



The QP Bookshelf Part 2:

Rolex Lore

QP picks out the best books on watchmaking's most famous brand

Ken Kessler



In the last issue, we promised that there would be a Rolex-only instalment in our series, and the popularity of that marque has ensured that you have not had to wait long. If any brand almost *demand*s its own shelf full of reference material, it must be what is the most coveted brand of all.

Sadly, it is also the most counterfeited brand of them all. Why? Because there are enough people out there so comprehensively lacking in both self-esteem and "class" that they would rather wear a bogus Rolex than a genuine Swatch or Casio. Such people do not even deserve your pity: if someone cannot afford something – a watch, designer jeans, whatever – that is no excuse to patronise criminals producing cod surrogates. (Shoot me if I ever consider buying a Ferrari on a Ford chassis.)

Because of the fakery, buying genuine Rolexes has become a risky business, and now a mini-industry is springing up: that of How-To-Spot-A-Genuine-Rolex books. Those of you who surf the Web or read American watch magazines will have noticed ads for such titles, and they do try their best to guide you through the minefield that is Rolex forgery. While we have no issue with these guidebooks, be wary of being lulled into a false sense of security. To illustrate this, we would tell you a cautionary tale: last year, we saw a fake so convincing that a Rolex veteran of nearly 30 years' standing, who had spent a number of years assembling Rolexes in Geneva, could not be 100% sure that it was bogus until he removed the back. So how can a "handy pocket guide" protect you?

Our advice, then, is by all means to investigate these spotters' guides, but do not part with money for ANY Rolex unless:

- 1) you are buying it from an authorised Rolex dealer or (if second-hand) a reputable vendor
- 2) you have had a knowledgeable Rolex repair-person look INSIDE the watch

Remember, some of the most convincing fakes use stolen Rolex parts, including genuine dials, and these are the ones that will catch you out, guide book or not.

With this in mind, we have decided to concentrate on Rolex histories and catalogues with more emphasis on general knowledge and less

emphasis on trying to turn you into a qualified Rolex hunter, because that is just not going to happen. It would be as spurious as expecting to be able to spot forged paintings after reading a book or two. And here is where we run smack into a brick wall: all of the Rolex history/guide books we have seen are unauthorised, because the company is utterly resistant to entreaties from researchers to open its archives. This is tragic, as it could result in a project gratefully received by all watch collectors, in turn creating a bestseller that would sweep aside all that came before it. But it is not all bad news. Amongst those responsible for the Rolex titles on these pages are some of the watch world's most respected authorities, including Antiquorum's Osvaldo Patrizzi and recognised Rolex maven James Dowling.

But there is the inevitable caveat: nearly every Rolex book states as fact certain details, however trivial, that simply are not true, or "correct". Why? Because much of the work has to be, thanks to Rolex's reticence, pure conjecture. Additionally, there is a tendency to accept as fact the myriad rumours and innuendos that have been repeated incessantly over the years. Fortunately, most of these errors are utterly trivial, and the books are 99% reliable. Just bear in mind that, until Rolex are prepared to treat their past, their heritage and their goodwill with the same open-mindedness and intellectual generosity as Patek Philippe, Girard-Perregaux and others, those loyal customers who made the brand what it is today will continue to suffer in partial ignorance.

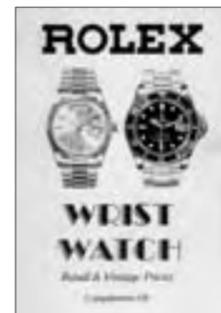


Rolex Wristwatches: The Best Of Time – An Unauthorized History (2nd Edition)

By James M Dowling & Jeffrey P Hess

Hardback, 400 pages, Price: £99.95,
Published by Schiffer Publishing, 2001, ISBN 0-7643-1367-3

Now available in an edition that is slightly revised and expanded over the 1996 debut, this has become the standard work on Rolex, a remarkable achievement considering that it has been assembled without Rolex's participation. Dowling and Hess are well known in watch-collecting circles, and their combined expertise (and tenacity) has resulted in a book that complements the Patrizzi volume (see below). Although it is nearly as rich in photos, this book is not as much of a catalogue *per se* as Patrizzi's *Collecting Rolex Wristwatches*; there is far too much actual prose to allow you to forget that it is a proper history. Eminently readable, full of delicious trivia, it is a feast for the fact-hungry Rolex fanatic. Along with the Patrizzi book (below), it is all you will ever need (though *Vintage Rolex Sports Models* is a nice extra, if you favour the sports watches above normal Rolexes).

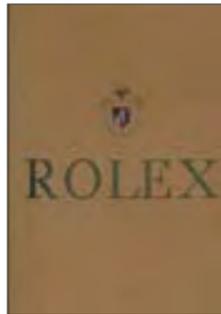


Rolex Wrist Watch Price Guide Book 91: Retail & Vintage Prices

By Sherry & Roy Ehrhardt and Joe Demesy

Paperback, 48 pages, Price: \$17 (when new),
Published by Heart of America Press, 1991

Though out of print, this deserves mention because it was, for its time, a model guide: pocket-sized and detailed. Within its 48 pages were guesstimates of production dates according to serial numbers, not-too-far-fetched prices and useable, if dark, images. Face it: you are not going a-watch-hunting while schlepping around a book that weighs 8 pounds. So why is this here if it means adding your name to the amazon.com "wish list" facility? Simple: we have included it as a plea for some industrious collector to update it!



Rolex – Timeless Elegance

By George Gordon

Hardback, 348 pages, Price: £100+ (out of print),
Published by Zie Yongder Co., 1989, ISBN 962-7359-01-7

One of the first of the massive Rolex hardback histories, this work, though low on text and high on illustrations, deserves attention simply because it is so beautiful. Unlike the Dowling/Hess title, it does not purport to be a history so much as a paean to the brand. The largest section looks more like an auction catalogue than anything else, with whole pages devoted to one or two watches. But the production values are peerless, the content includes wonderful reprints of old ads, promotional material and the odd newspaper clipping, and there is a superb appendix consisting of facsimile sheets of Rolex designs, printed on soft buff paper. This slip-cased delight is in no way an authoritative study, being more like a love letter to the brand. Copies still turn up, but expect to pay at least £100 for a decent one.

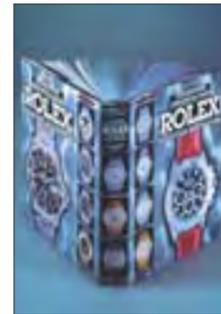


Rolex: 2421 Uhren

By Kesaharu Imai

Hardback, 144 pages, Price: ~£50,
Published by Callwey, 1998, ISBN 3-7667-1308-6

Like the famous homecare products, this book does just what it says on the cover: it shows you photos of 2421 Rolexes, each identified by model name, approximate date of manufacture, dimensions, any special details and a now-out-of-date estimated value. Although it is not meant to be, the book is hilarious in concept: a German translation of a Japanese work that scales new heights of anorakism. You simply will not believe how many infinitesimal variations there are amongst the watches, and you will probably find yourself overwhelmed when you try to identify, say, your 1970s Air-King, only to find 30 or more that look exactly like it. On one level, the book's assemblers have made this an indispensable guide because the watches are broken down into 13 categories (eg, Submariner, Prince), but within those categories there is no methodology for locating a specific watch, such as date of manufacture. You simply have to look at each one to find the particular variant you are after. But that is to carp. The photography is superb, the selection mind-boggling and it has helped this collector to identify watches on more occasions than he can recount.



Collecting Rolex Wristwatches (4th Edition)

By Osvaldo Patrizzi

Hardback, 512 pages, Price: €248,
Published by Guido Mondani Editore, 2001, ISBN 88-900514-9-3

Along with the Dowling/Hess book, this is a truly indispensable volume, sort of a cross between George Gordon's *Rolex – Timeless Elegance* and Imai's *Rolex: 2421 Uhren*. A massive book, it contains page after page of photos of Rolexes – usually one watch per page – making the images some 4 inches across! The photography is breathtaking, and each shot is accompanied by text identifying the watch comprehensively and precisely. It is, as the title says, a guide to collecting Rolexes – no more, no less – and it is written (in Italian and English) with the expertise of a man who single-handedly revolutionised watch auctions and the way in which watches are graded. Patrizzi augments what would otherwise be “just” a catalogue with reprints of important ads, some useful tables, text passages about certain genres of Rolex and more. The book is also accompanied by a separate supplement providing typical prices for each and every item, referenced against nearly 30 years' worth of Antiquorum's sales records. A truly magnificent work, with production values to make bibliophiles drool.



Vintage Rolex Sports Models

By Martin Skeet & Nick Urul

Hardback, 216 pages, Price: £59.95,
Published by Schiffer Publishing, 2002, ISBN 0-7643-1496-3

We wrote about this title last month in our introductory instalment, and we are including it again because it belongs here, with pride of place. It is, as stated last month, a near-perfect book about a specific part of the story of a single brand. The authors have concentrated on the very niche that contains the most desirable, collectible Rolex models, providing page after page of minutiae, analysing in detail every model in the sports ranges: GMT, Explorer, Submariner, Sea Dweller and Daytona. In effect, it is a spotters' guide for those who worship the marque's sporty models. As it is unauthorised, there are trivial mistakes or claims that might irritate Rolex insiders, but, given that this is a handicap affecting every book on Rolex, this is still a must have. ○

Next issue:

Military watch books

Further information:

For more information on any of these books, contact Rita Shenton Horological Booksellers, 142 Percy Road, Twickenham TW2 6JG. Tel: 020 8894 6888, Fax: 020 8893 8766