

REVOLUTION

Home / Editorial / Watch Design: The Spirit of Integration



Watch Design: The Spirit of Integration

VINTAGE

By [Adrian Hailwood](#)

Oct 16, 2019

Share Article:

A watch on a bracelet, or a bracelet that tells the time, the integrated bracelet watch is a bold statement. Uncompromisingly inflexible, and designed as an indivisible whole, it is not a watch of half measures. While its design roots stem from the early 1970s, the integrated bracelet is making something of a comeback in new and challenging forms.

Firstly, some definitions... Watches that cannot be removed from their bracelets have been around for decades, but they are not the subject for this discussion. Hammered gold Milanese bracelets soldered onto a watch case have always been a dressy alternative to a strap watch for both men and ladies, but the design of the bracelet does not integrate into the case; likewise, some integrated bracelets can be removed with

varying ease. It is the design of the watch that is integrated as much as the bracelet attachment method.

While it is tempting to be male-centric, ladies' watches have had integrated bracelets since well before the 1970s. Indeed, the watch presented to Elizabeth I in 1571 was described as a richly jewelled bracelet 'in the closing thereof a clocke, and in the forepart of the same a faire lozengie djamond without a foyle, hanging thearat a rounde juell fully garnished with dyamondes and a perle pendaunt.', and while no images of the design have survived, it seems that this was as much a bracelet as a watch. Since then, watches have been incorporated into bracelet design in more or less overt fashion. From dials surrounded by elaborate swirls of diamonds that continue around the wrist, to dials cunningly hidden within a bracelet, the ladies' bracelet watch has been as much a jewel as a timepiece, whether made by Patek Philippe, Rolex or Cartier.



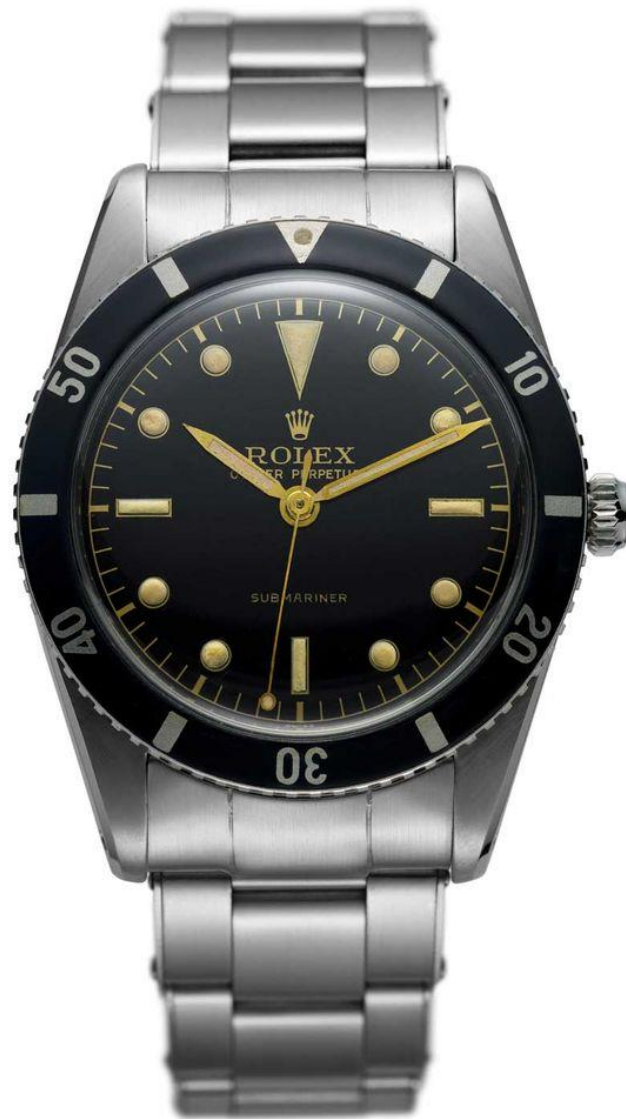
Cartier "Declaration" rock crystal and diamond bracelet watch (Image: Fourtane)

Men's watches developed along a different track to those of ladies. They took longer to be worn on the wrist rather than in the pocket and, once

there, even the most richly adorned were functional objects more than pieces of jewellery. This may be the reason why integrated bracelets took so long to transfer to men's designs. It seems that the watch head was the principal product, with the wrist attachment offered as a secondary, often expensive, accessory. A leather strap was simple, practical and cheap to replace, a gold band denoted prestige and wealth, while a steel bracelet was robust for hard wear or wet conditions. A study of watch catalogues from the 1930s onwards shows the relative rarity of bracelets for men's watches compared to those offered on straps.

The Function of Integration

In parallel, a thriving market developed in the manufacture and sale of watch bracelets from the likes of Gay Frères, Zuccolo Rochet or, later, Stellux and Speidel, allowing wearers to adopt whatever style they wanted for their watch when their strap or bracelet wore out. Anyone who has handled early watch bracelets from the '40s and '50s can vouch for the fact that all but the most expensive feel flimsy and, if worn hard, must have needed replacement on a regular basis. As the decades passed, more bracelets appeared fitted to watches in catalogue images. For Rolex this is due to the success and expansion of the Oyster collection as their core line, a water-resistant watch that needed a metal bracelet to fulfil its main function. In the 1950s, curved end links began to appear, giving watch bracelets a more 'integrated' look. The primary reason for this was to reduce lateral pressure on the spring-bar by holding it in place, but it closed a gap between case and bracelet that was a point of weakness for a sports watch and considered by some to be unsightly. While the bracelet may have appeared more connected to the watch case, they were still two separate elements offering the flexibility of removing the bracelet for a different option.



The Rolex Submariner from 1953 comes with curved end lugs that give the watch a look akin to that of an integrated timepiece

There must have been something in the shift from 1960s to the '70s, but, as if from nowhere, the integrated bracelet men's watch was suddenly in evidence. Like many cultural phenomena, it is difficult to say where exactly it started, but we can identify the pioneers and the social environment that may have influenced them. One of the first to appear was the Omega Constellation reference 168.045 from 1969. A slim, sleek minimalist watch, its complex bracelet-case junction makes it clear that this is a bracelet-only watch and there would be no fitting a strap, or any after-market bracelet onto it. It has been speculated that the master of integrated bracelet design, Gérald Genta may have had a hand

in this watch as something of a pre-cursor to his more famous creations, but research by Omega collector and historian Desmond Guilfoyle has shown that Genta was not at Omega at this time, although he did design the ref. 14900 and the 168.009 and the 1980s Seamaster Polaris in titanium.



Omega Constellation reference 168.045, released in 1969

The Beta 21 project, while pipped to the post of being the first production quartz watch, made up for it with radical styling. A new decade and a new movement demanded a new approach, and amongst the 21 companies that contributed to the project, Rolex and IWC delivered a new case-and-bracelet design that was truly integrated. The

Rolex 5100 'Texan' was produced in 18K gold only, and both case and bracelet were of hulking proportions. Yes, the bracelet was attached with a traditional spring-bar, but there was no slipping the bracelet off to install a strap; the case design limited this to the factory-made bracelet only. Over at IWC, they hedged their bets, producing the 'Da Vinci', which had a similar chunky aesthetic to the Rolex, but also the 'International' with traditional lugs for the non-believers. This chunky brick bracelet became a regular sight in the early 1970s, being used for the Jaeger-LeCoultre Master-Quartz and Favre-Leuba Quartz Raider, amongst others.



Da Vinci Beta 21 watch by IWC in several executions

Jewellery and Menswear

So, what was the context from which such designs sprang? The 1960s had seen a flourishing of men's jewellery, with trends firmly rooted in the bohemian styles of the anti-establishment youth. Necklaces and bracelets were beads, braids and thongs. The early 1970s saw the establishment appropriate this style with bracelets and necklaces reworked in precious metals. Wristwear was big, bold, sleek and

geometric. In July 1972 James Caan and Burt Reynolds posed for Playboy, sporting flamboyant examples of the latest jewellery trends, including chunky bracelets and bangles. Even the venerable jewellery house Cartier produced its first unisex bracelet. Designed by Aldo Cipullo, the Love Bangle, a heavy gold band with screw-head motif, was advertised being worn by men and women alike. In this environment it became far more acceptable for a man to wear a watch that was also a bold bracelet, or a bracelet that told the time.

The late 1960s and early '70s was a time where designers came out of the shadows to be celebrated by the brands that they worked for. Back over at Omega, 1969 saw the beginning of a collaboration with Anglo-Italian jewellery designer Andre Grima: these 'wearable works of art' were all built around an Omega watch movement, but the 55 timepieces that make up the final collection were as far from conventional as they could possibly be. Each one was created as an inseparable unit with rarely a distinction between case and bracelet. It may be no coincidence, then, that Omega was an early adopter in the creation of integrated men's watch bracelets.



A series of watches designed by Andre Grima for Omega, with Omega movements inside. The watch cases merged bracelet design with case construction in a seamless whole

Broader influences from fashion, design and even architecture were mirrored in the evolving wristwear. Men's fashion built on the floral and paisley romanticism of the late '60s with more structured lines, stripes and geometric prints with plaids, checks and tartan all proving popular. Collars, lapels, ties and trouser hems were wide with bold tie-clips and cufflinks to add sparkle. In architecture and design, brutalist concrete exteriors housed maximalist interiors with an emphasis on sleek, unbroken, linear forms in bold colours.

Against this backdrop, the appearance of a watch such as the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak, does not seem so groundbreaking. There had already been integrated steel mechanical bracelet watches (the Omega Constellation); there had already been expensive integrated bracelet watches (the Rolex 5100). What there had not been was a steel mechanical integrated bracelet watch with a slim automatic haute-horlogerie movement from a named designer that cost a small fortune. It was this combination of great design – the case flowing into the bracelet, right on-trend for 1972 – executed in mundane steel and at an

eye-watering price, that shocked the world. You can almost hear the exclamations of 'How much?!' echoing down the decades. The steel construction coupled with the price made it exclusive. You could justify an expensive watch if it came as a solid lump of bullion, but for steel, and in such a slim case, only the truly wealthy could rationalise such a purchase. This was a sentiment delivered through their advertising slogan: "It takes more than money to wear the Royal Oak".



The 1972 release of the Royal Oak made design the driving force of a timepiece, and also shocked the world with its sticker price

Although slow to catch on, the Royal Oak had four years as the sole member of its sector – in 1976, Patek Philippe launched its first sports watch, the Nautilus 3700, also from the mind and pen of Gérald Genta. Genta's other launch of 1976, the IWC Ingenieur, while fulfilling most of the criteria for this elite club, did not have quite the brand prestige, or wallet-emptying price tag of the other two in this new 'sports-luxe' category. The 'Holy Trinity' was completed in 1977 when Vacheron Constantin revealed their reference 222, designed by Jörg Hysek and sharing the same JLC calibre 920 base movement as the other two.



Vacheron Constantin ref. 222, designed by Jörg Hysek

Back in the real world, integrated bracelets had firmly embedded themselves in the mainstream. In 1975, Rolex launched reference 1530 in an integrated bracelet form, discontinuing the reference two years later to reuse the case for the ref. 17000 Oysterquartz. Omega used integrated cases widely across their Genève, Seamaster and Constellation families for both quartz and automatic models. Bracelet construction had improved to the point that frequent replacement was unnecessary and, with most watches having some level of water resistance, integrated bracelets doubled up as sports and business watches. As the quartz era progressed and movements got thinner, designers had more latitude to create a seamless transition from case to

bracelet. Peak integration was reached in 1979 with Piaget's Polo. Its use of the ultra-thin 7P quartz movement kept the case height down, and fitting the case to a heavy gold bracelet meant that the two could be of equal depth. The design of the bracelet with brushed links interspersed with polished godrons continued across the case and even the watch dial without a break. Only produced in precious metal, this was maximalism masquerading as minimalism, and an association with the sport of kings made it a hit with the rich and famous, accounting for a third of the brand's watch sales in the early '80s.



Piaget Polo from 1979 (Image: FHH)

Integration and Differentiation

So, where does the integrated bracelet watch sit now? Has the style become just another design trope, or does it have a special place in the market? I would suggest that at the lower end of the market, the integrated bracelet has little relevance. The restrictions imposed on the wearer by the lack of flexibility have little pay-off in either design or prestige, but if you want a different look, you can just buy a different watch. The fields of prestige or luxury watches are more interesting and

nanced. There may be references to vintage models reimaged with modern watchmaking technology, or the chance to offer something completely new.

The undeniable kings of the sport-luxe field are the pioneers Audemars Piguet and Patek Philippe, whose original creations have never really gone away. The allure of the brand names and historical importance of the Royal Oak and Nautilus have, if anything, increased their demand over time to the point where they are hard to find at retail, and resell for a healthy profit in the pre-owned market. No longer limited to steel, precious-metal and high-tech-ceramic versions abound, but the originals remain the most sought after. Vacheron Constantin, as in the 1970s has had to play catch-up. The original reference 222 was replaced by the Overseas in 1996, and so, it lacks something of the retro cachet of the other two. It is a worthy alternative for those who want a sports watch from the 'Big Three' and has made great strides in overcoming the inflexibility imposed by an integrated bracelet, developing a system that allows the interchange of straps without the need for tools.



Glashütte Original Seventies with its integrated lugs recalls the impressive style of the Da Vinci designed by Genta

Sometimes the resurrection of a vintage model provides an opportunity for updates. Glashütte Original's Seventies model draws on a watch that, being from behind the Iron Curtain, was far from 'luxe'; while it had a '70s TV-style case, the original bracelet was not integrated. The new version benefits from a high-end movement and the case-and-bracelet combination it might have had if the wall had never gone up in Germany. Girard-Perregaux's Laureato was originally a slim quartz, but the latest version gains an in-house automatic movement and the bracelet is dramatically improved in terms of finish, heft and complexity.

With watch brands seeking any opportunity to push up into the sports-luxe integrated-bracelet sector, you would be forgiven for thinking that the external design is all that matters. Is it all about claiming a slice of 1970s cool – and, hopefully, AP's and PP's success – regardless of the watchmaking on offer? Thankfully, we have examples of quite the opposite.

In 2011, François-Paul Journe launched his Linesport collection, a sporty alternative to his usual classicism. While the case and bracelet may be playful, the inner workings are deadly serious, offering chronographs either with split timing functions or precision to 1/100th of a second. Over at Laurent Ferrier, his entry into the world of luxury sports watches offers the same chronometer-grade tourbillon as the more sober examples of his art. The 44mm steel case is both bold and curvaceous, and although it integrates with a rubber strap rather than a steel bracelet, the cost of machining a dedicated bracelet for such a low-output manufacturer makes this forgivable.



Franois-Paul Journe's Linesport, first introduced in 2011

The premier example of case-bracelet design being coupled with the highest horology has to be Bvlgari and their Octo Finissimo collection. In the five short years since the collection's launch, Bvlgari have used the Octo Finissimo as the launch pad for their ongoing 'thinness' contest with Piaget. Every year, records are broken as more and more complex complications are compressed into its wafer-thin case. In truth, the watch appears as both a strap and a braceleted watch, but as, to me, the watch only comes alive on its bracelet, I will give it a pass. The 110 case facets are mirrored in the repeating angles of the bracelet links in one harmonious articulation. It is easy to dismiss jewellery brands as 'not proper watchmakers', so perhaps it is fitting that a jeweller reminds us what Gerald Genta demonstrated nearly 50 years ago: that a perfectly designed case and bracelet can elevate a sports watch to a piece of wearable art.



The Bvlgari Octo Finissimo is a wonderful example of case and bracelet design as a seemingly integrated whole, and fitted with impressive horological internals

