

secret watches

The coquettishly concealed dials of these jewels-cum-timepieces were right on trend in the Roaring Twenties – and are again now, says Ming Liu



A piece of jewellery that will truly surprise and delight is a secret watch. Also known as hidden timepieces because the dials are cleverly concealed – tucked under, say, a dazzling gemstone – these fabulous jewels-cum-watches have captured the imagination of collectors for more than a century. “Secret watches work wonderfully as both bracelet and timepiece,” says Jennifer Rummery, head of research at antique watch dealer Somlo, in London’s Burlington Arcade. “Clients are tired of walking into luxury watch boutiques and buying the same piece as their friends. Vintage secret watches are highly individual and collectors are drawn to their multifunctionality.”

Examples from the 1930s to the 1970s – such as a c1970 Piaget (£13,500) with a sapphire-trimmed diamond face set on hammered white gold – are especially desirable. Prices have risen “exponentially” in the past 10 to 15 years, says Rummery, especially for unusual, avant-garde styles, such as a 1940s, knot-like design (£12,500) in interwoven gold by Gaucherand, a house beloved by Elizabeth Taylor.

The origins of the secret watch remain disputed. One theory is that during the early 20th century – the apogee of the genre’s fashionability – a hidden watch allowed women to avoid the social faux pas of publicly checking the time. But Paul David Maudsley, international specialist director of watches at Phillips, who sold a beautiful 1940 Vacheron Constantin gold, ruby and sapphire example for £6,750 in 2015, isn’t entirely convinced. “In high society, it was considered impolite to look at your watch, but that very much carries on into today,” he says.

Sarah Davis, communications director at jewellery dealer Siegelson, says the fear of breaching etiquette seems rather at odds with the Roaring Twenties. “Women were dressing up, going to nightclubs and listening to jazz music, which was all a little scandalous.” So



Clockwise from left: c1958-1965 Bulgari Serpenti, sold by Bonhams for £60,000. 1940 Vacheron Constantin watch, sold by Phillips for £6,750. c2009 Cartier watch, \$78,000 from Beladora. c1950s Van Cleef & Arpels watch with an Omega movement, £12,200 on 1stdibs. 1944 Omega watch, sold by Somlo for £14,500. 1972 Patek Philippe watch, sold by Sotheby’s for \$10,000

They fuse incredible technical movements and femininity

in 2015 for \$18,750, surpassing its \$8,000-\$12,000 estimate. Omega, too, excelled in the form, most notably post the 1940s. A 1944 Omega swirling gold creation that recalls opulent pieces from antiquity when its diamond cover is shut was recently sold by Somlo for £14,500, while 1stdibs has a c1950s Van Cleef & Arpels example with an Omega movement for £12,200.

Elsewhere, the Bulgari Serpenti is fast earning cult status. This snake-motif

such bold watch designs, their dials coquettishly concealed, were right on trend. The firm currently has a c1937 platinum and diamond Boucheron watch (price on request) with a dial set on a rotating globe. The ball’s guilloché etchings and mesh bracelet, paired with the pivoting mechanism and invisible springs, highlight the then industrial influences on

design. “Secret watches can be gimmicky,” admits Davis, “but extraordinary ones marry beauty and technology.”

Of course, certain watch houses, such as Patek Philippe and Rolex, command premium prices: a splendid gold, sapphire and diamond secret watch with a bejewelled cover by the former sold for \$10,000 at Sotheby’s last year, exceeding its \$5,000-\$7,000 estimate, and 1stdibs currently has an exceptional diamond and emerald Patek Philippe design with an interlocking gold-leaf bracelet for £14,500. Meanwhile, a sleek c1950 Rolex with a square dial and mesh bracelet sold at Christie’s

beauty coils around the wrist and has a dial hidden inside the serpent’s mouth. Two spectacular examples sold at Christie’s in 2015 for a combined total of about £840,000. One, with a hammered-gold body top-and-tailed with jadeite and diamonds, was dragon-like in style; the other had the snake’s scales crafted from coral, onyx and diamond (Siegelson has a similar piece – price on request). And last year, Bonhams auctioned a chic, pale-blush, enamelled version for £60,000.

Cartier set the bar for secret watch design in the art deco period, when the jeweller sequestered dials under clusters of precious stones or designed them around particular themes. The tradition continues today: online site Beladora currently stocks an exceptional c2009 piece (\$78,000), the dial revealed by sliding aside the bejewelled head of a panther, a favourite Cartier motif.

A 1970s Cartier hidden watch, designed by Augustin Julia-Plana with lapis lazuli, malachite and diamonds, is a prized piece for one collector, a former interior designer. She has several secret watches, including 1940s examples by Omega and Gübelin, and a rope-like 1950s Tiffany design – and credits the watch collection she inherited from her parents with fuelling her passion for concealed timepieces: “I’m drawn to anything unique, and these have that perfect fusion of incredible technical movements and femininity. Today’s wristwatches are too bulky and masculine. These are discreet; people just think I’m wearing a gorgeous bracelet.” ♦



c1960 Bulgari Serpenti, from Siegelson
c1937 Boucheron watch, from Siegelson.

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