





Vintage

OR SIMPLY OLD?

By Sheldon Smith

There are specific factors that differentiate an old watch found at an antique store from a true vintage piece that has a history worth honoring.

An old watch is not necessarily an old watch.

Explaining to your neighbor or even one's spouse that strapping on an automatic watch to tell time takes a certain amount of verbal fortitude. Most people think that a timepiece is a mobile phone or a battery-powered plastic timepiece rather than a mini-mechanical marvel.

But explaining the allure of a vintage timepiece is typically where most people roll their eyes and cast you off as eclectic.

Some of this typcasting involves how one defines "vintage" as opposed to merely "antique." Although there are no absolutes for distinguishing a vintage timepiece from an antique timepiece, there are some definite factors that differentiate an old watch found at the neighborhood antique store from a true vintage piece that has a history worth honoring.

AGE

The timepiece's age is undeniably a factor, although there is no clear age that distinguishes vintage. Still, it is generally understood that a vintage watch is older than twenty years. There is a recognized sliding scale with antique (approaching 100 years old) at one end and simply retro or classic at the other end (twenty years old). Other factors worth merit are whether the piece borders on being antique or whether the watch was used during a specific historical time period such as World War II.

BRAND

As with cars and most consumer goods, brand matters. The brand, model, and year all come into play; there is a difference between a well-maintained old car and a model that elicits a nostalgic twinge—like the red whale-tailed Cadillac.



Great examples of vintage models with original hands and watch dials that exhibit great patina. These are examples of what many collectors would consider “grail” watches. From left: Rolex Oyster Majestic, Rolex Honeycomb Explorer, Rolex Pointy Guard 5513 (Photo Credit: Fourtane Estate Jewelers)

lac I saw last week. A well-maintained nameless watch would be a good antique, but a recognized brand worn on one’s wrist raises the watch into the vintage category. There is also a balance between brand and the watch’s provenance. The watch brand itself might not be recognized, but if the watch was worn by a president or dictator or was part of a historical event such as the Cuban Missile Crisis raises the watch on the vintage value spectrum. Respected timepiece companies, many of which make well-known brands, produce watches that will continue to run as well as the first day they were produced if they’re well maintained. This is in part why so many continue to be high on a collector’s list.

PROVENANCE/LEGACY

The story the watch tells either by wear marks or by the warranty papers included with the watch distinguishes it from the antique store showpiece versus one that might be found at a watch auction. Watches that have a good story, which might involve a unique owner, where the watch traveled, and the watch model’s history or legacy, are all factors that determine whether the piece is classic vintage or an antique shop display case model.

As important as the brand, a watch that elicits an emotion (such as, for example, Martin Luther King Jr.’s Rolex DateJust), raises the ante and often can make an old watch desirable enough to become a historical vintage timepiece.

CONDITION

Adding to the complexity of picking out a vintage watch is the watch’s condition. Some collectors want the watch in its absolute original condition, whether the watch is running or not. Throughout the watch’s life, a well-maintained watch will be serviced. This means the caseback has been opened, mainsprings replaced, and corroded parts replaced as a matter of course. A serviced watch might also have a replaced dial (commonly known as a “re-dial”) and other known service items that keep the watch well maintained, but not necessarily original.

On the other hand, a well-maintained watch that does not show any “witness marks” such as service scratches

SHOPPING *for* Vintage

How to buy a watch for your watch geek significant other....

Buying a gift for your significant other is already a difficult endeavor, but if your significant other is a watch geek the only perfect gift will be a watch.

Buying a watch for your watch geek will be, by far, the hardest gift to purchase. Watch geeks separate themselves from simple watch fans because aficionados know and appreciate the details that separate a \$400 watch from a \$4,000 one. Buying a watch as a gift for someone who relishes details such as red or gilt lettering, slight variations in case size, and whether the watch is a historically significant piece in the company's evolution will take some detective work. But if executed well the gift is guaranteed to create a lifetime moment for any couple.

Two things are certain about most watch geek aficionados; they are always on the hunt for their next "grail" watch and they like talking about it. Finding out what that "grail" watch is will take some work and time, but below are some sleuthing techniques, used exclusively or in concert, that will help you pick the perfect new or vintage watch for your significant other:

Research & Planning

As with the high school research paper, a well-researched subject takes some planning and foresight (or at least that is what my school librarian espoused). Because your watch geek aficionado likes to talk about watches, plan to attend natural settings when watch speak is spoken natively. Watch for, and attend, any watch events or gatherings, often called Get-Togethers (see below) and note when your significant other's watch magazines arrive. On an upcoming trip perhaps your watch aficionado other will want to cruise watch stores. Any one of these events will elicit more clues to the grail watch that your significant other craves. →

from removing the caseback or damaged screws can have a higher value than a model with these marks. A watch in absolute original condition without service, but still running, is a rare and valuable find. In essence, a watch that runs and is in pristine, original condition will bring a smile to the owner and likely fetch a higher sales price.

PATINA

The watch's patina is related to the watch's condition. Typically, patina is found on the hands, the bezel insert on a sports watch, and the dial. Certainly, a vintage watch should look vintage, but not run down.

A vintage watch with great patina



Philippe Stahl examines a watch at a Get Together (GTG) while Tisha Smith and Eric Ku looks on. Watch GTG's are friendly events to learn about watches from people who are passionate about the vintage watches.

“ Every vintage watch has a story ”

Photo Credit: Fourtane Estate Jewelers



Hans Wilsdorf's First Rolex with Serial Number 1. This watch certainly has a story to tell.

should look like a vintage leather bag, namely it should show wear but not user damage. Sunlight will fade a bezel insert, or make the hands change from silver to brown-gold. A well-running watch that shows wear from Mother Nature rather than from an abusive owner usually shows great patina.

VALUE = FUNCTION, PASSION, & SCARCITY

Lastly, there is the watch's actual value. Unlike new watches that depreciate the moment they leave the store, a vintage

SHOPPING *for* Vintage



An original model of the Rolex Deep Sea.

watch has already gone through the depreciation cycle and climbs to its vintage value because of the factors above. Low production numbers, scarcity, and the emotion the piece elicits all ratchet up the monetary value of the watch.

All these variables factor into whether the watch is a great antique found at the local antique mall or is a rare vintage model that will fetch a pretty penny at a watch auction. Every used watch has vintage aspects, but a valuable vintage watch will score high in all the areas listed above. ⌚

Get-Togethers

Watch Get-Togethers, or GTGs, are when watch enthusiasts meet and talk and share their collection. There is no formal association or calendar that organizes Get-Togethers as they are typically organized on the various Internet watch forums and blogs. Some Get-Togethers are formal affairs that require reservations whereas other watch get-togethers are informal affairs typically held in bars.

If you can, try to crash the next watch event by telling your significant other that you want to attend to learn about his or her affliction. Watch Get-Togethers are normally mixed-company and women attending GTGs are held in the highest esteem. Listening to your significant other talk to other watch geeks is a gold mine of clues, and the "de-brief" that happens on the drive home is typically the time when your significant other will reveal the next grail watch. Watch Get-Togethers are also good places to learn about the various vendors and retailers who enable the watch aficionado's affliction.

Listen

Watch geeks like to talk about watches. Each conversation is an opportunity to glean details on the next grail watch. Be in listening range when your significant other is talking to a watch retailer. Look for the model and brands that your significant other gravitates to in the store and listen to the conversation with the counter help. Listen for the emotion that a particular watch might bring out in your watch geek. Don't try to understand the affliction, but rather listen for the models and functions that your watch geek prefers.

Many times after leaving a store, your watch geek aficionado will correct what the counter help shared while attempting to make a sale. Each of these conversations elicits salient details that will help guide you to that grail watch.

Magazines

The watch industry is loaded with print media and catalogs the size of encyclopedias that feed the watch geek's affliction. Auction catalogs are also veritable gold mines of clues. When your significant other is not in the room, review the magazines and catalogs and look for dog-eared corners that are going to be reread or are marked for an Internet search follow-up. Look for a pattern in dog-eared pages or pages that are just torn out of magazines and left near the computer for later review.

Websites

Despite the watch industry's ambivalence to the Internet, the electronic age has certainly helped fuel a new audience to watches. Your watch geek aficionado most likely uses these Internet forums to read and research various watches. When your significant other is not using the computer, look to see what sites are bookmarked, or even sneakier, look to see what your watch geek posted. Internet forum postings in particular forum will certainly help in narrowing down the brand and model.

Last resort: Just ask...

If all else fails, just ask. There is no way to ask a loaded question subtly, so sometimes it is just best to ask. Depending on the taste of your watch geek, it might take a while to find a dealer who might have the watch. Any watch geek appreciates watches that are given from the heart and with the intent to surprise.