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Trending: The Luxury Sports Watch in Steel

REVIEW

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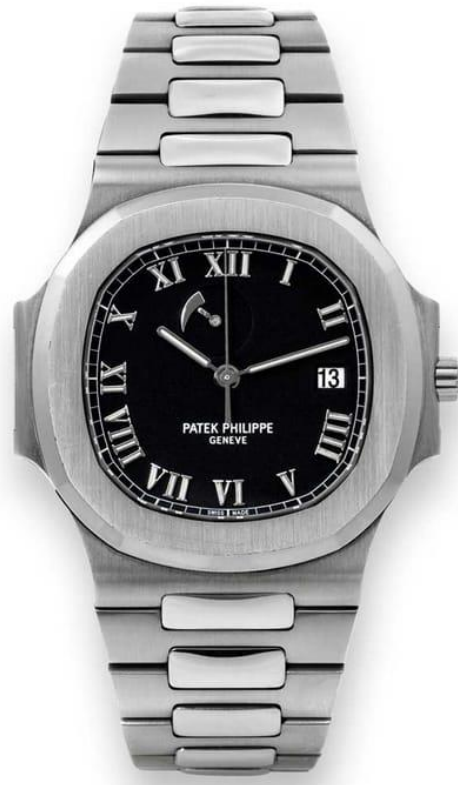
There is no denying the stainless steel, integrated bracelet, luxury sports watch is hot right now. This is not some cosmetic tweak like an on-trend dial colour but an enormous commitment of resources in terms of design and tooling. This trend is not a passing fad, but a groundswell that has been building for the last couple of years and which now seems to be cresting, with a new watch being announced almost monthly.

Some of these watches have been brand stalwarts, newly pushed to the fore to catch the wave, others are lately unearthed from the archives, dusted off and given a new lease of life and finally we have novice entrants to this fiercely competitive market looking to bring a new 21st Century twist to '70s and '80s styling.



Audemars Piguet Royal Oak ref. 15202ST

So why this and why now? Maybe the seams of archival inspiration from the '50s and '60s are approaching exhaustion and it is the turn of the following decades to be rediscovered. Perhaps chronograph-fever is petering out and this is a way to give a time-only watch more of a sports vibe. I suspect, though, the real reason is the phenomenal increase in the desirability of those two forerunners of the sector, the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak and more particularly, the Patek Philippe Nautilus. With boutique waiting lists so long that they become meaningless and secondary market prices upwards of 3x RRP, it doesn't take a genius to see what the consumer wants and what they are willing to wait/pay for. No surprise then, to see other manufacturers from across the price spectrum gathering to offer alternatives.



Patek Philippe Nautilus Ref. 3710/1A

It is tempting to dismiss this as a kind of Sports-luxe bingo, to see how many borrowed tropes can be crammed into each watch... integrated bracelet, check, octagonal or porthole bezel, check, dial decoration squared or striped, check, visible screws in the bezel...etc. but this would be unfair as watches such as the Girard Perregaux Laureato and the Vacheron Constantin Overseas have their own distinguished history and drew their original inspiration from the same zeitgeist as the two trailblazers. Watches such as the new Urban Jurgensen One treads a delicate line between familiarity and novelty; there is no question that it belongs in the luxury sports sector, but there is no single element of the design that is derivative.



Urban Jurgensen One ref. 5241

With the rise of the integrated bracelet watch it is important that brands avoid a 'me too' mentality. At the risk of making a bad calculus joke, the challenge of integration is differentiation. It is here that a coherent back story is vital for a reissue and, for a new watch, a clear presentation of the brand's existing DNA, such as in the new Bell & Ross BR05 Aviation Automatic.



Bell & Ross BR 05

What is encouraging is the amount of thought that is going into these new designs, whether in a new form of steel such as the Lucent Steel A223 used by Chopard in their Alpine Eagle, or innovative bracelet attachment systems that allow additional strap options yet do not compromise the integrated design, such as in the Vacheron Constantin Overseas.



Vacheron Constantin Overseas Self-Winding with a black dial

Carefully thought-out bracelets, conceived as part of a holistic watch concept, robust and waterproof but comfortable on the wrist, scream luxury in way that a rubber strap cannot compete with.

There is a note of caution for any potential bandwagon jumpers; good design that captures the current mood should be done for its own sake alone. Any attempt to be an alternative to Patek Philippe's Nautilus begs the question 'does a frustrated Nautilus buyer, who cannot either wait or justify paying over the odds, choose an alternative brand, or do they choose an alternative Patek?'

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