

Placky But Not Tacky

The Swatch watch finally has notable company

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 In these pages, 'Swatch' is normally a by-word for watchmaking's corporate Goliath, or at the very least a collective term for the group's 'prestige' brands, such as Breguet and Omega, who regularly earn the gaze of *QP's* refined eye. It is rare, however, that we mean the cheap, plastic legend itself - saviour of the Swiss watch industry, fashion icon and the biggest-selling timepiece of all time. Having shipped its 333 millionth unit in June at Swatch's biggest product launch yet, there are few signs of its popularity waning. But that's not to say there isn't a credible choice anymore. *QP* momentarily discards its white gloves and loupe, and enjoys a romp through the technicolour watchscape of fantastic plastic.



Swatch's new Jelly in Jelly range - a return to the classic plastic style of the Eighties - was launched in association with the Blue Man Group performance art collective. This is the unlimited-edition Blue Man Group watch (£32.50), featuring the stage show's three characters, and the new range's 'Jelly'-like transparent dial.

How the Swiss watch industry got its groove back is an oft-told tale, but one worth repeating. For if a watchmaking bible were ever written, the events surrounding the year 1983 could rightfully be hailed as the resurrection. It was then that ASUAG and SSIH, two Swiss watch giants under threat from the Japanese quartz invasion, were fused to form 'SMH' (Swiss Corporation for Microelectronics and Watchmaking Industries), entirely on the recommendation of hired gun, Nicolas G Hayek, who eventually bought SMH's majority sharehold in 1985. His now-legendary 'Hayek Study' set out the stages of recovery for all the brands and manufactories brought under the SMH umbrella, including Longines, Omega and Tissot, to drag them kicking and screaming into the Eighties. This meant consolidation, assembly lines, automation and one essential but brilliant enterprise: the low-cost, high-tech, artistic and emotional 'Second Watch', or Swatch as we know it better.

The Swatch watch's immediate and unflagging cool is hard to comprehend when you consider it was hatched by a masterplan of higher economics designed to rescue a clutch of corporate acronyms. Indeed, it is almost ironic that SMH - just as well known for its 'prestige' luxury products - was renamed the 'Swatch Group' in 1998 after a plastic, quartz watch worth \$50. But, of course, it was exactly these three characteristics that made Swatch such a huge success both industrially and culturally. And the greatest of these was plastic.

Failed first attempt

Though rather alien to the world of watches, plastic had never been a stranger to the world of design, owing to its plethora of obvious advantages - the rainbow of colours, malleability, endless versatility, texture, economy. Most plastic quartz watches of the Seventies were taking advantage of the latter but little else, leaving the staunchly traditional Swiss industry to exploit the material's aesthetic and technical possibilities by itself. Arguably, the first plastic watch was a Tissot, developed from 1964. The almost entirely synthetic 'Astrolon' movement launched at the 1971 Basel fair - the first self-lubricating movement ever made - was in many ways a logical precursor to Swatch, despite being mechanical. Indeed, Edouard-Louis Tissot's original intention for Astrolon (named to sound similar to Nylon) was to widen first Tissot then Omega's profit margins in preparation for the industry's inevitable switch to both quartz and the low-cost mechanical watch. Just like Swatch, whose design was eventually taken from ultra-thin prototypes in development at ASUAG since 1978, Astrolon's parts were brought down to a economical minimum (52 vs 51 respectively), injection-moulded plastic was used as much as possible, it retailed under \$50, and the watches were sealed and irreparable - disposable, in other words.

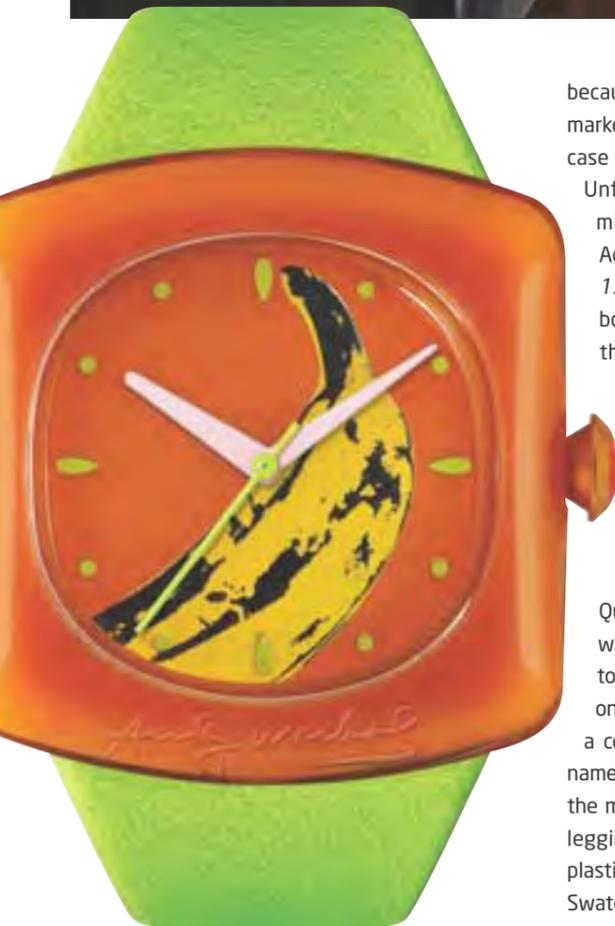
Tissot Research's original plans even used the Astrolon's baseplate as the caseback - a key concept behind Swatch's simplification from around 100 parts to 51. Tissot scrapped the 'caseplate' idea though,



(Left) The first Swatch Art Special, launched in 1985 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, was Kiki Picasso's 'Kiki' - now very collectable. (Right) The 'Blanc sur Noir' Swatch by Keith Haring (1958-1990) - the New York street artist whose trademark faceless figures adorned several Swatch designs in 1986, conveying Haring's persistent message of world unity.



Nicolas G. Hayek, whose firm, Hayek Engineering, turned around the fortunes of the Swiss watchmaking industry in the early Eighties by launching Swatch (a contraction of 'Second Watch', not 'Swiss Watch' as many believe). The first collection of 12 Swatch models was introduced on 1st March 1983 in Zürich, Switzerland. Initially the price ranged from Sfr.39.90 to Sfr.49.90, but was standardized to Sfr.50.00 that autumn. Sales targets were set to 1 million timepieces for 1983 and 2.5 million the year after. By 1992, 100 million had been sold, and the 333 millionth unit was shipped this June.



because it was thought Astrolon would market well with a number of different case options, including precious metals. Unfortunately, this wasn't the only misassumption that Tissot made. According to Estelle Fallet's *Tissot: 150 Years of History*, it was a failure both psychologically and technically: the plastic material deterred consumers and distributors, and the product originally seen as an innovation with a bright future proved 'quasi-obsolescent' as soon as it was launched, because of quartz's breakthrough.

Quartz or no quartz, Tissot's plastic watch was just that: a cheap addition to a not-so-cheap product line. Swatch on the other hand was a fresh face; a completely new brand with a catchy name and a daring aesthetic that captured the mood of the early Eighties, hairspray, leggings and all, playing-up its crude plasticity. Most importantly though, the Swatch watch was marketed as a fashion

accessory rather than a watch. While Tissot retailers refused to stock Astrolon on the basis they couldn't make a profit from repairs anymore, the Swatch watch banked on its disposability - owners practically relished running their batteries down, as an excuse to get a new watch; a new look; a new 'emotion'. As Hayek himself attests, top priority has always been "the product, the product and once again the product." This product was so unique and so desirable in itself that the fact it was a watch became quite incidental. Swatch had achieved that holy grail of brand economics: 'lifestyle' status. Buy a Swatch, buy the dream.

Strike a pose

And buy we did, in our droves. Many bought several, for Swatch's affordability combined with plastic's limitless canvas meant huge collectability and many opportunities to mix-and-match with your latest ensemble. Soon there were countless interpretations of that distinctive tonneau case, those eight



gently curved lugs and the plucky tapered strap. Fans couldn't get enough. One comprehensive collection that ran up to 1997 was auctioned-off in 2001 by horological heavyweights Antiquorum - all 1,489 lots selling for a total of \$67,700. Swatch's world-renowned Art Special collaborations became worthy creative exercises, garnering endorsements from the likes of Keith Haring, Yoko Ono, Vivienne Westwood, Kiki Picasso and Christian Lacroix; all characters that helped to legitimise Swatch's rightful place in fashion and, ultimately, pop.

Pop's defining 'qualities' - synthetic, bright, angular, brash, antagonistic - are all embraced by underground fashion mag *Super Super*, whose Editor, Hanna Hanra is championing an Eighties pop/punk revival of sorts, presumably with Swatch in mind: "In 1983, Swatch was something new and cool that everyone could afford. And it still is," Hanra reckons. "By updating its look seasonally, like fashion rather than a one-off purchase, it constantly appeals to a young 'first-time watch buying' crowd, as well as re-appealing to the fashion crowd, season after season. From the early days of *iD*, to *Smash Hits* and every style rag in-between, Swatch has always been coveted. By keeping the shape a classic, changing the colours and textures and collaborating with people like Keith Haring, they have always stayed ahead of the game."

Such adaptability is down to plastic: the ease of realising any design across both strap and dial, and the ability to quickly produce many different designs in vast quantities to satisfy customers' changing moods - a shotgun response to consumer demand. But even the mighty Swatch watch had to change. After all, the generation that Swatch appealed to was a generation fast becoming infamous for its short attention span. The watch market had changed too, with Japanese quartz models becoming more adventurous with design, and a revived awareness of the 'proper' watch brands kept afloat by the success of Swatch.

Swatch diversified concurrently, proving it still had the edge on design, as well as technology. For many years since, new developments have claimed their place alongside the classic Swatch watch in plastic - from the Swatch Chrono to Pop Swatch, to Irony (the appropriately named metal version), to the light-powered Swatch Solar, to the Swatch Automatic to Swatch the Beep - the world's first pager in a wristwatch, which died an instant death.



(Left) Arguably the world's first plastic watch: Tissot Research Division's 'Sytal', or 'Idea 2001' in the Italian market, from 1971, featuring the Astrolon synthetic mechanical movement. (Above and below) Technomarine proves that the plastic, sporty look can still be luxurious. The Cruise watch (£195) is available in a garish kaleidoscope from the Sport collection. (Opposite page, bottom) Andy Warhol 15 'Banana' watch with plastic injection-moulded case and leather strap (\$150), inspired by the New Yorker's famous pop art screen print, immortalised by the Velvet Underground's 1967 album cover.





Alongside micro-printers, Seiko Instruments USA also markets a number of fashion watch collections, under licenses that include Harry Potter, Disney, Alessi and now Andy Warhol. The latter collection, dubbed 'Andy Warhol 15' after the artist's comment on fame, is sold through the 15minutesof.com website and captures the output of The Factory in exuberant style. This Giant Size Super Value Pack (\$74.99) is limited to 6,446,150,881 pieces, created to mirror Warhol's interest in mass consumerism.



Elba Team is Locman's new spin-off brand, launched at Basel this year to the delight of QP. Both the chronograph (left; £130) and time-only (right; £95) models sport clear, colourless cases that make the straps and dial seem all the more colourful.

Mirroring Warhol's interest in mass consumerism with delicious cynicism, the Giant Size Super Value Pack is restricted to just 6,446,150,881 pieces.

Most recently has been Access, a watch with a built-in ski pass that can be used at most of the world's ski resorts - one of Swatch's few technical developments to actually catch. Back in 2001, Swatch even launched the soon-forgotten Diaphane tourbillon - a mechanical movement mounted on a carousel that turned once every hour. Probably the world's slowest and most superfluous tourbillon, but one that served better than most as a statement of daring and creativity.

Breaking the mould

Think Swatch though, and most will think of nothing beyond plastic. Which is why it took a seriously new interpretation of wristborn polymer for Swatch to ever worry about its monopoly on the material. Technomarine hit the scene in 1997, just as the luxury watch market was starting to take off again. Founder Franck Dubarry noticed a yawning gap between the prestige stalwarts and the lower-end fashion brands, and took the rather literal approach of combining both. In a meeting of two

diametrically opposed worlds, his 'serious vacation watch' dared to sport diamonds on a bulbous, jelly-like plastic exterior. Despite the initial shock, Technodiamond sold out effortlessly and ensured Technomarine's well-executed brand was taken seriously, rocks or no rocks. People had willingly reinterpreted their perception of 'luxury', and thus helped bring about an exciting new niche in the market. All of a sudden, brightly coloured, fun timepieces with youthful lifestyle associations (in this case, the inevitable surfer scene) were marketable as high-end accessories. For rich people who don't want to wear their Cartier on the beach, but at the same time don't really want to settle for a Swatch.

And if Technomarine's just a little too funky for the casual elite, there's always the ever-opulent Chopard, whose Be Mad 'resin' watch graced thousands of wealthy forearms last year, and even found its way into the Oscars goody bags. However, despite looking and feeling like a magenta Rubix cube, Be Mad still manages to look inappropriate with anything but a sweeping ball



(Above) Italy's Spazio24 had the lucky foresight to sponsor its national football team this year, which means its clear plastic 'Cool' collection (€79) is sporting patriotic colours.

"The coolest watch I saw at Basel was on the wrist of a female, Italian watch journalist. The watch - a clear plastic replica of a Rolex Submariner!"

gown. Plastic really can be glamorous it seems. Sadly, many of us are still a long way from treading that Beverley Hills carpet, but we can still console ourselves with Seiko Instruments' new Andy Warhol watches, whose tagline reminds us of those famous 15 minutes we can all expect at some point in our lives. Given Warhol's ironic take on pop culture and subsequently bold aesthetic, it was clear that any watch designed in tribute should be chunky, garish and plastic. These 'art' watches do not disappoint, despite the ambitious brief. And unlike Swatch's artist collaborations, the 'Andy Warhol 15' range makes excellent use of its shape and feel, as well its 2-D

'canvas'. Furthermore, mirroring Warhol's interest in mass consumerism with delicious cynicism, the 'limited-edition' Giant Size Super Value Pack of four plastic watches (just \$75!) is restricted to just 6,446,150,881 pieces.

Italy's playful new Elba Team brand also boasts an ultra-placky aesthetic that goes just far enough to reap ironic chic. 'ET' is actually an offshoot of the Locman Group, which only started to make its own watches in 1997, after a decade of third-party production. Locman came straight out of the closet with irresistible panache, appealing directly to the fashion-conscious Italian market. It is no surprise that its plastic watch range maintains this exuberance, using clear rather than opaque plastic cases to heighten the colours on the dials and straps, giving the watches a breezy feel.

You may laugh, especially at the thought of wealthy Italians sporting such frivolity, but just bear in mind *QP* writer Ken Kessler's highlight of Baselworld 2006: "The coolest watch I saw, bar none, was on the wrist of a female, Italian watch journalist. The watch - a clear plastic replica of a Rolex Submariner!" The brand in question is the rather unfortunately named Spazio24, and the price is a mere €69. A quite negligible amount to pay for something so unusual, yet so - how does one put it? - 'creatively derivative'. There's even a Rolex-green Perspex option, and a GMT Master tribute. Endorsement from the Italian national football team probably hasn't harmed Spazio24's order sheet either, so get your name down early.

Making a splash

But how is Swatch, the original plastic timepiece keeping its 1983 design classic fresh? Why should we pay any attention to this watch in 2006? The answer, for this year at least, is the new range, Jelly in Jelly: a return to Swatch's roots, with a new Art Special collaboration in tow too. In June, at the brand's biggest launch yet, Swatch and the



Aside from the Blue Man Group watch pictured at the start, the new Jelly in Jelly range (all €32.50) offers a new basic range in plastic, running from the ultra-conservative (left) to the rather more (or less) fashion conscious (right).



To launch Jelly in Jelly, celebrate the 333 millionth Swatch and unveil the Blue Man Group collaboration, Swatch staged the 'Splashtival' festival in Lugano, Switzerland. Live on stage, the BMG created the artwork for their forthcoming limited edition Art Special watch with a twist on their signature number. By holding a watch-shaped canvas over three kettledrums drenched in paint, a design was created as the Group played. We should see the resulting watch in September.

performance art collective Blue Man Group unveiled the neatly consolidated range, whose see-through dial directly references 1985's 'Jelly Fish' model. Although there is already a Blue Man Group watch featuring the strange, paint-drumming mime artists themselves, a special live performance resulted in the final design for a limited-edition artist watch. No matter that it's likely to be predominantly blank, with rather faint splashes of pink, blue and yellow (they should have banged their drums a bit harder) - what's important is that Swatch has reasserted itself as a brand that's still doing interesting things in an unembarrassingly youthful manner.

Keeping up with 'the kids', Swatch has also been blessed by the current trend for all things retro. A popular taste for 'ironic' coolness may well be one reason behind

Swatch's relaunch of the black plastic watch with white dial (confusingly also under the Jelly in Jelly umbrella, despite no transparency being in evidence). Also, tying-in with the paint splattering, a new online competition has been unveiled, which follows-up last year's web-mediated 'flash-mob' gatherings. To enter this year's 'Splash Mob', just submit your own video or photo of a splash, and get rated by other visitors to Swatch's website. As tenuous a link to watches or genuine art this might be, Swatch is actually using new media very cleverly. By engaging with its core audience of culturally switched-on youngsters on a massive scale, with accessibility a priority and keen eye on trends, the original philosophy of the plastic watch is being kept alive, it seems. ○

(Below) Now discontinued, Chopard's 'resin' watch, Be Mad, from the Ice Cube collection. Originally limited to 9,999 pieces and set with four diamonds, this was a worthy plastic watch to give away in the Oscars goody bag last year.



Further information: www.swatch.com, www.technomarine.com, www.chopard.com, www.15minutesof.com, www.elbateam.it, www.spazio24.it