

# The Latin Connection

How Swiss watchmakers once sought their very own El Dorado

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At the beginning of the last century, the resource-rich nations of Latin America offered a major target for the Swiss watch industry, and Latino collectors amassed hoards of horological treasures. From such bespoke creations as Patek Philippe's Chronometro Gondolo, tailored for the Brazilian market, to special commissions for fresh batches of dictators, the Swiss made the most of this lucrative market during the leaner years in Europe. Indeed, it is a Latin American who can justifiably claim to have been the driving force behind the Cartier Santos – one of the world's first wristwatch.





Girard-Perregaux's ornate Esmeralda pocket watch, named after the Mexican jeweller who sold it to the President of Mexico, General Porfirio Diaz at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

(Previous page) The bustling, dusty streets of Havana in the 1930s did not escape the influence of Latin America's thriving watch industry, as can be seen from this glorious cityscape – witness the Cuervo y Sobrinos sign in the background.

You can be forgiven for not making the link between haute horlogerie and Latin America; samba, sombreros and cigars come more readily to mind. While most watch aficionados know the importance of the Asian markets to the Swiss watch industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fewer know of the connection with Latin America. However, Switzerland – a landlocked nation – had long been accustomed to exporting all over the globe and was adept at finding new markets whenever the European economic climate chilled.

### Promised land

The Swiss Federation de l'Industrie Horlogère archives show that sales to Latin America rose almost ten-fold between 1910 and 1946 – from 10 million to nearly 90 million Swiss francs' worth of watches, all making their way to ports such as Buenos Aires, Veracruz and Rio de Janeiro. This corresponds to 1 million pieces in 1910 and almost 4 million in 1946, when Latin America represented 22% of global Swiss watch sales. Latin America was the place where the commercially savvy flourished when times were hard in war-ravaged Europe. Girard-Perregaux, Patek Philippe, Tissot, Longines, Vacheron Constantin

and Rolex were all drawn by tales of Mexican haciendas the size of Scotland belonging to one family; Argentine fortunes built from canned meat and Bolivian empires built on guano; silver mines in Peru and coffee in Costa Rica. "Latin America was a bouyant market during the war years. It was where the money was," confirms Jonathan Darracott, watch and clock specialist at Sotheby's, London.

Girard-Perregaux were pioneers who had foreseen the approaching boom years. They opened their first American sales point, or 'counter', in 1860 in Buenos Aires and not – as would be expected – New York. A remnant of this golden era is General Porfirio Diaz's ornate and oversized pocket watch 'La Esmeralda', complete with galloping horses and a robust gold case – fit for any self-respecting dictator. As Brandon J Thomas, watch expert at Antiquorum, Geneva explains: "Most of the watch manufactures made watches that appealed to the South American taste; that is, with engraved silver dials and applied gold mounts."

La Esmeralda was the name of the Mexican jeweller who sold Diaz his watch. As Darracott explains, putting a retailer's name on the dial of a pocket watch or wristwatch was nothing new; personalisation was already common in Europe and the US. "Until 1925, most retailers of note put their own names on the dials of watches. This practice continues today, though obviously to a lesser extent."

### Gondolo

One unique relationship was that between Patek Philippe and the Brazilian jeweller Gondolo y Labouriau. "What was very different was what Patek Philippe did with its Gondolo model," Darracott reveals. "With the Gondolo, an entirely new range was designed in a new, larger size, especially for the Brazilian market."

The Gondolo story actually started in 1872, when Patek Philippe delivered its first piece to Rio de Janeiro – an 18 lignes, silver-case pocket watch. It was not until 1902 that the jeweller commissioned an exclusive pocket watch featuring a gold gear

train: the Chronometro Gondolo – the Gondolo that remained in production until 1927, growing to encompass nine models, each housing an exclusive movement with flourishes such as rose-gold wheels to please the local watch aficionados. The Gondolo was more than a branded watch; it was an entirely new and exclusive model.

So we have Rio to thank for the chunky pocket watch still in production today, created in 1933 after the original Brazilian version was discontinued. And its desire has lasted: in November 2003, Christie's, Geneva sold a Chronometro Gondolo for over SFr.250,000. The watch had withstood the rigours of tropical humidity that have sadly affected many of these watches, and came complete with its original certificate, making it a rare and highly desirable piece.

Fittingly, it was originally sold in a rather novel fashion. To add excitement and attract customers, dozens of clubs were set up by Gondolo y Labouriau. Each member was given a lottery ticket along with their weekly repayment plan for the watch they had bought. The point at which your number was drawn determined how many installments you had to pay. If you were lucky enough to be drawn early on in your payment schedule, you were given the watch without any further money due – a highly effective marketing ploy. These clubs regularly convened for outings, indulging in elaborate picnics and wearing outsized Mexican hats. But behind all the gaiety, the 'Plano do Club Patek Philippe System' was a system that worked: thousands of Patek Philippses were sold over its 25-year existence.

### Hybrid

With time, the Latin American markets began to show their fragility. Tissot decided to create a chameleon watch that could weather the ups and downs of the local economies. The Chrono Janeiro, first created in 1938, featured both Omega and Tissot on the dial. It was specifically designed for the Latin American market so that jewellers could offer a watch that appealed to customers of both brands.

In her book on the history of Tissot, Estelle Fallet explains this hybrid watch: "Omega production was typified by maximum attention to detail, which makes the price more expensive. These details were therefore removed, to achieve the lower



The Plano do Club Patek Philippe picnicking in Brazil – the sociable side to a highly lucrative marketing scheme. The Brazilian distributor sold 180 time-pieces to each club, resulting in the sale of thousands of watches.



The latest model from Cartier's historic line of Santos watches (yellow-gold case and steel bracelet; starting price, £2,250), which started in 1904 when Louis Cartier created one of the world's first wristwatches for Alberto Santos Dumont. The first commercially available Santos watch left the workshop in 1912.



If your number was drawn early in your payment schedule, Patek gave you the Gondolo without any further instalments due.

(Above) When increasing numbers of wristwatches appeared in the 1920s, there was a proliferation in the variety of shapes and sizes in which the Gondolo was produced. Of the nine varieties, this example is a curved, square-shaped Art Deco model from 1928.

(Right) An early, open-face, keyless-winding Patek Philippe Chronometro Gondolo pocket watch from 1904.

Tissot prices, but not without controversy; bitter and tough discussions were waged between the technical managers of the two companies." The watch was phased out in 1950, but remains a curiosity and a strong part of Tissot's heritage as shown by the re-edition of this watch in 2003, this time with no Omega on the dial...

Rolex were also quick to develop links with Latin America in the late 1930s after the success of the Oyster Perpetual. Founded in 1905, Rolex had been developing the UK and Commonwealth markets, and it was not until the war years that Rolex looked to more lucrative markets. So it is from the 1930s onward that you will find Serpico y Laino personalised dials from the highly collectible Venezuelan retailer, along with other rarities that have Rolex addicts salivating at auctions.

#### What goes around...

One curiosity of the Latin watch boom is that it was not all one-way trade. Further north, in the

warm waters of the Caribbean, Cuba has another story of horological interest. It was not unusual to find jewellers catering to the freshly minted wealth in cities like Havana, where Cuervo y Sobrinos, founded in 1882, were doing brisk trade. As for better known retailers such as Tiffany and Garrard, Patek Philippe, Longines and Rolex all branded watches for Cuervo y Sobrinos.

However, what is surprising is the *international* success of this retailer from Havana's Fifth Avenue. By the 1940s, they had opened boutiques in Paris, La Chaux de Fonds and Pforzheim, and claimed they were the most prestigious jewellers in Latin America.

More recently, the Cuervo y Sobrinos brand has been resuscitated by the Italian, Marzio Villa, who explains the drive behind this Latin American based brand: "All that is Latin American is fashionable right now." So fashionable that his current annual production of around 4,000

Watch dealers made a beeline for Brazil in the late 1970s, '80s and early '90s, pretty much cleaning the place out.

pieces a year does not satisfy the public hunger for these timepieces that evoke the days of Hemingway knocking back mojitos at the Hotel Naçional. Adding intrigue to the Cuervo y Sobrinos story, Villa tells of the old premises' basement, where he found a number of uncased movements that had been housed inside limited edition Esplendido, Prominentes and Robusto models. The cigar analogy is strong, from the names of the models that mimic cigar sizes to the humidors in which they are sold. The watches are as voluptuously curved as a 1930s Cadillac parked outside the Tropicana.

#### Legendary legacy

It was in fact a Brazilian who was the inspiration behind one of the world's first wristwatches – possibly one of the best known models to this day. Aviation pioneer Alberto Santos Dumont became a close friend of Louis Cartier while experimenting with his flying machines in Paris. In 1904, the French watchmaker and jeweller created a watch not only capable of withstanding the rigours of Santos' aerial experiments, but one that he could also strap onto his wrist to ensure it was fully visible while he kept his hands on the controls: the Santos was born.

The rich seam of horological heritage that runs through Latin America is clearly an alluring one, especially when littered with such significant contributions to the Swiss watch industry. But before you rush to catch the next flight to Bogota or Quito to claim your stake in the horological El Dorado, heed the words of Roger Lister, clock and watch expert at Christie's in London: "Watch dealers made a beeline for Brazil in the late 1970s, '80s and early '90s and pretty much cleaned the place out." Such a quest nowadays might as well be for fools' gold. ●

#### Further information

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Tissot, The Swatch Group UK, 112 Southampton Road, Eastleigh, Hants SO50 5PB. Tel: 023 80 611 612, Fax: 023 80643 003, www.tissot.ch



From 1882, Armando Rio y Cuervo and his brothers built up Cuervo y Sobrinos (literally 'Cuervo and nephews') from their uncle's business on Fifth Street, Havana to an international brand that continues to encapsulate the spirit of Latin America. This is the Prominente Dual Time model (€2,890).