

# ART ATTACK

*Top watchmakers seek inspiration from the  
Art Deco movement of the 1920s*

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Floral and arabesque motifs in watchmaking are inspired by 19th century Art Deco jewellery



The Cartier Santos created in 1906 for Brazilian pilot Alberto Santos-Dumont paved way for the Cartier Tank developed in 1917



f late, Hollywood has been celebrating the 1920s, recreating the grandeur and decadence that the bygone era boasted. Take, for instance, the 2011 Oscar-winning black-and-white silent film, *The Artist*, or the more recent adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's magnum opus, *The Great Gatsby*. Both were opulent in terms of the costumes, accessories and sets, with the larger focus on a plethora of changes that grappled society post World War I.

The Roaring Twenties, as the period is referred to, was distinguished by the Art Deco movement, which redefined art and culture. An eclectic mix of contemporary designs, traditional crafts and new materials, Art Deco changed

the game as it brought about cleaner lines, symmetry and bolder colours, which were gradually infused into lifestyles of the elite.

The movement originated in France and the term was first used by architect Le Corbusier, in reference to the 1925 'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes' held in Paris. It spread across globally, flourishing during the 1920s and 30s, which was called the Jazz Age—a term coined by Fitzgerald to describe the flamboyance associated with the era.

Rapid industrialisation was also prevalent, thanks to the technological advancements brought about by the Machine Age and this impacted watch-



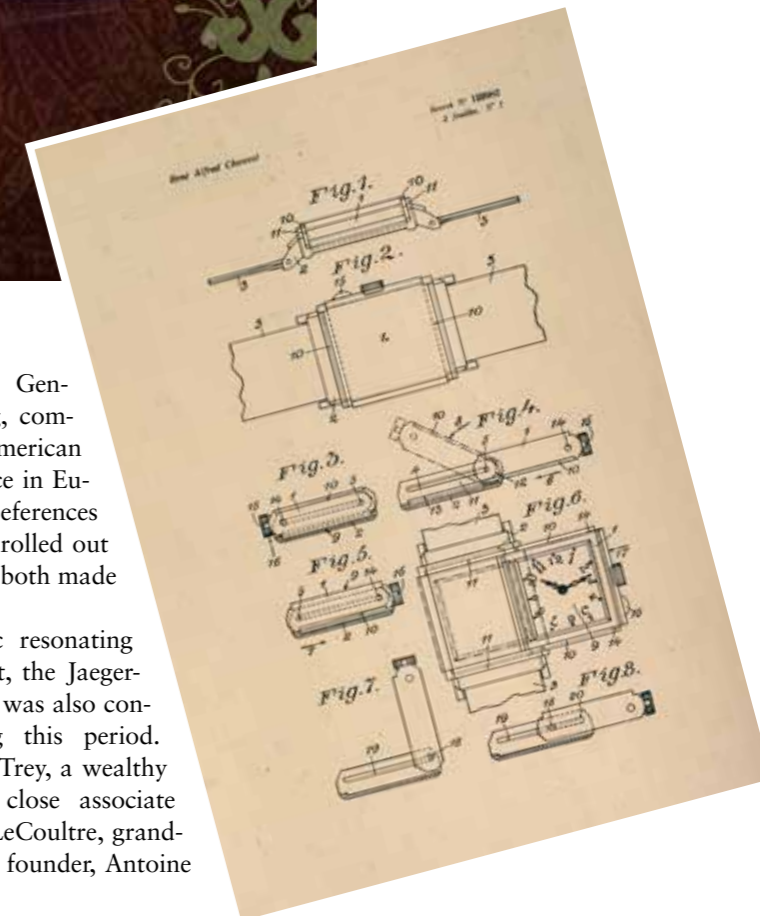
Photo: Vacheron Constantin



Two of the most iconic timepieces created during the era were the Cartier Tank (below) and the Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso (above)



The Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso was created in 1931 for polo players in India during the British Raj. (Below) The original Reverso and its design sketch



One of the pioneers of Art Deco, French maison Cartier cashed in on the success of the Santos watch, created in 1906 for Brazilian pilot Alberto Santos-Dumont. It was probably the first pilot's watch, and it led to the Cartier Tank, made first in 1917.

With its joints built into the case, it has a square-in-rectangle design, where the connection points of the strap are concealed under sharp-edged, flat vertical sidepieces. Legend has it that Louis Cartier designed the watch based on the horizontal section of the Renault military tanks used in World War I. And the first prototype of the Tank watch

was presented to General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force in Europe. Subsequent references of the watch were rolled out in 1919 and 1920, both made of gold.

Another classic resonating the Art Deco spirit, the Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso was also conceptualised during this period. In 1930, César de Trey, a wealthy businessman and close associate of Jacques-David LeCoultre, grandson of the brand's founder, Antoine

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making as well. By early 20th century, wristwatches gained immense popularity, as they had been widely used by soldiers during World War I. They had replaced the bulky pocketwatches, and went on to become a fashion statement post war. Both men and women wanted to add more watches to their collections.

However, the challenge was to make them sturdier but lighter, and move away from the usual round de-

signs. That gave birth to rectangular, square and barrel-like or tonneau cases, crafted out of modern materials such as aluminium, stainless steel and bakelite, with dials often using sunburst motifs, stained glass and lacquer. The indices, too, were minimalist with either just plain Arabic numerals or simple hour-markers.

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The Panerai Radiomir Firenze 3 Days Acciaio 47mm has hand-engraved motifs inspired by Art Deco.

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Piaget's Black Tie watch seeks inspiration from the colour scheme of a 1920's tuxedo

LeCoultre, met a British polo player commissioned in the Indian army during a match. He showed César de Trey his damaged watch and challenged him to develop a timepiece that would be sturdy enough to absorb the shocks and knocks of the game.

The result was a revolutionary design, by which the case could just turn over. Thus was born the Reverso, which got a patent in 1931. This timepiece has undergone many enhancements over the years, but the pivoting principle based on a simple mechanism of two spring-mounted spurs that slot into grooves on either side of the watch cradle still hold ground.

Although Art Deco faded due to austerities imposed post World War II in 1945, it has served as a constant source of inspiration to watchmakers. Celebrating the brand's 260th anniversary this year, Vacheron Constantin has



The Longines Evidenza line is influenced by a silver tonneau timepiece created in 1925



added two new timepieces to its Mé-tiers d'Art Mécaniques Gravées collection distinguished by movements that are entirely hand-engraved.

The plates and bridges of the hand-wound calibres 2260 and 4400 are adorned with delicate floral motifs, reminiscent of the engravings on the first set of pocketwatches created by the maison in 1755. Housed in a platinum case, the two movements are decorated with floral, scrolling and arabesque motifs—inspired by Art Deco jewellery.

Italian watchmaker Panerai, known for sporty timepieces, has also jumped on the bandwagon by dedicating a special edition watch that pays tribute to its home-grown version of the Art Deco era, which was at its peak in Florence, the brand's birthplace.

The new Radiomir Firenze 3 Days Acciaio 47mm, showcased at SIHH this

year, has the same dimensions as the first watch created by Officine Panerai in 1936. It is entirely decorated with hand-engraving executed by expert Italian craftsmen, the designs being inspired by motifs which recur in Florentine iconography.

Available in a brushed steel case, this watch is limited to just 99 pieces. Each case took more than a week for engraving, as the geometric and floral motifs were first drawn using powdered chalk and then engraved with a burin. The surfaces consist of fine parallel lines, which provide depth to the design, accentuating the contrasts between light and dark. The watch is powered by the hand-wound Calibre P.3000, which supplies a power reserve of three days.

Piaget, too, is revisiting the 1920s this year with its Black Tie watch, distinguished by a cushion-shaped

case and the black-and-white colour schemes of a tuxedo, which was worn by the rich and famous during that age.

The dial uses a black onyx stone set on a satin-brushed white gold case and is absolutely clean, with just two hands. The watch, which is equipped with the slim automatic Piaget 534P movement, is available in a limited edition of 28 pieces. Longines is another brand which has drawn inspiration from the innumerable distinct Art Deco styles. And the result is the Evidenza collection, which is marked by tonneau-shaped cases in stainless steel—a style, which first appeared in wristwatches created by the company in 1911. All watches in the Evidenza line are fitted with self-winding mechanical movements and are influenced by a 1925 silver tonneau timepiece, created at the Saint-Imier manufacture. ○