

Classic Autos

by Jonathan Scatchard

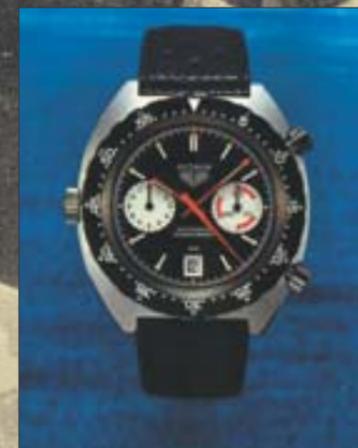
One of the most talked about, must-have watches of recent times – whether in vintage or modern form – is the outrageous and very stylish Monaco by TAG Heuer. The modern advertising for this piece relies heavily on the image of screen idol Steve McQueen, who famously wore the watch during the filming of the 1971 film “Le Mans”. A reissue of the famous blue dial, silver subdials and orange chronograph hand has helped to force the prices of the originals up from the low £100s 5 years ago to as much as £3000 today. Now the flag drops for the Autavia.

Whilst the excitement and focus has been firmly on the Monaco, one equally important watch can still be found in auction houses and on Internet sites, in some cases at such bargain prices as the Monaco was 5 years ago. This watch is the Heuer Autavia. The Autavia (whose name is derived from a combination of automobile and aviation) was first made as a dashboard-mounted chronograph in 1933. This was when Heuer first started taking sports timing seriously, and coincided with the beginning of the era of racing legends. Fifteen years later, Heuer developed their first chronograph for drivers to wear on the wrist and called it the Auto-graph.

We had to wait until the early '60s before Heuer revived the Autavia name, putting it to a hugely successful chronograph with a hand-wound movement and several versions of turning bezel for pilots, motorists, divers and even scientists. But even the hugely popular Autavia was eclipsed in 1963 by one of the finest watches ever made: the Carrera. The Carrera has had many articles written about it, and its price among collectors is by now well established.

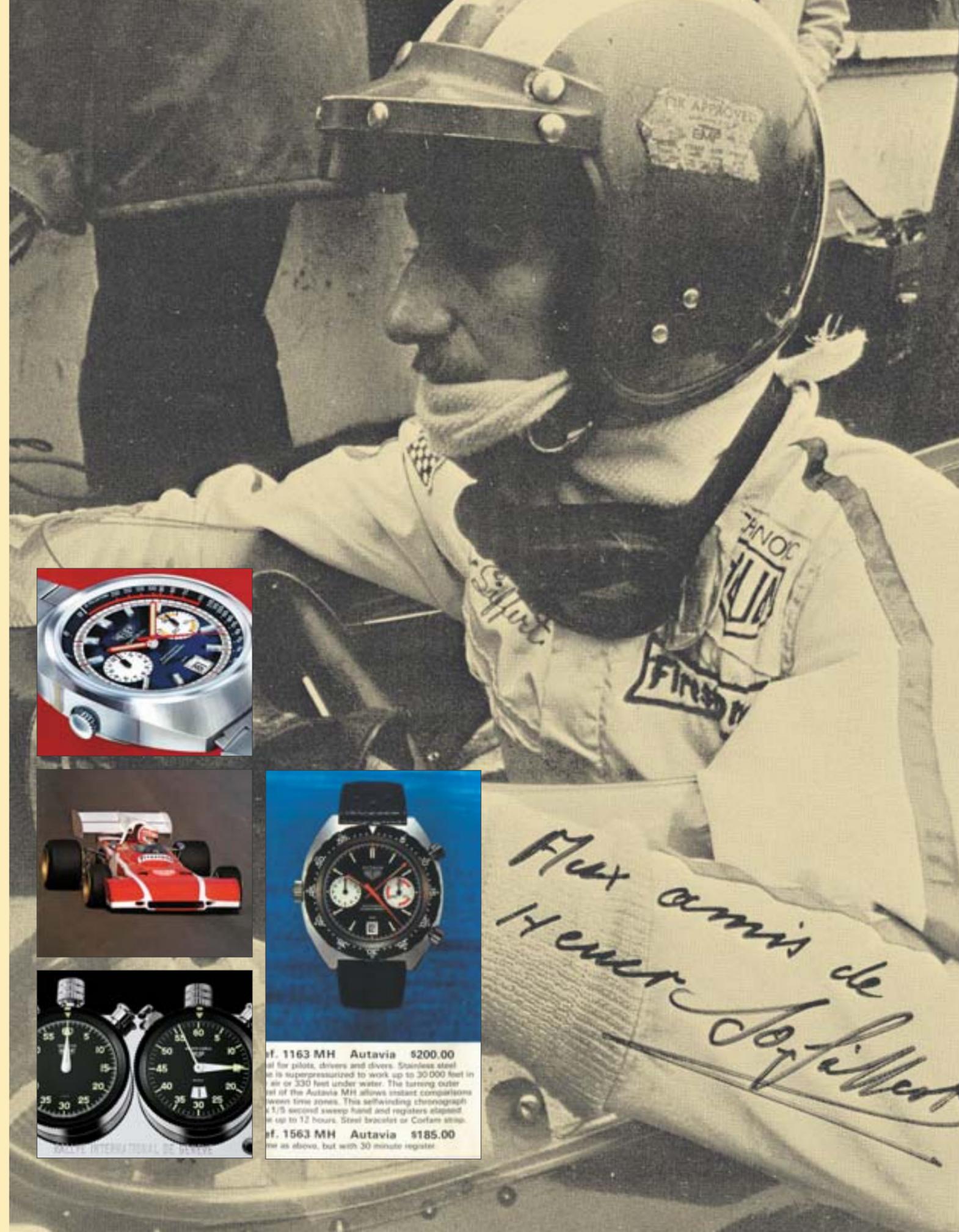
Invention

During the 1960s the Swiss watch-making industry was developing new innovations (the threat of electronic movements from America and quartz from Japan was very real). Since the late 1940s, movement manufacturers in Switzerland had been working on ways to make a self-winding (automatic) chronograph, but without any real success. Heuer knew that they had



Ref. 1163 MH Autavia \$200.00
 Ideal for pilots, drivers and divers. Stainless steel case is superpressurized to work up to 30,000 feet in air or 330 feet under water. The turning outer bezel of the Autavia MH allows instant comparisons between time zones. This self-winding chronograph has a 1/5 second sweep hand and registers elapsed time up to 12 hours. Steel bracelet or Corfam strap.

Ref. 1563 MH Autavia \$185.00
 Same as above, but with 30 minute register.





Late 1960s examples of the original Heuer Autavia Chronomatic and Heuer Carrera. Pristine examples regularly achieve prices of over £1,500 at auction. The Autavia first appeared in wristwatch form – but with a hand-wound movement – in 1963, and in dashboard chronograph form in 1933.

to come up with something special to remain at the pinnacle of sports timing, but the costs of developing a new movement were so high that they had to find a partner to help share the expense. In fact, they found two – Breitling and Hamilton-Buren – with whom, among much secrecy, they raced to make the world's first automatic chronograph movement. It was widely known that American and Japanese companies were working hard to develop a similar movement, and rumour had it that the Swiss firm Zenith were also pulling out all the stops.

In 1969, to much acclaim, Heuer's collaborations led to the birth of a fine movement; Heuer called it calibre 12, and it had a micro-rotor cleverly hidden under the dial. Chronograph buttons would be located at the traditional 2 and 4 o'clock positions but, distinctively, the winding

crown would be on the opposite side at 9 o'clock. At first, all three firms called their calibre 12-based watches Chronomatic, but Heuer only used this name for 1 year, and, in 1970, replaced it with simply "automatic chronograph". Three models with the calibre 12 movement were initially produced:

- the Carrera, which featured a tachymetre scale on the dial
- the Monaco, a remarkable square-cased, water-resistant watch
- the Autavia, which had a unidirectional-turning bezel

A winning formula

In addition to the technical achievements of 1969, something else happened which was to change the fortunes of Heuer and help develop



Heuer's original designs for Chronomatic watches put the winding crowns on the left, "to remind you that this chronograph never needs winding," as the adverts had it. The Autavia 2003 models keep this quirky touch, but carefully reworks the detail of the dials to make these watches as right for the times now as they were 40 years ago. Watch out also for a rose-gold version.

a brand association that persists to this day. Successful Swiss motor-racing driver Joe "Seppi" Siffert had just won the Le Mans 24-hr race. A representative of Porsche, he was known to be looking for sponsorship as he began scaling the heights of Formula 1 driving. Jack Heuer struck a deal with Siffert (at this time Heuer became the first ever Formula 1 sponsor not to be connected with the automobile industry), and the Heuer logo was seen on the sides of his car and on his overalls. Siffert famously wore the calibre 12 Autavia with the rarer white dial, black sub-dials and black bezel. The word *Chronomatic* was also to be seen on this early watch.

Tragically, Siffert was killed in 1971 during time trials for the Brands Hatch grand prix. Heuer's involvement with Formula 1 continued though, with legendary names such as Jack Ickx (in whose honour Heuer made the Leonidas Easy Rider chronograph), Clay Regazzoni and Niki Lauda. In fact, it is believed that the entire Ferrari team wore gold Carreras.

Desire

It is somewhat ironic that the Monaco watch owes a large part of its fame and success to a movie legend who, it is widely assumed, based his character in the film "Le Mans" on Seppi Siffert, and whose own excellent choice of watch is, to this day, findable and affordable. This serves to confront the Heuer fan with further tempting thoughts: "OK, so you own a Monaco? You must have an Autavia!" "You've got a Monaco and an Autavia? How can you live without a Carrera?"

The calibre 12 is, in any form, deservedly sought after by collectors and can still be found at reasonable prices. Breitling Chronomatic watches of this period often get underrated, as do Hamiltons, which are just as recognisable as the Heuers with the winding crowns at 9 o'clock.

Despite being outlived by both Zenith's El Primero and Oris's Valjoux 7750 – the two main competitors in the 1970s – the Chronomatic movement's place in history is assured. ◉

Further information: TAG Heuer Boutique, 35 Brook Street, London W1. Tel: 020 7016 5555, www.tagheuer.com