

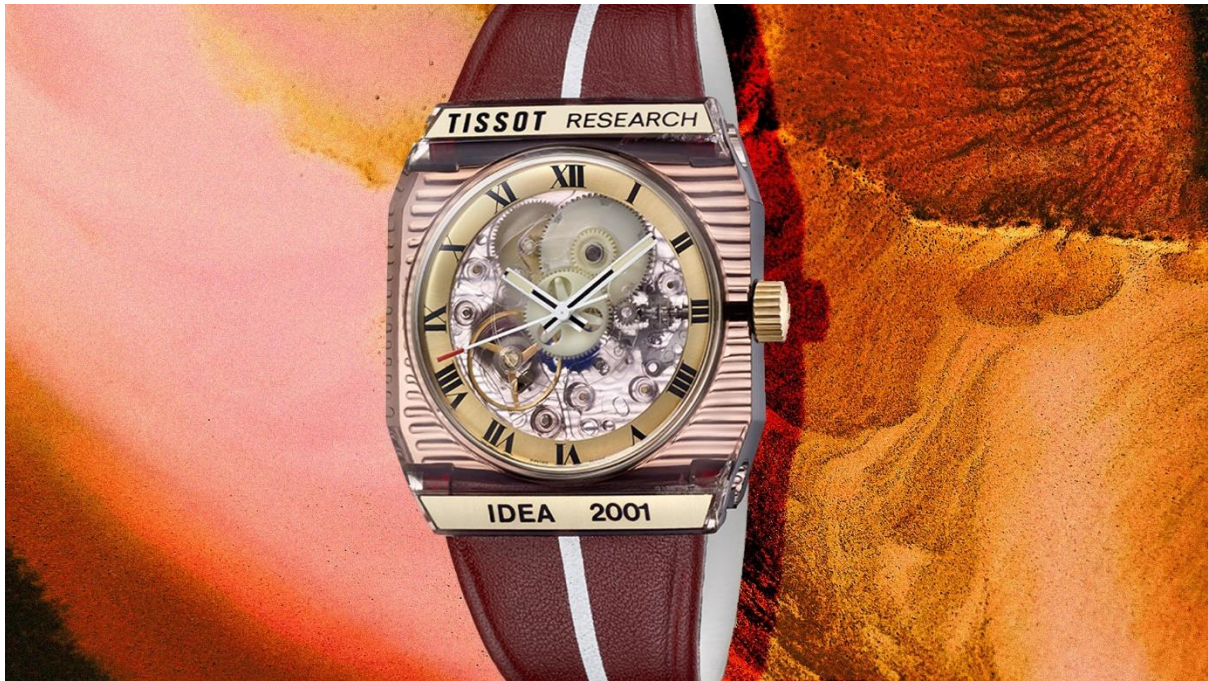


Why the plastic Tissot Astrolon is soaring in value

The Tissot Astrolon didn't catch on when it was released in 1972, but in the last four years its price has increased by 900 per cent...

By **Adrian Hailwood**

4 February 2021



As 2020 threw into sharp relief, strategising for the future is tough. The longer your plan is in development, the greater the chance the world will have changed by the time you reach launch.

Spare a thought, then, for Tissot. In 1952, it filed a patent for a revolutionary “oil-less watch”. The project was named “Sytal” for “Système Tissot d’auto-lubrification”. The number of standard parts was reduced from around 91 to 52 and most of the mechanism was made from Teflon-type self-lubricating plastic with a mere handful of metal components. The movement was designed to be ultra cheap to produce, maintenance-free and, ultimately, disposable.



Astrolon marketing imagery from the Tissot archive

Following 19 years in development, the Astrolon movement (a name chosen to associate with “nylon”) emerged into the world in 1972. Quartz had already arrived and was rapidly moving from being an expensive novelty to a mass-produced commodity. Tissot launched the watch with a futuristic plastic case and strap as either the “Tissot Research – Idea 2001” or “Tissot Synthetic – Idea 2001” depending on the market. The watch, and the movement, didn't catch on. There was nothing wrong with it physically – the mechanism performed exactly as promised – but psychologically neither watchmakers nor the public were ready to accept a watch with a plastic movement. As Edouard-Louis Tissot, the company CEO, said, “We had used advanced materials to produce a watch whose basic technology was, well, four hundred years old!” The majority of the movements, along with 20 years of R&D budget, were just thrown away. The runaway success of the largely plastic Swatch, a mere ten years later, must have been a bitter pill to swallow.

As is sometimes the case with objects designed to be disposable, their survival for years or decades after their manufacture is an

achievement in itself. The growing interest in brands' back stories and the development of watchmaking has led to a reappraisal of the Astrolon and so the value of the original "Idea 2001" has appreciated. Available to buy for around £100 only three or four years ago, some unknown time-travel wizardry has recently released a wave of "New Old Stock" examples onto the market, the best preserved of which are offered at more than £1,000. Rare in this condition, they most certainly are; historically significant, definitely. But a low-cost, disposable plastic watch sustaining four-figure value? Only time will tell...

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