

## Watch Words

## All in Good Time

A clockwork may be out of order sometimes, but never out of style. The dials covering it are different. Not only do they have to keep time, they have to also keep up with the times, for they're the face of a timepiece. But function always comes before fascination.

No face betrays as well as a clock's what's going on behind it—which is why enthusiasts, poetically, prefer to call the dial the “clock face.” The clock's hands don't lie. The number of cycles of seconds and minutes on the dial reveals the ticking of the clockwork inside.

A watch, for example, with a second-dial and a stopwatch, appears as a face with two perfectly round eyes shining out of it; often, the date will be shown at the three o'clock position. Gen-

erations of designers have again and again done their best to vary the order of the numbers and the hands anew, but the real function of a clock is to present all its information—especially the current time—at first sight. The important thing is: don't change the settings!

Franz Wolff talks about clock faces as lovingly as if he were describing a human face. The Mannheim watchmaker knows the history of ancient timepieces inside out, and even lectures on



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how the variously distinctive facial expressions of clocks betray their inside operations. “If you meet a person for the first time, you look him in the face first. It's the same with a watch—you look at the dial first, and usually can tell immediately what era it dates from.” The material, the form of the hands, and of course the design and subdivision of the dial usually will indicate the date of manufacture.

At least for the last 500 years, since watches became portable, the dial has kept up with the times beautifully. Especially the last century brought major changes in the faces of watches, for that was when watches became fashion objects. There have, certainly, been attempts through the centuries to do without dials completely, and just cover particularly fine clockworks with glass plates. “But that fortunately never took hold. How are you supposed to read the time that way? A watch without a dial and hands just won't work,” Wolff says. And so watchmakers have never stopped finding ways to give time a face.

**Time travel: The dial is the face of the watch; variations definitely permitted**



The dials shown are from the current collection of the watchmaker Breitling ([www.breitling.com](http://www.breitling.com))

Basically, the first sundials, which appeared around 2,600 B.C., already told time in much the same way that the classic dial does, but they were mostly semi-circular. Yet, there were already circular faces on the astronomical water clocks that appeared around 1400 B.C.—and of course, too, on the first church steeple clocks around 1300 A.D. “The dial as we know it today developed with the appearance of the mechanical watch in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,” explains Wolff. Why did it stay circular, and why is this still the most popular shape to this day? Because this is exactly the shape of the gear set, which can therefore be arranged under the dial in a space-saving way—and because it's also the shape the hands describe when they rotate around a fixed point.

On the other hand, what happens within the circle changes all the time. Initially, there was only an hour hand circling the center of the dial. “People didn't need anything more exact than that until the sixteenth century,” Wolff says. “But during the renaissance, a quarter-hour indicator already joined it, and by the eighteenth century, all clocks had two hands.”

However, the early watch owners weren't so proud of their little machines that they wanted to show them to everybody. The metal dials were still hidden under pearls or jewels inlaid in gold. They often became playful secrets, as the owners enameled them with erotic scenes. The dial was really only liberated with the breakthrough of the wristwatch during World War I. The Swiss designed bare-bones dials that could be read particularly quickly, and manufacturers taught their digits, still protected by large-meshed grids, to shine.

Before long, this last cover fell, too. During the twenties and thirties, anything went that the customers liked. Cases became oval and pointed; curved, exaggerated numbers dominated the dial, and fine lines were etched into the metal plates. It took the Bauhaus and art déco designers to quiet things down again. Dials from the forties can be recognized easily even today, by their discreet cool colors and straight numbers. But not until the fifties and sixties did clock faces emerge that are still classics for enthusiasts today: Roman or Arabic numerals yielded to simple lines, and hands ended in pointed triangles.

You couldn't get much more classic clarity than that. When the digital culture would try to revolutionize the face of watches with sterile LEDs and LCDs, pop culture responded with colored Swatch watches whose dials were photos of things like cucumber slices. And the harmonic proportions of yesteryear are today inspiring many luxury manufacturers to bring out retro models. Classic watchmakers like Wolff or Ralf Meertz of the Munich workshop World of Time also don't believe in reduced but colored dials as a long-term trend in the visual design of watches. For one thing that chronometrical and human faces have in common is that too much color usually distracts from the essential.