

# Tiffany

A travelling exhibition of unusual designs shows Tiffany's strength as watch designers, if not makers. The New York jewellery house's Mark collection has clearly benefitted from such a stylish legacy, as QP finds out

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It was not often that Charles Lewis Tiffany got it wrong in business, even if some schemes could be described as a little off the wall – such as in 1858, when he bid for a leftover length of the newly laid Atlantic cable, which he decided to slice up, mount and sell as souvenirs. Naturally, it made him a mint. When the American Civil War erupted three years later, he quickly recovered from the decline in demand for luxury goods by switching to the manufacture of swords, medals and other war paraphernalia, keeping the company buoyant until peace resumed in 1865. When Tiffany turned to watches however, it wasn't such an easy ride...



### Ups and downs

It was, shall we say, a minor error of judgement: Tiffany decided it was time the Americans showed the Swiss a thing or two about making watches. Never one to do things lightly, he opted to establish a factory right in the middle of Geneva, at Place Cornavin. It was no small-scale atelier either – this was a sprawling, five-storey affair that could lay claim to being the largest facility of its type in Switzerland. “One of Geneva’s sights worth seeing,” said an enthusiastic Swiss Chronicle correspondent in 1875.

One can only imagine the wry smiles on the faces of the old guard as, after just a few years (the Tiffany archive appears somewhat hazy on this), a couple of other, rather more established arrivals called Antoine de Patek and Jean Adrien Philippe agreed to take the factory off Mr Tiffany’s hands for a fair and reasonable sum.

There were no hard feelings,

however, as Patek Philippe had struck a deal in 1851 that made Tiffany Patek’s first retailer in America and, long before the Tiffany watch factory was founded, Patek had taken on a rôle as the brand’s private watchmakers – a partnership that celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2001 with the introduction of the limited series of T150 wristwatches, 450 of which were made available solely through Tiffany in the US at a retail price of \$22,500 each.

But while Tiffany’s brief foray into large-scale manufacturing during the 19<sup>th</sup> century may not have been entirely successful, the firm retained skilled watchmakers who shared Patek’s workshop facilities in Geneva, allowing them to continue to create and innovate.

### Retrospective

When the first Tiffany-branded watch went on sale in New York during the 1850s, the name set a new benchmark for pocket watch style and sophistication. The simple gold Tiffany cases soon became prized for their classic beauty, which contrasted with the mechanically complex movements contained within.

And the mechanics were often something to behold, such as those of the

celebrated Tiffany Timer of 1866 – one of the world’s first stopwatches – and the Tiffany Chronograph of the early 1870s, which was at the forefront of dual-function pocket timepieces and attracted significant patrons such as WH Vanderbilt and John Henry Starin, the designer of the New York subway.

Each of these important watches used movements created by Tiffany themselves. The firm received several patents for various technical developments, so it was far from unreasonable to think that the factory in Place Cornavin might be able to equal, or even better, the Swiss at their own game. However, the real talent of America’s premier jeweller lay in external aesthetics. Perhaps grudgingly, Tiffany accepted this as fact, left the movement making to the specialists, and allowed his jewellery craftsmen to do what they did best: create breathtaking designs.

Part of the legacy of this golden age of watch design – when Tiffany’s goldsmiths, jewellers, and enamellers were seemingly granted *carte blanche* to produce the most fabulous dials, cases and finishes that their imaginations could dream up – now forms an integral part of the Tiffany and Co. archive.

Significant items from the collection have recently been the subject of various travelling exhibitions held throughout the world in celebration of the latest range of Tiffany wristwatches – the Tiffany Mark collection – which draws on the reputation for beautiful simplicity for which the brand is famous. (The line of mechanical pieces includes everything from a straightforward hand-wound, two-hands watch to a fine-looking automatic regulator and a hand-wound, platinum-cased tourbillon.) The exhibition, appropriately named Quality Time, was assembled and curated by Tiffany archivist Annamarie Sandeck, who has the rather enviable job of spending her days seeking out some of the most rare and exquisite of the firm’s early products.

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These Mark models are conspicuous by their distinctive leather straps, coloured green (below; £2,375) and blue (opposite; £1,150).





The pieces shown in London include the fruits of the partnership between Patek Philippe and Tiffany.



(Above) The wife of Sugar baron William Harrison used this purse's discreetly mounted watch (1890–ca.1910) to ensure her social engagements ran to schedule (featured in Tiffany's Quality Time exhibition).

(Right) This gold cigar cutter (ca.1912) combines smoking accessory with timepiece in incomparable style (featured in Tiffany's Quality Time exhibition).

The pieces shown in London included the magnificent John Henry Starin chronograph mentioned earlier, as well as the first known creation of the partnership between Patek Philippe and Tiffany (then known as Tiffany, Young and Ellis), which dates from around 1849. The most remarkable exhibits, however, demonstrate how, in the hands of Tiffany's vastly experienced jewellers, watch cases can be transformed from the utilitarian to extraordinary; set with gems; and carved, chased and moulded with fantastic designs such as fish, plants and animals.

There were also deliciously practical works of art, such as the finger purse made for the wife of sugar baron William Harrison. The top of the purse is set with a tiny, diamond-encircled watch, which allowed Mrs Harrison to discreetly monitor how much time she could allocate to each of the many social and charity events she attended. Tiffany's fabulous range of Edwardian smoking accessories was exemplified by the wonderful combination cigar cutter pocket watch of 1912. Not up to slicing the Atlantic cable into retail-sized chunks perhaps, but an incomparably stylish way to prepare a Cohiba. ◉

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**Further information:** To find out where to see the travelling exhibition of items from the archive of Tiffany and Co., call: +1 212 230 6956.

The Tiffany Mark wristwatch collection, priced from £835 to £36,300, comprises watches featuring a choice of seven different movements housed in two case sizes, two case shapes and made from a range of three metals. The entire range can be seen at Tiffany and Co., 25 Old Bond Street, London W1S. [www.tiffany.com/uk](http://www.tiffany.com/uk)