



Collecting

Part Nine: Shaped Cases (I)



Ever since Louis Cartier allegedly invented the modern wristwatch in 1904, numerous milestone models from every key player have distinguished themselves through case shape alone. Reverso, Pagoda, Eiffel Tower, Gondolo, Tank, Cioccolato... all iconic designs that evoke their era more vividly than most round watches. And with many new brands reviving classic forms from the Twenties through Fifties, prices for original 'cassa di forma' watches are escalating. In the first of a two-part review of the most collectable, we see how Cartier set the bar high from the very start, why Patek's Gondolo series exploded, and who benefitted most from art deco.

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(Left) Despite a relatively subdued estimate of £12,000-18,000, this platinum Cartier Tank with Breguet hands, ca 1940, sold at Sotheby's London last year for £48,000.

(Above) The hinge-and-bracket case of this ca 1932 Tank 'Basculante' allows the watch to be reversed, or stood upright as a bedside 'clock'. Sold in May by Christie's for SFr.39,600.

(Right) Extremely rare platinum Tank 'Cintrée', originally sold by Cartier New York in August 1942. The most coveted Tank variant, this fine example fetched more than double its high estimate at Antiquorum last November, at SFr.301,700.



(Left) The original Chronometro Gondolo ref. 1322 from 1925 - inspiration for this year's ref. 5098 replica. 'Gondolo' derives from the name of a Rio de Janeiro retailer, for whom Patek supplied special form watches for almost 30 years, from 1902.

(Right) Hot watch at Basel 2007 was Patek's Chronometro Gondolo ref. 5098 (€18,585), containing calibre 25-21 REC PS - the first rectangular ('REC') movement from Patek since the formed calibre 9-90, introduced in 1934 and retired in 1967. The dial is an exact replica of its 80-something predecessor (left), and the case shape only departs with a subtly reworked camber.



(Below right) Fetching over twice its high estimate, a rectangular platinum Patek from 1928 sold at Christie's big May sale for SFr.108,000.

(Below left) An interesting, skeletonised Audemars Piguet from 1967 sold at the same sale for SFr.42,000. Form watches were scarce during the Sixties - and this makes a very collectable exception.

It was in 1904 that Parisian playboy Alberto Santos-Dumont requested that his friend Louis Cartier design and make a wristwatch for him, as it would be easier to use in flight than his cumbersome pocket watch. The resulting square wristwatch, the Santos, was in fact the first 'form' or shaped-case wristwatch. Indeed, round wristwatches didn't become popular until the 1930s, when the Bauhaus influence reached its peak.

From the very start, the wristwatch market was dominated by Cartier and Patek in terms of both desirability and design. The first wristwatches were extremely expensive and deemed quite feminine, and popularity extended to those with rather fuller bank accounts.

Cartier, no doubt spurred-on by the success of its Santos, introduced the 'tonneau' or barrel-shaped watch in 1906. Today, these early models in platinum can exceed £20,000 at auction; even more if embellished with diamonds. Six years on, and Louis Cartier launched the famed Tortue, the tortoise-shaped case that would house some of Cartier's most exclusive movements, such as the minute repeater and chronograph. Today, these are perhaps the most coveted of all Cartier watches - an original chronograph today would achieve a handsome price at auction, probably exceeding £40,000-50,000. However, it was in 1917 that the most famous of all Cartier designs was conceived, based on the plan of an allied Renault tank. The Louis Cartier Tank was an instant hit, even reaping Hollywood endorsement with devotees such as Rudolph Valentino. A good-condition platinum Tank from the 1920s with Breguet hands can easily bring in £11,000-12,000.

Countless variations on the Tank theme soon followed, and the most desirable of all, the Tank Cintrée debuted in 1923. Rectangular and curved, it was very large for its time, and in platinum prices at auction are phenomenal: with an original platinum bracelet, it is not uncommon to see values exceed £150,000.

Vintage Cartier values are no doubt helped by the use of European Watch and Clock Company movements, which are widely regarded as some of the finest of the era. Attempts at waterproofing led to the Tank à Vis in 1931, where the bezel was screwed. I have yet to see a vintage one at auction, but a more modern Collection Privée model (see cover story, Issue 24) can be purchased for a not unreasonable £5,000-6,000, pre-owned. In conjunction with Jaeger, Cartier's reversible or 'Basculante' Tank was premiered in 1932. Using an ingenious hinge and bracket system, the centre part of the case

could swivel upon itself. A good condition Basculante is currently £20,000-£25,000.

Patek also took the wristwatch challenge seriously, and in a far-sighted business decision, made an effort to concentrate a large part of its manufacturing process solely on wristwatches. Some of the most desirable early examples were made exclusively for the Rio de Janeiro retailer, Gondolo y Labouriau, and were known as the 'Chronometro Gondolo' series (see Issue 6, 'The Latin Connection'). Since the sales price of SFr.790 was roughly equivalent to a qualified Brazilian worker's annual salary, customers were offered an attractive payment scheme: SFr.10 a week for a maximum of 79 weeks and admission to the Plano do Club

(Right) Jaeger-LeCoultre's Reverso was the ultimate art deco watch. This 'Amelia Earhart' edition from 1935 commemorates the aviation pioneer's solo flight from Mexico City to New York, and demonstrates the caseback's versatility. This lot was sold for SFr.25,960 at Antiquorum last year.





Two Rolex Princes from a Sotheby's London sale in 2005, one from ca 1929 in highly collectable two-tone gold (left) and a flared 'Brancard' ref. 971 in platinum from ca 1950 (right), which fetched over twice its high estimate, at £15,600.



Long and curved, Patek Philippe's ref. 492 in 'Staybrite' steel from ca 1936, during the height of art deco's influence. Sold for SFr.18,400 at Antiquorum in 2004.

Patek Philippe - a lottery in which one Chronometro Gondolo was the prize in each of 79 consecutive weekly drawings.

The first Chronometro Gondolo wristwatches appeared around 1910, eight years after the series started. Made and shipped to Rio until 1927, the series featured rectangular, tonneau, square and cushion-shaped models, which is why 'Gondolo' remains the name chosen for all form watches by Patek Philippe. Very sought-after are the long, curved rectangular pieces. Indeed, the extra-large version - at 30 mm x 47 mm, large even by today's standards - is currently valued at £30,000-50,000. Also popular are the tonneau-cased Chronometro Gondolos launched in 1925. This year, Patek has re-launched this model in platinum as the ref. 5098. And within lies Patek's first rectangular movement since the esteemed calibre 9-90 was retired in 1967. A smash hit of Baselworld 2007, don't expect a forgiving waiting list! Needless to say, the lucky few will soon own a watch with an auction value far greater than the current £18,585 retail price.

In reverse

From the early '20s to the end of the '30s, the overriding design philosophy was art deco. As a statement of modernism and elegance, its influence impacted on aspects of design ranging from shoes to buildings and of course watches. In a sense, an amalgamation of many different styles and movements of the early 20th century, including constructivism, cubism, modernism, Bauhaus, art nouveau, and futurism, art deco manifested itself in watches principally through motifs found in architecture and automobile design - streamlined, angular, faceted and stepped forms with sweeping curves.

One of the favoured materials was bright steel, and Patek manufactured many of its art deco wristwatches in this rare metal. Two of the most coveted pieces are references 492, a long, curved wristwatch, and the ultra-rare ref. 522 with more angular triple-step case edges, valued at £16,000-£20,000. The style of these art deco classics was emulated recently by the modern 10-day tourbillon, ref. 5101p.

However, it was neither Patek nor Cartier that produced the most definitive art



Ultra-rare, with spectacular art deco styling, a steel ref. 522 from 1938 worth approximately £16,500.

deco wristwatch. Designed in 1931 for accident-prone polo players, the flip-case Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso has become a deserved legend. It was unique: a watch that revolved back on itself, protecting its delicate glass. Its allure however, transcended the polo pitch. The back of the case could be engraved or enamelled, adding exclusivity and individuality. Today, a rare steel '30s Reverso will retail for £4,000-5,000. Even rarer are the reversible watches that both Patek and Vacheron produced under license from Jaeger, such as the

demand for this model in the Thirties. For a royalty of 60 francs per watch, Vacheron made five examples in 1934, one of which sold in 2003 for SFr.80,500!

There was another company expanding in the 1930s, rapidly devouring market share with clever publicity and an unquenchable supply of rugged chronometers. However, the Rolex Watch Company's ultimate expression of style and exorbitance was the universally adored Prince. There were actually several styles, the most hankered-after being the ref. 971 'Brancard' waisted-case model and the step-sided 'Railway', but collectors aspire especially to the 971 'tiger stripe' model in yellow and white gold. Good, unrestored pieces with original dials in 18 ct gold can fetch £14,000-18,000. Jump-hour models also attract a great deal of interest amongst collectors: a white-gold Brancard ref. 1491 is currently £20,000-25,000, but be patient as these are as rare as hens' teeth. Slightly less expensive is the jump-hour 'Railway' model, ref. 1587, at £15,000, in two-tone yellow and white gold. Silver Prince Brancard's are relatively affordable, at £3,000-4,000, and even in today's Oyster-dominated market, the Prince retains its peculiar appeal amongst collectors. ◉



Of extraordinary proportions, this wristwatch is one of the largest ever made by Patek Philippe - undoubtedly as part of the Gondolo series. Sold at Sotheby's Geneva on 17th May 2005, way above estimate at SFr.138,000, the extract from Patek's archives confirms the movement was manufactured in 1912, cased and completed in 1922 and sold the same year.

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