

# Old Master

 The world of Rolex collecting is a minefield of detail and opinion even for the most experienced collector. Rolex really is different, as Imran Khan's survey of the GMT-Master and its history shows.

A second-series GMT-Master from the mid-1960s, with its distinctive screen-printed aluminium bezel.



Born in 1954, the GMT-Master was one of the first of the “professional” watches launched during Rolex’s golden era. The result of a collaboration between the now-defunct airline Pan Am and Rolex’s head of R&D René Jeanneret, the GMT-Master allowed easy reading of two different time zones – a must for the new transatlantic pilots and jetsetters.

The original GMT-Master was known as the 6542 – its reference number – and was based on a modified calibre 1030, producing the new calibre 1065. This allowed the use of a fourth 24-hr hand, which, together with a 24-hr rotatable bezel, allowed the simultaneous reading of two different time zones. These first models had bakelite bezels and lacquered dials with gilt printing. They were signed “officially certified chronometer”, and many were sold with Controle Officiel Suisse des Chronometres (COSC) timing certificates.

This 6542 was also unique in that the case had no crown guards, and it was 2-mm smaller in diameter than the later 1675 models. The 24-hr hand also had a “mini arrow”. The model was discontinued in 1959, and good examples of original 6542 models with box and papers are now exceptionally rare. Many have also had the crack-prone bakelite bezels replaced.

## Evolution

In 1960, the 6542 was replaced by a model with a crown-guard and the new calibre 1565 movement. This new version – the 1675 – retained many of the features of its predecessor, such as the mini-arrow 24-hr hand and lacquered, gilt-printed dials. One major change was the bezel: it was now made of screen-printed aluminium, making it much more durable than the earlier bakelite version. The new crown-guard design brought the GMT-Master into tune with the Submariner, Rolex’s other professional watch. These first series 1675s had “pointed” crown guards and are some of the most aesthetic sports watches ever made.

During the 1960s, the GMT-Master underwent a visual transformation as it evolved to the definitive acrylic glass 1675 of the 1970s. First among the changes was the disappearance of the elegant pointed crown-guard and the emergence of the more robust (if less appealing) rounded guard. Accompanying this, the 24-hr hand grew to the much larger arrow we see today. The first of these models retained the beautiful glossy lacquered dials, although the inner minute track gave way to minute markings at the edge of the dial – an example of form following function. Eventually, in the late 1960s, the lacquered dial was dispensed with and replaced by a matt dial.

“... The GMT-Master was created by Rolex to meet the very special and exacting needs of the flying personnel of two world-renowned aviation companies....”

... The GMT-Master has also met with an enthusiastic reception from ships’ captains, members of the armed forces and international businessmen....”

GMT-Master catalogue, 1966



The movement benefited from the hack (stop-seconds) feature in the early '70s. The GMT-Master retained this look for nearly 20 years, and, like the classic Mercedes SL roadster, is definitely a usable classic! The calibre 1565 movement is often described as one of Rolex’s best engineered and is extremely robust – indeed, many owners who have never serviced their watches (not that we would recommend this course of action) can still boast about the accuracy of their timekeeping!

The GMT-Master became a firm favourite with adventurers and pilots alike, a state of affairs that didn’t pass unnoticed at Rolex HQ. These links with the airline industry, and especially Pan Am, were exploited by Rolex in their advertising. More dynamic adverts came from adventurers who testified to their GMT-Master’s performance in all manner of testing conditions.



Calibres 1570 (top) and 1030/1065. The 1030/1065 was used up until 1960 when the GMT was updated and fitted with a modified calibre 1565, which was then designated the 1570.

In 1979, the 16750 was launched. Though visually unchanged, this model introduced a new movement: the calibre 3075. This allowed the date to be changed from the crown independently of the time – or, as Rolex puts it, “quickset”. Interestingly, the gold models were also fitted with new sapphire crystals, while the all-steel model retained its acrylic glass. The first of the series kept the old matt dials, but these were replaced in the mid-1980s by new glossy dials with the luminous areas outlined in white gold.

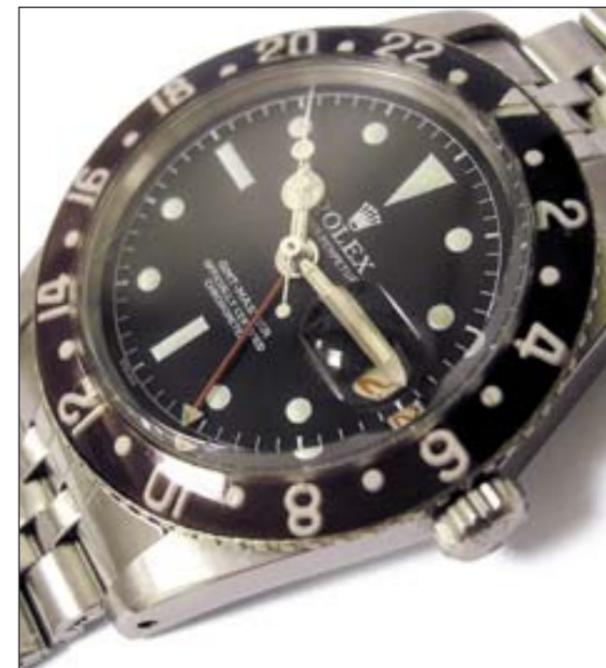
The 16750 with matt dial has become one of those rare interim models that are now sought-after collector’s items. However, unlike the earlier lacquered-dial models, these can still be found with the box and all of the original paperwork intact.

The final version of the GMT-Master, the 16700, was by far the most radical in terms of the series’s evolution. This new model was completely reworked from its 1675/16750 predecessors, with a chunkier case, new bezel, larger crown and (at last) a sapphire crystal. For the first time, Rolex gave the GMT-Master water resistance of 100 m instead of its previous 50 m. This was the “Schwarzenegger” of the GMT-Master series.

At the same time, Rolex launched the GMT-Master II with the new calibre 3085 movement (shared with the new Explorer II), which allowed the hour hand to move in precise 1-hr jumps. The GMT-Master II continues today, but the original “two timer” was finally discontinued in 2000.

### Collectables

The GMT-Master has become collectable in recent years, perhaps following in the wake of the more popular Submariner and Daytona models. The “Master” has its own unique appeal and is certainly the more usable professional watch for most of us non-divers! Its affordability and comfort on the wrist, coupled with its distinctive looks, make the GMT-Master a sagacious classic buy. If you are thinking of conquering Everest, the 16700 would be best, but for sheer wrist art, the 1675 with pointed crown-guard and lacquered dial would have to be the first choice!



Buying a GMT-Master should not prove too difficult – there are many vintage dealers, and the major auction houses usually have a few in their sales. The difficult-to-find models are the early 6542s and 1675s with lacquered dials. Good pieces with all of their paperwork fetch a premium – but it is one that is worth paying.

Finally, always do your research before you buy, and remember to check the serial numbers between the lugs and movement number with Rolex to make sure that the watch is not lost or stolen. Once you have made your purchase, always have your watch serviced. Rolex (Bexley) can be contacted directly and are always helpful. ◯



◀ The original GMT 6542, with bakelite bezel and lacquered dial.

▲ GMT 1675 first series with pointed crown-guards.