

Want an uncommon Rolex that's (gulp) affordable? Meet the Oysterquartz...

Yes, Rolex did make quartz watches – but not many of them. They're quirky, stylish and can be bought for less than £3,000. Collectors take note!

By Adrian Hailwood

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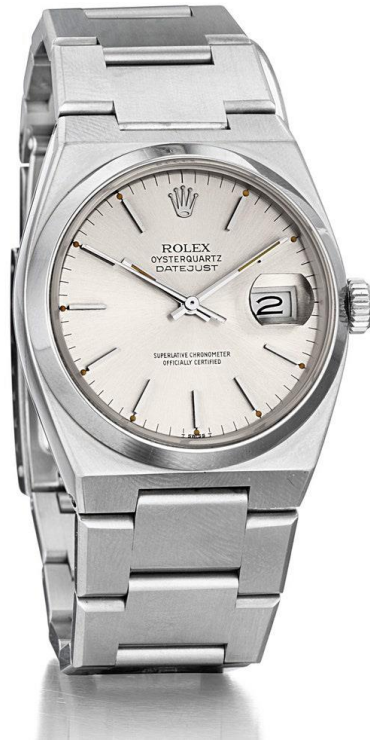


Image Courtesy of Phillips

In the 1960s, the race was on to produce the first commercial quartz wristwatch. Rolex had decided there was strength in numbers and joined the “Beta 21” consortium, a group of Swiss watch companies collaborating as the Centre Electronique Horloger (CEH). However, the Japanese brand [Seiko](#) beat them to market with its 1969 Astron watch – and the Beta 21 movement made its production debut in 1970 as a flawed compromise. Power drain issues meant that the design had to be modified by removing frequency reducers. The Beta 21’s second hand therefore “swept”, in contrast to Seiko’s tick. Of the 6,000 movements produced, 1,000 went to Rolex for its ref 5100 “Texan” – a monolithic gold watch that nonetheless sold out even before it hit the retailers.

Still, [Rolex](#) was convinced it could make something better, and left CEH in 1972 to begin work on its own movement. Five years later, it unveiled a quartz calibre like no other: the Oysterquartz 5035. Unlike other early quartz movements, this looked less like a mess of circuitry and more like a traditional watch movement. It had eleven jewels, thermal compensation and a standard of movement finishing higher than Rolex’s mechanical output. For the first 18 months, the dials bore just three words: “Rolex”, “Datejust” and “Oysterquartz”. After a tweak to the quartz crystal, shifting from the

Beta 21 “bar” design to the more Seiko-like “tuning fork” shape, the watches were submitted for COSC certification and thereafter acquired the “Superlative Chronometer Officially Certified” wording.



A stainless-steel Rolex Oysterquartz Datejust sold for \$3,500 by Phillips auction house in 2012
Image Courtesy of Phillips

The simple Oysterquartz was produced in three models: the 17000 stainless steel, the 17013 in stainless steel and yellow gold and the 17013 in stainless steel and white gold, all with sober baton dials. For those with a preference for the exotic, Rolex also developed calibre 5055, the Day-Date version which the watchmaker housed in precious-metal cases using stone-setting and eye-catching dials to satisfy the most lavish and outré tastes. There was also a prototype perpetual calendar calibre 5335 that never made it into production.



A rare 1987 Rolex Oysterquartz Day-Date in yellow gold set with rainbow gems auctioned by Phillips in 2017 Image Courtesy of Phillips

Produced for 25 years, it is estimated that around 25,000 Oysterquartz watches made it to market. An average of 1,000 per year across the range is a low number, making these uncommon in the wild – a fact that collectors are finally waking up to. With interest in [high-quality quartz](#) watchmaking on the rise, the Rolex Oysterquartz is a canny acquisition. Well made and still relatively affordable, a good steel example can be picked up for less than £3,000. For a rarer, more expensive piece, such as the gem-set model pictured above, check in at a specialist such as [Phillips Perpetual](#), the [auction house](#)'s vintage boutique located in London's Berkeley Square.