



# Why the Zodiac Astrographic is the ultimate ‘mystery watch’

‘Mystery watches’ such as the Zodiac Astrographic offer a small dose of wonder at each glance. Here's how...

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Some watches delight with the complexity of their dials, offering scales, registers, complications and even a view of the movement beneath. Others impress with their no-nonsense, utilitarian severity – a purposeful dial for purposeful people. A small subset of watches beguile their wearer with a sense of whimsy and intrigue, offering no more functionality than two- or three-handed time-telling yet providing a small dose of wonder at each glance. These, dear reader, are the mystery dials.

The concept is a simple one: mounting the hand on a disc that is turned by the movement beneath. But it offers plenty of opportunities for fantastical dial design. The simplest keep a conventional hand for the minutes, but reduce the hour indication to a wandering dot. If the discs that replaced the hands are made transparent, however, both hours, minutes and even seconds can be substituted for dots, stars, arrows, diamonds – whatever you fancy. Seen most often in the 1950s and 1960s, the mystery watch has been a largely American phenomenon. Always more flamboyant in their approach to case design, the makers of these dials, who frequently employed diamond indices as well as hands, appealed to those with a sense of the dramatic.

As the 1960s drew to a close and other brands worked up mechanical marvels such as automatic chronographs, Zodiac chose to rescue the mystery dial from blingy ostentation and reimagine it as pure futuristic kitsch. Although a Swiss brand, Zodiac had always been strong in the US market. Its dive watch, the Sea Wolf, produced in 1953, the same year as the Rolex Submariner and the Blancpain Fifty Fathoms, was adopted by the US Navy Seals in the early 1970s. Maybe Zodiac believed that US consumers could best handle space age design alongside a tool watch offering.

The Zodiac Astrographic, then, is a bold statement watch. Produced in either an oval or rectangular case, the steeply sloping sides rise high to accommodate the stacked discs above the dial. The background dial colour was a vivid electric blue, although grey or – inevitably, given the era – brown were an option. The hour and minute “hands” were rectangular blocks that gave the appearance of conventional hands, except they were not attached at the centre – seeming to float in space; the seconds were shown by an orbiting red dot around the dial edge. Luminous hour markers, minute track and the large Zodiac logo that hid the centre pinion of the discs were all printed on the underside of the glass to add to the futuristic effect.

For all its external outlandishness, under the bonnet the Astrographic boasts some serious watchmaking. It is powered by Zodiac’s Split Second Timing (SST) movement, one of the first automatic 36,000bph hi-beat movements, based on an AS calibre and developed jointly by Zodiac, Girard-Perregaux, Eberhard, Doxa and Favre-Leuba. This hi-beat action smooths the passage of the red seconds dot around the dial adding to the sense of otherworldliness.

If you are captivated by the Astrographic to the point of wanting to track one down, you can pay as little as £500, but that doesn’t mean you should; that futuristic mystery comes with a few warning notes. Hi-beat movements need careful maintenance, as high speed means high wear. Make sure that your chosen watch has been serviced and oiled correctly to prevent it becoming a fanciful

paperweight. The crystal, with its printing on the underside, is very hard to replace if broken so steer away from any with deep scratches. Minor scratches can be buffed out by someone who knows their stuff, but there is a risk of breaking the crystal. Finally, the clear discs that create the “floating” illusion have to be clean to be effective. Over years, they can attract dirt, which at best can make them more opaque, ruining the effect or at worst can leave circular scratches. Cleaning is possible, but not easy. The best option is to follow that old adage of vintage collecting and buy the best possible condition you can afford. Alternatively, track down one of the reissues from the 45th or 50th anniversaries. You lose a lot of the charm (and the 50-year reissue only comes in the oval case) but you do get reliability and clarity.