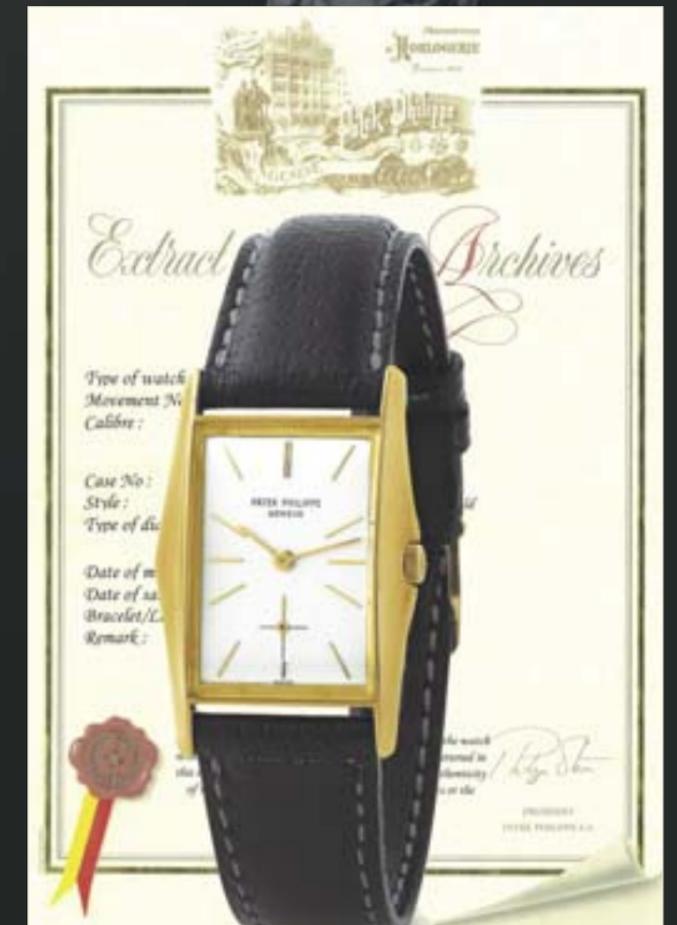
The Sixties onwards

Unfortunately, the Sixties witnessed a decline in the popularity of shaped case watches as the thin, round, gold watch began its reign. However, all was not lost: two wonderfully eccentric models were created in this decade: the Cartier Crash, and the Patek Asymétrique.

(Above left) An awe-inspiring Sfr.316,000 (£149,656) was paid for this platinum and diamond-set Patek ref. 2442 'Banana' at Sotheby's in May 2003.

(Above right) Pink-gold example of the so-called 'Ram's Horns' Patek, made ca 1957 and sold at Antiquorum in 2005 for \$57,500.

(Below) The 'pectoral fins' of this ref. 2554 Patek earned fond comparison to the manta ray tropical fish in the Fifties. This example sold at Antiquorum New York for a mid-estimate \$24,780.





(Above) Recalling Vacheron's iconic 1950s form watch, Cioccolato, the current 'Toledo 1952' triple-calendar moonphase version is £15,400 in white gold. (Right) Dubbed 'Papillon', after its butterfly lugs, Vacheron's ref. 4775 is another model coveted above others for its creative and technical shape. SFr.63,250 bought one owner this platinum example at Antiquorum.



(Right) Being competitive and attentive to the evolution of the market, the two major houses of the Fifties, Patek and Vacheron, often produced similar models. This ref. 4984 bears a striking resemblance to Patek's ref. 1588, and, despite being known as the 'Lips', bears testament to the influence of automobile design in the Fifties. This yellow-gold Lips watch was sold at Antiquorum's 'Quarter Millennium of Vacheron Constantin' theme sale in 2005 for SFr.16,100.

(Left) A 1951 Omega Cosmic, in remarkable condition, now worth up to £15,000. Omega's first calendar watch, it was equipped with calibre 27 DL, later renamed as cal. 381, and inspired the Omega Museum collection's Cosmic carré watch in 2002.

Vacheron's Papillon perfectly illustrates the influence that American car design had on watches during the Fifties.

Cartier's Crash has a rather macabre history. Following a car accident, the unfortunate owner's Baignoire Allongée deformed from the ensuing fire's intense heat. When the watch was brought in for repair, the deformed shape proved to be the inspiration for Crash's design, and name. Just seven pieces were made between 1968 and 1975. A limited edition of 400 pieces was produced in 1991, and these are rarely available for sale, but

look to budget around £8,000-12,000. As for one of the original seven pieces, a few have turned up at auction and sell for £25,000.

Jewellery designer Gilbert Albert, head of Patek Philippe's workshops from 1955, was responsible for some of the most eclectic wristwatches produced by the company. Breaking away from traditional shapes, he introduced asymmetrical

triangles and rhombic forms inspired by his passion for modern sculpture and works by artists such as Brancusi and Mondrian. His creativity produced the famed references 3422 and 3424. Highly sought-after at auction, a yellow-gold 3422 normally hammers between £20,000 and £30,000. Last year's new ref. 5489 Gondolo 'Trapeze', a trapezoid design, continues the tradition initiated by Albert, although I do wish it was slightly larger.

The Seventies was a decade that belonged to Cartier. A new version of the 1936 Parallelogram was produced in a larger case, which has since become another Cartier classic. Today, a white-gold model can cost £15,000-20,000. A two-time-zone reversible Tank model followed in the late Seventies, again another classic, and again £15,000-20,000.

In 1991, Jaeger Le-Coultré celebrated the 60th anniversary of its iconic Reverso with the launch of a new, larger 'Grande Taille' case. The larger case allowed the Reverso to incorporate new movements and complications, and what a venturesome decision it proved to be. The first of the limited series in pink gold with power reserve and date (£8,000-10,000) was followed by a chronograph, tourbillon, minute repeater, geographic and perpetual calendar. It is perhaps most beautiful series of

watches manufactured, and the average value for one is £15,000-18,000.

Franck Muller continued the tradition of the form watch with his Casablanca and Long Island (more than a hint of Patek Gondolo here!), and like the Grande Taille Reverso, it boasts every type of complication. Patek has also reinvigorated its Gondolo line, initially with the ref. 5024 in yellow and white gold (now discontinued, £5,000-6,000), and more recently the current production models ref. 5109 and 5111, which reminds me of the vintage Top Hat model. Perhaps the bargain of the modern era is the steel Cartier Tank Basculante re-issue, using an ingenious, hinge-and-bracket flip-over case and housing the exquisite Piguet cal. 6.10. Sales were not remarkable (perhaps it was a victim of the super-size revolution), but I would love to

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(Left) A 'big' hit for Cartier at this year's SIHH fair was the Tank XL, which scales-up an existing classic with similar success to 2004's Santos 100 launch. (Centre) The rather macabre Cartier Crash, styled and named after a Baignoire Allongée that came in for repair in the mid-Sixties after melting in a car accident fire. (Right) In 1955, at the age of 24, renowned Genevan jewellery designer Gilbert Albert began design cases for Patek Philippe. His rhomboid ref. 3422 was first manufactured in 1960 and the pictured example fetched HK\$230,000 (ca £19,000) at Antiquorum in 2005.

see a larger version of this classic, whose main advantage over the Reverso is the ability to transform into a convenient bedside clock!

The current market for form watches, despite rumours of the death of the 'dress' watch, is actually remarkably strong. One only needs to look at the wrists of tomorrow's collectors for the evidence: all adorned with Emporio Armani's ubiquitous rectangular fashion statement. And a glance at the escalating prices of vintage pieces is enough to reassure anyone of form watches' investment potential.

New forms

But what would make a shrewd modern purchase? When it comes to investing, you need to consider the big guns: Patek, Rolex, Cartier and, strangely, not a brand but a watch - the inimitable Reverso. The Reverso series in pink gold makes an excellent acquisition, especially the minute repeater and tourbillon models. If you can find one of the steel moonphase editions made for Wempe in just 100 pieces you will have snagged a rare bird indeed. Reversos in platinum are very rare, and if bought astutely from the secondary market, should reap dividends. Pateks of course come with instant collectability, but, as always, some are more collectable than others! The new Chronometro Gondolo (see Shaped Cases Part I) is, of course, practically guaranteed classic status.

Another healthy sign is the reappearance of Rolex's Prince; a bit like an open-top Jaguar sports car; never quite in favour when

new, but always destined for classic status. Revamped in a larger size, the new Princes have captured the mood of the market, and for the first time in a Rolex, come with a sapphire caseback - better late than never!

For those with a more moderate budget in the market for a classically styled shaped-case watch, the Longines Evidenza and Dolce Vita collections will do very nicely. Also worth consideration is the elegant No. 7 collection from the youthful Bedat & Co., with its elegant curves echoing those of Patek's Tour Eiffel/Pagoda.

Old or new, Cartier's limited editions will always be coveted, especially classics such as the Tank Cintrée made in just 50 pieces, or the 150th anniversary Tank à Guichets in platinum. All of the complicated Tortue models are safe bets, especially the chronographs and Cartier's Collection Privée is an Aladdin's cave of formed treasures, reviving all the classics (see cover story, Issue 24).

To end this fleeting glimpse into the world of the shaped case, we now have the absolute in form watches - the Cartier Tank - in XL size, presumably banking on the success of the Santos' beefy '100' reincarnation. With a new, larger case (but not so large that it would lose its discretion on the wrist), the Tank XL now comes with a sapphire caseback, is available in rose gold and platinum and lends the ultimate expression of design, luxury and horological savvy. I want one. 