

ADVENTURES IN SPACE

Mitch Greenblatt generally walks in and straight out of most watch shops, citing Rolex as “dull” and the modern watch world “boring”. Perhaps forgivable, given that the New York artist owns what could possibly be the world’s biggest collection of space-age watches, harking from the days when we all dreamed of homes on the moon and meals in a tablet. The horological spectrum of brushed aluminium, garish Perspex and red LED that dots Greenblatt’s Brooklyn apartment is quite astounding, making it all the harder to understand why ‘Watchismo’ - as he is now known - didn’t wear a watch till he was 30.

Claire Adler

Despite that familiar obsession for watch collecting that we all know, Mitch Greenblatt is something of an anti watch geek, basing all his purchases on looks alone, with little care for what’s ticking beneath or who made it tick in the first place. After all, until 2002, he was an illustrator for nine years with clients such as Absolut Vodka, and has even worked as a painter, sculptor and photographer. Self-dubbed ‘Watchismo’, Greenblatt is now mad about futuristic-looking watches, and judging by the vast array of weird and wonderful wrist-gadgets on his website, it’s no surprise that looks come first.

It wasn’t long ago though that Greenblatt’s daily routine in New York hinged on scanning the wrists of subway passengers to check the time. Despite being obsessively punctual, he never wore a watch. The turning point came during a visit to Portobello Market in London’s Notting Hill. “The world of watches simply had not existed for me before that point,” says Greenblatt. “But that day I saw a space-age watch and it touched me. I was rushing to the airport and I didn’t have any British cash left on me so I never bought it.”

A former illustrator, painter and sculptor, Mitch ‘Watchismo’ Greenblatt now harbours a serious passion for how watchmakers from the Fifties to the Seventies embraced modernism, technology and the future. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.





(Left) A highlight of Greenblatt's collection is the Synchronar Solar LED, originally conceived by the inventor Roger Riehl in 1960, long before Pulsar, Omega, or Hamilton's LED watches. CMOS finally created integrated circuits in 1967 allowing Riehl to show his first working 'Synchronar' (short for Synchronous Chronometer Calendar) in 1971. It is 100% solar powered, thanks to its silicon power cells on top, and when not exposed to light, the watch will run for months on stored power.

squirrelled away in Greenblatt's personal treasure trove. Customers have even included the prestigious American department store Barneys, but Greenblatt prefers to sell directly to his customers - most of whom are British, curiously.

In addition to classic digital brands like Pulsar, Bulova and Omega, Greenblatt carries the more obscure makes, including Spaceman - in pursuit of which he contacted the designer's son and promptly flew to Switzerland to buy the world's remaining stock from the original distributor. His collection also includes arguably historic artifacts, such as one of the first battery-powered watches from the 1950s (Hamilton's asymmetric Electric), early digital watches with LED displays, and some of the first ever LCD watches. A good example of how well preserved Greenblatt's collection gets is his stunning *Odyssee 2001* - a Hamilton watch commemorating the American firm's involvement on Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film. *2001's* producers apparently commissioned several designers to envisage 21st century everyday objects for the film, which included the original sculptured wristband now living in the National Watch and Clock Museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania. True to form, Greenblatt's *Odyssee 2001* still looks thoroughly contemporary, and even futuristic.

"I was never a science fiction geek," says Greenblatt, "but when I first noticed these watches, I appreciated the thought processes behind imagining everyday items for the future. Of course, watch design was also being hugely influenced

by product design of the time," he says, citing the iconic JVC Videosphere - a round television that could either be suspended from a chain or appended to a tube platform.

Customer services

Inevitably, many of the brands in Greenblatt's collection didn't last very long and several watches are obscure one-offs. So surely there is a thin line between discovering a rare gem and unearthing something no one wanted to look at in the first place? Greenblatt admits that some of the watches he has encountered over the years have faces only their creator could love, but many are joyous and special finds. "I've noticed some of my customers, including a Danish watch company, have morphed these watches into something else," he says. "I feel a bit like a curator, encouraging others to take notice of these designs." One such incident occurred, he believes, when 'urban' clothing brand Diesel bought several pieces, subsequently launching high-street designs clearly informed of the Seventies aesthetic reflected by Watchismo's portfolio. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, after all...



An unearthly design from Record - a brand owned by Longines.

In 1966, Stanley Kubrick commissioned Hamilton to design a futuristic watch for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, resulting in the 'The Heavy', a sculptured watch used as a prop in the film (below), now housed in the National Watch and Clock Museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania. In 1969, Hamilton released a commemorative limited edition - the *Odyssee 2001*, of which Greenblatt has two examples (right and bottom right). The model with triangular hands and spherical markers is rarer, but the model with baton hands and square markers is more attractive.



(Above) 'Vega' model of Hamilton's legendary Electric - 'the world's first electric watch', launched in 1957. The array of case styles available reminded customers of the ultra-modern movement inside: a mechanical escapement battery-driven via electrical contacts making and breaking a circuit at a rate of 2.5 Hz (the equivalent of 18,000 vph).



Treasure hunt

But the memory of that watch never left Greenblatt. He began a long trawl through eBay and the few vintage watch shops left in New York without much success. "Nothing replaced the craving for that original watch," he says. This experience, coupled with a birthday gift of an avocado-green vintage Universal from his girlfriend got Greenblatt irretrievably hooked.

History of the Modern Wristwatch by Pieter Doenson soon became Greenblatt's bible. The book focuses on the advances in post-war watch design, including those by Richard Arbib, who created the mechano-lectric Hamilton Electric hybrid, and Pierre Cardin whose watches came out circa 1971, just before the designer licensed-out his name for countless other products. "That book changed everything. It got me focused on what was out there," says Greenblatt.

Ever since, he has travelled across the USA, Switzerland, France, The Netherlands and beyond in search of the most unusual timepieces from the 1960s and 1970s. He buys vintage watches for his collection with a view to selling them directly to customers - assuming of course that the piece isn't so unique or rare that it's

(Below and bottom) Greenblatt bought-up the entire remaining stock of the now-defunct 'Spaceman' brand from its old Swiss distributor, having tracked-down the brand's founder's son in Switzerland. The Audacieuse (below) is a classic space-age design from 1972, by Andre Le Marquand, who was inspired by an astronaut's helmet.



(Right) Plastic fantastic: two 1971 Pierre Cardin 'new old stock' watches with Jaeger movements.

(Below) A 1960s mechanical-digital chronograph from Waltham, based on a Kelek movement.



(Above) From 1976, a Zenith 'Time Command' analogue/LED hybrid watch, on sale at watchismo.com for \$990.

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Greenblatt's most adrenaline-fuelled sale turned into a nightmare though. The personal stylist for a "major pop music mogul" was interested in an early LED watch by Pulsar. "Within the space of five minutes, he wrote me 12 emails, announcing he would come over with cash. The whole thing didn't seem real," recalls Greenblatt. "The guy came round with \$10,000, saying he didn't want to spend it all. He bought some LEDs claiming it was a done deal. But later he came back insisting on exchanging the items several times over. Celebrities just want everything now. It made me joke about banning them from my website..."

Largely unimpressed by the conservative Swiss watch world, Greenblatt is nonetheless excited by the rather more esoteric innovators of *haute horlogerie*, like Vianney Halter and Felix Baumgartner. He is

fascinated by their respective Opus projects for Harry Winston as well as Baumgartner's Urwerk 103 series, which "looks like a spacecraft", according to Greenblatt. "I wish I had done that myself," he adds wistfully.

He could be on the cusp of taking the first step in that direction, though. Now no longer content to sell only others' retro-futuristic designs, Greenblatt is beaver away on designs for his own watch, which he suspects might be a bit *too* advanced-looking for most. He is reluctant to give too much away, but reveals his own design will be heavily influenced by his favourite type of space-age watch - those with a side-on view. Often called 'driver's watches', the position of the display means you don't have to move your wrist to check the time - perfect for the drive back to moonbase. ○

Further information: Currently being revamped, the Watchismo website will soon sell more affordable 'modern' watches ranging from \$50-\$300 that Greenblatt will be 'curating' based on their advanced and/or retro designs, while vintage watches range from \$50-\$2,000. www.watchismo.com