



Why the Rolex Zerographe is the coolest Rolex you've never heard of

Launched in 1937, the Rolex Zerographe was the watchmaker's first in-house chronograph. Imagine if the Crown brought it back...

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Rolex fans start each new year with the same question: “Which model is the brand going to relaunch, resize or upgrade?” Archive revivals are rare, as Rolex favours continuity over reinvention. The [Cellini Moonphase](#) and Cellini [Prince](#), call-backs to the “Padellone” and the Prince respectively, were fine timepieces in their own right – yet steel sports watches tend to cause greater paroxysms of excitement among enthusiasts. That’s why I have a humble suggestion. If there is one watch in the Rolex archive that would roundly reward a whole new reimagining, it’s surely the almost legendary Zerographe.

Many people believe that calibre 4130, launched in 2000 to power the mighty [Daytona](#), was Rolex’s first in-house chronograph movement, but actually it had created one before, back in 1937. This first step was a decidedly hesitant one, with the Zerographe being produced in remarkably small numbers. Estimates differ between 12 and “less than 50” but, as is often the case, Rolex is saying nothing. These numbers were split over two models, the smooth bezelled ref 3890 and the far more interesting ref 3346, the company’s first watch to feature a rotating bezel. Perhaps the Zerographe was a test of concept, perhaps the Second World War interrupted production plans, or maybe the classic chrono with a

borrowed movement was more popular with customers and easier to produce. Whatever the reason, the Zerographe remains an intriguing offshoot of Rolex history.



The Rolex Zerographe ref 3346 CHRISTIE'S IMAGES LTD. 2021

The chronograph function was rudimentary, but teamed with the elapsed minute bezel the 3346 could be used to time intervals of up to an hour – sufficient for most day-to-day purposes. (Tell me that the hour register isn't the least used part of an already little used complication, honestly?) The seconds hand ran continuously until the two o'clock pusher was pressed, which sent the hand back to zero, remaining there until the pusher was released. Given that most modern owners only fiddle with their chronographs to watch this return-to-zero action, the Zerographe captures the most satisfying part of the process.

Of the few that were made, the most striking Zerographe has to be the black "error-proof" dial version of the 3346 (showing a mix of Roman and Arabic numerals), an example of which has now

changed hands at auction three times, most recently at Phillips in 2016 for CHF 389,000. The combination of large, luminous hour markers and sword/Mercedes hands contrasted against a black dial makes it immediately identifiable as Rolex, while the broad, utilitarian bezel with red and black accents set atop the classic Oyster case marks it out as a purposeful sport watch.

The only detail not apparent from the catalogue images is the size – a diminutive 32mm. Much as I love an era-appropriate case on a vintage watch, this is just too small for contemporary taste. Imagine, however, if it was reissued with modern sizing: not a 2020 Submariner-style 1mm tweak but a full 8mm growth spurt. All Rolex would have to do is upgrade the movement but keep its simple quirkiness, put it on a modern Oyster bracelet and prepare for the avalanche of orders. As I said, just my humble suggestion. But I'd gladly wear-test the prototype.