

The new Oyster Turn-O-Graph, launched at BASELWORLD 2004. A red date disc complements the red seconds hand, and the bi-directional bezel is available in white (pictured; £2,950), yellow or pink Rolesor.



Twists & Turns

The latest incarnation of Rolex's Turn-O-Graph perpetuates an illustrious, if low-key saga

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Launched as a new concept in measuring elapsed time, the Turn-O-Graph made its debut at the Basel fair in 1953. It combined the robustness of the Oyster case with a new rotatable bezel – the first for Rolex – and was designed to offer an alternative to the chronograph. Never the most collectible of Rolexes, BASELWORLD 2004 nonetheless greeted the re-launched Turn-O-Graph warmly. *QP* charts its lineage.

NEW RELEASES FROM ROLEX

BASELWORLD 2004 saw two new Daytona models: a white-gold bracelet model as well as the new 'Leopard' Daytona. The former is a bracelet version of the white-gold model and has a new dial variation with lashings of red – a case of Daytona Newmanitis perhaps! All good fun, Rolex has not produced such colourful models since the 1970's orange-hand Explorer 2s and Paul Newman Daytonas. But if you think that's wacky, wait until you see the Leopard! Yellow-gold, with a yellow sapphire bezel and diamond-encrusted lugs, it certainly cannot be described as a stealth watch. Naturally, it comes with a leopard-spot strap and leopard-spot dial. Interestingly, the latter is actually enamel – rather than screen-painted – making it one of the few Rolexes made with such dials.

A new Datejust also made its debut at Basel: a leather strap model (pictured; £7,060). It features new polished lugs as well as a new dial with bigger markers and hands. The inner bezel features the Rolex insignia (greeted with distaste among certain Rolex enthusiast circles) and reference number at the 6 o'clock position. This model is only available in gold and is not interchangeable with a bracelet.



Despite having a number of its own chronographs in production, Rolex was extremely keen to promote the advantages of its new watch's rotatable bezel (remembering of course that Rolex chronographs were not very popular during this period). The early literature on the Turn-O-Graph slated these chronographs for their lack of robustness as everyday watches and for their poor water resistance. The possibility of auto-winding was another of the Turn-O-Graph's advantages over stopwatch mechanisms, which – back then – were restricted to manual winding.

Early days

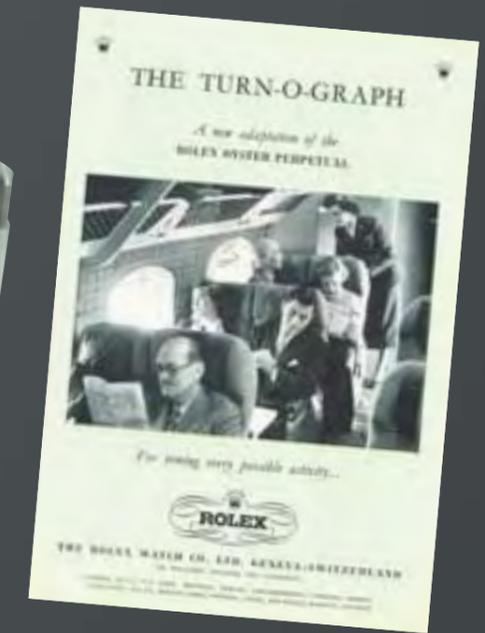
The first Turn-O-Graph model was the reference 6202 and came in two guises: the all-steel version with black bezel and dial with luminous indices, and the deluxe steel and gold bezel version. The steel versions are the most professional of all Turn-O-Graphs produced, given their intent to do more than just tell the time. The reference 6202 had beautiful lacquered dials and gold printing. The hands were gold and some were even made with honeycomb dials. As can be expected from a brand such as Rolex, these early versions are highly desirable amongst collectors as both were discontinued in 1956 and are therefore extremely rare.

The follow-up models, with the new calibre 1065 date movement, were the reference 6609 (gold) and 6309 (steel and gold). Essentially these were updated versions of the deluxe 6202 models.

Airborne

The name 'Turn-O-Graph' had been dropped from the dial and the new models were a variation on the popular Datejust theme. The date wheel was a pleasing red/black combination, known to collectors as the roulette date. Further modifications were made in the early 1960s with the introduction of the calibre 1575 movement. This new reference 1625 was available in gold and steel, and gold combinations. In America, the reference 1625 was adopted for use by the US Air Force aerobatic squadron known as the Thunderbirds. Somewhat inevitably, the 1625 soon adopted the moniker 'Thunderbird'. After all, a vintage Rolex would not be worth collecting without a nickname! It remained in the catalogues unchanged until 1980.

The new calibre 3055 was then fitted, but, aesthetically, little changed and the Thunderbird was re-referenced as the 16253.



It was not until the end of the 1980s that a major reworking of the Datejust Turn-O-Graph took place. In came the new balance bridge calibre 3135 movement and, at last, a sapphire crystal was fitted. The bezel was given a new finish and, for the first time, waterproofed to 100m. The new references 16263 and 16264 were only available in steel and gold – the all-gold version being dumped. It was perhaps ironic that the watch the Turn-O-Graph was meant to eliminate – the chronograph – was being launched concurrently with an automatic movement water resistant to 100m; what has now become probably the most coveted watch in the world!

Revamped

Hardly one of Rolex's most desired watches, the Turn-O-Graph was subject to a much-needed make-over this year – and we are not talking about the steady approach typical of Rolex. The reference 116264 is radically different. Unveiled at BASEL-WORLD this year, the new watch pays homage to the past as well as modernity in a striking and pleasing combination.

The rotatable bezel has been revised to look more like the fluted bezel of the standard Datejust and features a new system of rotation using four sprung bearings. It features a red seconds hand and – a real blast from the past – a red date wheel.



The case lugs have been polished like the Day Date models. Even the bracelets are much improved, with sold-end links for both the Jubilee and Oyster models. The Jubilee now features a hidden clasp and the Oyster comes with a rapid extension link, similar to the Daytona models. It is also available in a pink-gold and steel combo, last seen in the 1960s.

Overall, the new model succeeds not by trying to be a chronograph, but as a simple and elegant watch that allows you to keep track of that parking meter every now and then. ○

(Top left) An example of the very first Turn-O-Graph model, from 1956 (ref. 6202) with black dial and black bezel. Prices currently vary between £3,500 and £4,500.

(Top right) The front cover of an early Turn-O-Graph promotional leaflet from 1956.

(Above) A 1971 Turn-O-Graph (ref. 1625), with silver dial. Estimated at £1,200–£1,700.

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