



LOOK,
NO HANDS!

Digital's gradual resurgence to the high-end

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i Pity, if you will, the poor digital display watch: scorned by watch connoisseurs, appropriated by promotions companies as cheap but mildly impressive giveaways, worn with a sense of disposability. Worse still, the digital watch inhabits a world where more advanced is not necessarily better. With watches, mechanics are still favoured over high-tech. But perhaps times are changing...

Like them or not, LCD screens are still everywhere. And now they are flourishing throughout the 'premium' brands – loosely classed as those with watches beyond the £1,000 mark. Bell & Ross, Omega and Breitling – makers of manly watches for manly purposes – all now have top-end watches with digital displays, at least as part of an analogue dial. Snobbishness aside, digital cannot be ignored.

Prestige

Perhaps most encouragingly, TAG Heuer's recently reissued Microtimer from 2002 (£1,250), which continues to set style junkie's pulses racing, is possibly the first completely digital watch to be launched by a major brand for twenty years. It is a distinct departure from TAG's usual range of sports watches, yet – significantly – does not stand out as an exception; it sits comfortably among the firm's top models and justifies its pricetag. There is hope for other brands it seems – especially the likes of Ventura, who, despite an established range of chronometers, have founded their reputation on digital since 1991.



Bell & Ross' Function (£1,430), shown with its digital display on. So-called, due to the huge range of functions bestowed by the digital facility – alarm, chronograph, calendar, second time zone etc.

(Previous page) TAG Heuer's Microtimer – the first Swiss movement accurate to 1/1,000th of a second. It succeeded 2002's Micrograph F1, which was awarded the top prize for design at the Grand Prix de l'Horlogerie de Genève (£1,250).

"The market for short time measurement has now gone totally digital and as we have a history in measurement it really wasn't too much of a leap for us to launch a fully digital luxury watch," says TAG Heuer's honorary chairman Jack Heuer. "We've even put diamonds on one version. There's a high-end niche market for digitals and I wouldn't be surprised if other top-end manufacturers now follow."

Is it too little too late though? Has the digital watch's image been irreparably damaged by too many kids on skateboards or by novelty watches at fairgrounds to be taken seriously by the grown man? Certainly digital watches continue to sell to the youth and sports markets, both for their toughness and timing, and their advent did not turn out to be "a brief craze rather than the product of the future," as Patek Philippe announced in 1977 (indeed, the arrival of quartz heralded the slow decline of sales figures for Swiss mechanical watches, which peaked in 1974 and has never recovered).

Curiosities

A 'novelty' niche for mechanical-digital display watches will always persist. Since 1910, several timepieces have used printed displays rather than hands to indicate the time, by a similar means to a typical watch's date display. Recent examples include the brand new Porsche Design Indicator (see *News*), and last year's Harry Winston Opus III.

Some serious watch collectors are similarly drawn to quartz liquid crystal display (LCD) and light-emitting diode (LED) display watches – the designer Paul Smith among them. The likes of TAG's 1975 Chronosplit (the first quartz chrono with a double digital display), Omega's 1976 Chrono-Quartz (the first 'hybrid' watch with both analogue display for the time and LCD for the chronograph), or Girard-Perregaux's LED 'Casquette', are like gold dust. Even limited edition G-Shocks, which Casio has been producing in runs of 1,000 for the last seven years, change hands for thousands.

"There is definitely a niche market in which wearing an early digital watch has an appeal, both as part of watch history and because it has a certain lo-fi or ironic cool that even mechanical watches can't match," adds Matthew Hirst, analyst at the trends agency Headlight Vision.

Beginnings

Strange though it seems now, quartz digitals once wowed the world – with schoolboys finding the calculator function handy and their schools disliking the way that digital's wide acceptance made teaching the time harder. By 1976, Bulova

could even sell out a gold-plated version. It had not been the first. Hamilton produced the first digital display watch in 1972 (launch had been intended for 1970 but it took another two years of development). An 18 ct. gold piece under the company's Pulsar brand name sold for a then-considerable \$2,100.

Its LED display was created by passing an electric charge through inorganic materials, with seven electronic switches required for each of the numerals on the display. What added to the 'ooh' factor was that the display not only came in red – created by the use of aluminium gallium arsenide – and later in green, but that it was illuminated by pressing a button – actually a device to save on the vast amounts of power the display ate up. The watch had been inspired by a futuristic clock Pulsar had developed to feature in Stanley's Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But it seems fitting that the first man to wear the new watch was one James Bond in *Live and Let Die*.

Such was its impact that many even thought the new quartz analogues would be swept away. But the heavyweight ticket would be a stumbling block until 1975, when over 80 digitals were on the market and competition began to drive down prices. One of them was from Texas Instruments (of 'Speak and Spell' fame) and cost just \$20, heralding the association of digitals with high affordability. By 1976, a digital could be had for just \$10. Pulsar started losing money, such that it was sold twice in one year, ending up under Seiko's umbrella.

Fast progress

LED's requirement of a two-handed operation to read the time saw takeover by the permanent LCD display as inevitable. It was created in 1972 after decades of research at Hull University. Once the boffins had discovered cyano-biphenyl – a crystal that could be made to change form at room temperature – it was first used in calculators. Again, it was Seiko that first put it into a watch.

Indeed, the LCD watch market was rapidly dominated by Japanese and American firms.



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While the Swiss soon backed out of the market to concentrate on mechanical pieces, the Far East ran wild, cramming all they could onto your arm. Wherein, perhaps, lies the digital's downfall.

"When digitals first came out, all they did was tell the time, and that kind of product might not do well now. But today they achieve premium status through miniaturisation," argues Casio Timepieces' Campaigns Manager, Kerry Staniforth. "I don't think digital watches have changed so much as to make the notion of luxury ones impossible, though there's a certain snobbery about digitals, especially at the high end of the market."

Outside of specialist use and the fleeting appeal of novelty, maybe we are just bored with minia-

Omega's Chrono-Quartz, launched at the 1976 Montreal Olympics. It was the first 'hybrid' watch in the world with both analogue display for the time functions and LCD for the chronograph functions; the two driven by the same quartz resonator.



(Left) Eighteen-carat white-gold variant of the Breitling B-1 chronograph (£12,410). (Right) The 'Casquette' from Girard-Perregaux, launched in 1976. Such pristine examples this are very rare nowadays. The LED display is so power-hungry, that one must press a button to view either one of the three functions: hour and minutes, seconds and date. Its case and bracelet were both fashioned from a then-novel substance called macrolon.

turisation for its own sake, when the benefits and functionality are unclear. That has not stopped fresh spins on the digital wristwatch being periodically launched. In recent years Casio has produced the first digital watches with a camera, with GPS, with an MP3 player and with dual-band radio-controlled timekeeping. Bringing appliances to the watch is not new though: Seiko made a digital watch with a TV back in 1982 – the year Casio created one with a Japanese/English dictionary.

A matter of need

Heuer estimates that at least half of the watches in use in the world are already digital read-outs, amounting to some 600m. And there is already one blunt assertion by which digitals can always claim pre-eminence, no matter how complicated your

mechanical movement, no matter how many hours it took some grey-haired, short-sighted man to tweezer together. It is, of course, easy and accurate timekeeping.

"The lack of a mechanical movement puts a lot of watch aficionados off digitals. But it's a fact that if you need 100% precision timing and display, you have to have quartz digital," stresses Franz La Rosee, UK MD of Breitling, whose B1, Emergency and Aerospace models, at £1,350–£14,625, incorporate digital read-outs. "And such items are not exactly inexpensive. I think the general image of digital watches very much depends on who makes it. They need not have a bad image. And they will always be around – if only because it's very hard to make a mechanical watch for £80." ◉