

Lunar Module

QP hails Omega's veteran astronaut, the Speedmaster

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It is not uncommon to see the over-touted words 'legend' or 'icon' carved into the horological scriptures. Reverso, Royal Oak, Submariner, Calatrava - all names that garner immediate recognition and respect, no mention of marque required. One particular masterpiece enjoys such an accolade with an epic history to boot. It is a legend *and* icon by virtue of events far beyond the closeted world of watches. Welcome the Speedmaster. Omega's hero has a story behind it so extraordinary that other watches seem, well, earthbound.

The legend begins in Bienne, at *Maison d'Omega*. In the 1950s, Omega was a giant amongst the manufactures of Switzerland. It was a brand recognised across the world, famous for its precision movements and its quality. There, a team led by Albert Piguet developed a new sports chronograph using the Lémania calibre 27 CHRO C12 ébauche, resulting in the cal. 321. A careful comparison with Patek Philippe's famed Lémania-based ref. 5070

(ignoring the superior finishing of Patek) might just send collectors' hearts into tachycardia.

The first finished product, ref. CK 2915, designed by Claude Ballod, was proudly presented at the 1957 Basel fair. The Speedmaster gained immediate recognition as a superior chronograph. This was a substantial watch for its time, at 39 mm in diameter. The debutant model had a polished steel bezel and



arrow-shaped hands, known today as the 'broad arrow'. Finding an original and unmolested one today is as easy as arranging a royal wedding.

As always, improvements and changes in aesthetics play a crucial role in the history of any model with a long lineage. So it followed that the original bezel and hands were replaced a few years later with a new black enamel tachometer bezel

and dagger-shaped hands. This was the new ref. CK 2998, now 1 mm larger in diameter. Already a respected and meritable chronograph, its fortunes were soon to skyrocket from those of humble civilian to that of space hero.

Blast off

In 1962, NASA decided to equip its future Gemini and Apollo astronauts with a highly accurate and

This year's Speedmaster Professional special edition for the 40th anniversary of the first space walk, limited to 2005 pieces (£1,650). Edward White spent 36 minutes 'extra vehicular' during the Gemini 4 mission on 3rd June 1965, duly wearing his Speedmaster.

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reliable wrist chronograph. Corrigan's watch shop in Texas was paid a visit by the man from NASA. His brief was simple; to buy superlative chronographs of a dozen different brands. These would be rigorously tested to find out which was made of the right stuff! Just as any potential astronaut has to prove himself in the most arduous of medical, mental and physical tests, so too would the venerable Speedmaster.

It needed to be impervious to the effects of temperature extremes (+93°C down to -18°C), radiation, shock resistance (40 G in every direction), decompression, compression... NASA formulated test regimes with extremely stringent parameters, with failure in any of these tests resulting in a melancholy return to Civvy Street.

into space on board the Sigma 7 capsule in 1962. This maiden voyage marked the dawn of the Speedmaster space saga. Whether or not it meant to rival the other aviators' favourite of the time, the Breitling Navitimer, the two became caught-up in a brief horological space race of their own, nonetheless. The 24-hour dial version of the Navitimer, the Cosmonaute, was worn by Scott Carpenter in 1962 during his orbit aboard Aurora 7.

By 1964, only six brands remained in competition. After a final series of tests, the Speedmaster was declared on March 1st 1965 as "flight-qualified by NASA for all manned space missions." Only the Speedmaster had withstood all the severe tests within a comfortable margin of tolerance - namely five seconds per day! Later that month, the Speedmaster was worn officially for the first time, on Gemini 3 - the first manned Gemini mission.

Not content with mere space flight, the first exposure to the harsh environment of space occurred that same year in June: Edward White made history as the first 'extra-vehicular' American astronaut, 'walking' around his Gemini 4 shuttle, Speedmaster duly strapped to the wrist of his space suit. All this at a time when most watches on the market were barely shower-proof.

Fine tuning

As NASA refined its technology in the quest for a moon landing, so Omega evolved its Speedmaster. The 1965 model ref. ST 105.003 introduced the now-familiar white luminous hands, these being much clearer to read. The most radical change followed later that year with the metamorphosis of the case into the larger, asymmetric 42-mm incarnation, with recessed crown and trademark twisted lugs. This design was never improved on and remains as fresh today. Referenced as ST 105.012, the dial was signed for the first time as 'Professional', in recognition of its space endeavours. It was re-referenced as ST 145.012 for the 1967 model. These two references are perhaps the most revered in terms of

the moon programme - the first watches worn on the moon. (Incidentally, Neil Armstrong left his Speedmaster (a ref. ST 105.012) in Apollo 11's lunar module, *Eagle*, but Buzz Aldrin's watch - a 1967 ST 145.012 - made it to the lunar surface.)

Naturally, Omega wanted to capitalise on this achievement and 1969's casebacks were engraved with "The first watch worn on the moon" - a stop-gap measure until a formal celebratory model could be released. Gold was eventually chosen to commemorate the landing itself and a limited edition of 1,024 pieces were made, with the first 39 given to President Nixon and all the astronauts on the space programme. This was the first time a Speedmaster was available in a precious metal.

Nineteen sixty-nine also saw the replacement of the estimable cal. 321 movement (column-wheel chrono) with a new Lémania cal. 861 (cam-driven). The raised metal Omega logo also disappeared, to be replaced with a new printed version. This, the ref. ST 145.022 was to remain in production for nearly three decades - remarkable when you consider the

turbulence posed by the advent of quartz and the automatic chronograph.

High flyer

In April 1970, the Omega Speedmaster famously helped to rescue the Apollo 13 mission from potential disaster. Following system failure, Jim Lovell et al. used the mechanical chronograph to time their thruster bursts accurately, aligning the command module perfectly for re-entry and safe splashdown. This earned Omega the 'Silver Snoopy Award' - the highest distinction that NASA awards; first introduced during the Apollo mission for outstanding performance contributing to flight safety and mission success.

Even better PR followed, five years later. Temporary suspension of the cold war in July 1975 allowed the American and Soviet Apollo-Gemini and Soyuz ships to dock in space, allowing both cosmonaut and astronaut to unite in friendship... and, of course, spotlight the Speedmaster - worn not only by the Americans Stafford, Slayton and Brand, but also by Leonov and Kubassov! A few weeks earlier in Houston, Omega Public Relations Manager George Johnson had offered

Astronaut Walter Schirra took his own Speedmaster (a ref. CK 2998) for its first trip

(Left) Apollo XI 1969-1994 25th anniversary of moon landing commemorative edition of Speedmaster, limited to 2,500 pieces, engraved with "Flight qualified by NASA for all manned space missions / The First Watch on the Moon"



(Above) Astronaut Stafford and Cosmonaut Leonov aboard the docked American and Russian ships in 1975. Both crews were wearing the Speedmaster, visible here on Stafford's right wrist.



One of 500 watches launched in 1975 to commemorate the Apollo-Soyuz mission. The chronograph was so well-known that Omega omitted "Speedmaster Professional" from the dial, featuring instead the mission emblem.



The Silver Snoopy award, presented to Omega for the Speedmaster's critical role in saving Apollo 13's stricken crew.



(Left) The original Moon Watch: ref. ST 145.015 from 1967. The first Speedmaster with asymmetric case and the first model that walked on the moon; worn by Edwin 'Buzz' Aldrin on the Apollo 11 mission.

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This was a unique moment in history, commemorated by a special edition of 500 pieces, each with (for the first time) the mission badge on the dial and a specially engraved back. This model is particularly sought after: Antiquorum realised SFr.8,625 in April 2004, making it one of the most expensive Speedmasters sold at auction.

For the next 30 years we would become inundated with special or limited editions. At last year's BASELWORLD we had the 35th anniversary of the moon landing and special edition silver with black subdial model. This year, the 40th anniversary of the first space walk is honoured with a blue-dialled model.

Thankfully, innovation has not been constrained to the mere confines of the Moon Watch's dial. The mid-1980s saw the presentation of two new variants: a 2,000-piece moonphase with date edition, and an automatic version with 24-hour counter and day-date display. The moonphase version with a modified cal. 866, was released in 1985, and is one of the most desirable models collected today.



(Left) A 'doctor's' chronograph from 1965 (ref. 105.003), with pulsimeter bezel used to measure heart rate in patients - read off from the bezel after 15 pulses. This was the first reference fitted with highly legible, white luminous hands.

The Speedmaster name has been well and truly diluted to be almost homeopathic in potency. But none of these versions, including the Omega's 125th anniversary model, have come close to emulating the character of the original. Today, the Speedmaster exists in its classic form, as an automatic in the Broad arrow range (ref. 3570.50.00), and as reduced size automatic (ref. 3510.50.00) with date or full triple calendar version.

Collecting

Never consider watches as an investment - that is my rule. Buy because you like. But for once, given the choice between a blue-chip share and a collectable Speedmaster, I would opt for the latter. Pre-moon landing cal. 321 Speedmasters have to be the horological bargains of the century. Totally undervalued, they represent a truly sagacious acquisition.

Of course exceptions always prove the rule; none more so than the original 1957, moonphase and Apollo-Soyuz models. These are very rare and start budgeting at around £4,000. The pre-asymmetric case cal. 321 models are a very thrifty purchase, starting as low as £1,500 for a ref. ST 105.003 and

£2,000 for a nicely preserved CK 2998. But these prices just cannot last. With stock Valjoux-movement Daytonas now costing around £9,000, the market will turn to other brands and models. And sure enough, the vintage Speedies will start to disappear. Any pre-purchase hesitation should be vanquished when you remind yourself of the other Genevan company that uses Lémania ébauches for its chronographs. And you can forget COSC too - the Speedmaster has been tested by NASA.

The good news is you can pick up a ref. ST 145.015 - just like the one Buzz Aldrin took to the moon - for as little as £1,000 (for now, at least). The 1969 gold commemorative models are still available and vary from £4,000-£7,000; again, very accessible. In recent years, the moon landing 20th anniversary model and last year's 35th anniversary model have been successful, and are already sought after.

As its 50th birthday approaches, we can quite rightly look forward to a special celebration of this model. Its celestial heritage is obviously important, but let us not forget why it was chosen by NASA in the first place: quite simply, it is the best there is. Innovation is what we need for its 50th birthday party, not another new dial. ○



(Right) Launched at Basel in April, the Michael Schumacher 'Legend' watch, available in three different dial colour schemes (£2,100), commemorating Schumacher's 2004 world championship title. Fitted with automatic column-wheel cal. 3301, which has 55 hours' power reserve.