

# Watches



Time is surely the oldest presence in the universe. Chronic and unremitting, he draws in his train the centuries and the seasons, imposing his own rhythm on them, against the background of the multiple convulsions that propel us from war to peace, through revolution and crises, past ephemeral joys and fugitive pleasures. His sole concern is to force mankind to race against him, a contest in which he always wins the final victory. Yet he endears himself to us when we measure his passing in the heel of a wooden shoe or under the wings of a pair of doves.

As we see it, it is not by chance that the creators of jewel-watches placed their tiny mechanisms that tell us the hours in a setting of flowers, fruits, adornments of dress and musical instruments. By this intentionally exquisite manner, they succeed in rejuvenating the aged countenance of time, in revealing to us the light and not the pitiless side of his nature. And this charm entrances us: the velvet surface of a butterfly's wing shimmers with the glow of subtle enamel, glinting with fine under-engraving and scintillant on the petals of a rose or a multi-colored tulip which open when a secret spot is pressed. The montgolfière is much more than a simple hot-air balloon: it becomes the messenger of exalted

moments. Does there exist anywhere a weapon more silent and inoffensive than this little gold pistol, enameled and set with pearls, which releases a fine perfumed spray and hides, in its stock, a watch no larger than a young hazelnut?

When we relate to these objects we are suspended in time and our memory is limited to the moment, pure crystal felicity. They are the mobiles of delight. They transform the variety of things into a sovereign beauty, surprising us by their sempiternity. They succeed in their efforts to bring Time down to earth by embodying it in the form of a lyre or in the quiver of a cupid. The impulse to miniaturize every-day objects or the beings of the animal and plant world is in itself an invitation to grasp the original of that which we only for the span of a lifetime and which we never wholly possess: Time.

The creative drive, picturesque to the point of eccentricity, which presides over the making of fanciful watches is equally found in the other objects deemed necessary to masculine and feminine fashion and which serve a number of purposes. Frequently jewel-watches themselves are designed for more than one use and include scent bottles, beauty-spot cases, vinaigrettes. Or they can be set into objects having quite a different primary function: cane knobs, lorgnettes, snuff boxes, field glasses, seals, etc.

There is no end to the fripperies that play their parts in the decorative patterns indulged in by jewel-watch fanciers: scent bottles, salt shakers, vinegar cruets, bouquet holders, cases of all sorts, programs for the ball, souvenir diaries, notebooks and buttons. One of the most frequently decorated of the accessories is the chatelaine. It consists of a rather large brooch from which are suspended a number of little chains terminating in hooks. The center hook holds a watch and a whole gamut of trinkets dangle from the others. All of these baubles sway and tinkle together keeping time to the wearer's steps, and their jingling, called "charivari", was an integral part of their elegance.

Elegance is the harmonious interplay of all the components of costume and bearing. The same elegance is shown throughout in the choice of the embellishments, in the combining of laces, ribbons, feathers, embroideries and other ornaments. The excessive admiration displayed for one form of personal adornment or another, the first aim of which is to be original, is called fashion.

Fads spring up, capricious, sometimes absurd but always fleeting, favoring a certain color or a way of lacing shoes or knotting a silk scarf or telling time. This is reflected in language. Fashion is a collective phenomenon where we can see the crowd grow enthusiastic over a novelty. At the beginning this is actually an effort to stand out from the crowd and, paradoxically, at the same time, to look like everybody else. Fashion makes it possible for each individual to display, according to his means, the prestige of the milieu to which he belongs; it is thus directly related to economic notions of conspicuous consumption.



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Over a period of time it becomes habit or custom. Fashion is in constant motion, and in spite of everything that may be said, it is not the one launching it or following it who is truly original, but the one who is a step ahead of it.

Many factors are involved in the birth of a fashion. We are going to try to highlight those which made possible the surge of creation of extraordinary objects that characterized the watchmaking industry of Geneva. During the last half of the 18th century, the Swiss cantons enjoyed considerable economic prosperity. The textile industry, not only cotton, linen and wool, but also silk, developed in Zurich, Basel, Saint Gallen and Neuchâtel. Woven, embroidered and printed fabrics flourished. Geneva won its international reputation as the favored place for luxury watches and enamel decorations. Nor should we forget the very intense intellectual atmosphere of the Age of Enlightenment and the profound relationships growing up between the major cities and the neighboring countries: Zurich became a great center of German literature, and Geneva provided the background for the explosive genius of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, the heirs of French culture.

In addition, one of the most important among the historical factors was the very strong impact of the French Revolution on the Confederation. In 1798 a French army invaded Switzerland and forced the cantons to submit to the formation of a Helvetic Republic under the domination of France. Thus the local autonomies were abolished and the prefects installed virtually everywhere became the real repositories of power. The strict uniformity of this administration was not particularly appreciated by the Swiss who were accustomed to living in a highly differentiated regionalism. Bonaparte recognized this and restored the federalist system, creating new cantons. However, the Swiss were forced to supply a large contingent of men to Napoleon's army. When the Emperor fell in 1814, Switzerland immediately reverted to the decentralized system of the old confederation, thus clearly manifesting the triumphant European conservative reaction to the revolutionary period. Switzerland was then in a position to establish its principle of neutrality, its independence and its integrity. These new conditions of peace were conducive to economic expansion.

In terms of esthetics, a fashion doesn't just sprout up overnight; it always derives from a model. In Geneva this model had two basic characteristics. In the first place, the French influence encouraged the flowering of a special taste in watches of bizarre and daring design. Over a long period of time Paris had held the monopoly of good taste and it was by no means infrequent that certain goldsmiths of Geneva went so far as to stamp their snuff boxes with false Parisian hallmarks to lend greater allure to their products. It should be made clear that their workmanship was in no respect inferior to the French. In the second place, there is an explanation that seems to us to be the most plausible for that phase of the history of taste: the fact that fantasy watches were being created in Geneva as early as 1650.

At that time the watchmakers didn't hesitate to set their movements into silver rabbits, chimerical birds and ravishing seashells cut out of rock crystal. It amounted to a veritable renaissance, all the greater in that it took place at a time when the artistic maturity and technique of the Genevans can be considered as having reached its highest level.

From the book "Watches of Fantasy" by Fabienne X. Sturm and Osvaldo Patrizzi

