

RACHAEL TAYLOR

# ROLEX

The Story Behind the Style



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A STUDIO PRESS BOOK

First published in the UK in 2023 by Studio Press,  
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK,  
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square,  
London WC1B 4DA

Owned by Bonnier Books, Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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ISBN 978-1-80078-717-9

FSC DUMMY

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in China

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# ROLEX

## The Story Behind the Style



RACHAEL TAYLOR

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## The World's Most Famous Watch Brand

Rolex has become shorthand for luxury. There is no watch you can strap on to your wrist that will be recognised for the status symbol it is quicker than a Rolex. And for many, this is the appeal.

Yet there was a time when the name Rolex – a word completely made up by the brand's founder Hans Wilsdorf – was not famous. It would take hard work, boundary pushing and a lot of self-belief on the part of Wilsdorf, a German orphan, to jettison the name into the upper echelons of horology; starting with convincing the pocket watch-wearing gentleman of the early 20th century that they wanted to wear the time on their wrist at all.

As you will discover, Rolex won its place in history by constantly questioning what was possible and innovating at all costs. It pioneered so many elements of watchmaking and design that are standard today, such as waterproof watches, placing a date window on the dial, and even removing the need to wind our watches.

It also found its way into some of the most exciting moments in history by placing Rolex watches on the wrists of adventurers and explorers. Its watches have travelled to the world's highest peaks and to the depths of the ocean; they have survived extremes of temperature, speed and pressure.

The story of Rolex is so much more than that of its watches. It is one of epic ambition and vision. What started out as a one-man band in London's Hatton Garden would become the epicentre of the Swiss watchmaking industry, and one of the most recognisable and coveted brands in the world.



ABOVE: A Rolex boutique in the GUM State Department Store on Red Square in Moscow.



## An Orphan Who Became the King of Watchmaking

To tell the history of Rolex, we must start with a man rather than a watch. Hans Wilsdorf, who would go on to build what is arguably the world's most famous luxury watch brand, was born in the Bavarian town of Kulmbach, Germany, in 1881 to Anna and Johan Daniel Ferdinand Wilsdorf.

The Wilsdorfs owned an iron toolmaking business, which had been started by Hans Wilsdorf's grandfather. It was a successful enterprise that had provided a comfortable life for Wilsdorf, his older brother and younger sister. It was a happy and stable life until tragedy struck when Anna and Johan died months apart. By the time he was 12 years old, Wilsdorf was an orphan.

Anna's brothers stepped in to steer the children's fate, and it was decided that the toolmaking business that had belonged to their father should be sold to provide a financially stable future for them. Once this had been completed, the children were sent to elite boarding schools for the remainder of their childhoods. Wilsdorf was educated 45 kilometres away in Coburg, where he showed an interest in mathematics and foreign languages, becoming fluent in English.

Although this was an upsetting chapter in his life, Wilsdorf credits these events with giving him the strength of character



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PREVIOUS: Hans  
Wilsdorf, the founder  
of Rolex.

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RIGHT: Watchmakers  
at work in a Rolex  
workshop in Geneva  
in 1949.





required to be successful in the future. In an autobiography he wrote as part of a series of four books titled *Rolex Jubilee Vade Mecum*, published in 1946, he reflected: "The way in which [my uncles] made me become self-reliant very early in life made me acquire the habit of looking after my possessions and, looking back, I believe that it is to this that much of my success is due."

Wilsdorf's first foray into the world of work was an apprenticeship with a pearl exporter in Geneva that sold to businesses across the world. The experience that he gained in this role would prove vital when setting up his own business, and he described it as being "invaluable throughout my career". One of the lessons learned was that it was possible to build a business around products others had made, which would be the founding idea for his initial watch business.

In 1900, Wilsdorf moved to La Chaux-de-Fonds, a town in the Jura mountains – an area of Switzerland that is synonymous with watchmaking. He took a job with major watch exporter Cuno Korten, which was his introduction to the world of horology. While his main role was corresponding with the English market, another of his duties at Cuno Korten was to keep its warehouses of pocket watches in working order. To do this, he had to manually wind hundreds of pocket watches each day. It seems little wonder after this experience that he would later become obsessed with the quest to create a self-winding watch movement. After two years in the Swiss mountains, Wilsdorf returned to Germany to complete mandatory military service. He did not return to Switzerland upon its completion in 1903 but instead moved to London and took a job with a watchmaker. He also met and married his first wife at this time, an English woman called Florence Crotty, and became a British citizen.



TOP: A rare vintage Rolex Trench watch, originally made for soldiers in World War I.



BOTTOM: A view of the caseback of a Rolex Oyster Perpetual, circa 1931.

Two years later, at the age of 24, Wilsdorf was ready to strike out on his own, and in 1905 he opened his own watch business in partnership with his brother-in-law Alfred Davis. The company, which had its offices at 83 Hatton Garden in London, was called Wilsdorf & Davis and specialised in sourcing Swiss movements and placing them within English-made cases.

At that time, pocket watches were the mainstream method of timekeeping. Wristwatches did exist but were not common, and were considered to be a women's accessory. Indeed, the first wristwatches were made for women, as their dress at that time didn't allow for the comfortable wearing of pocket watches, since they didn't have pockets.

Wilsdorf was a visionary in this respect. He believed in the potential of wristwatches, and correctly forecast that this smaller,





more wearable product would one day make the larger pocket watch obsolete. He set about trying to change the image of wristwatches.

A fundamental step was finding a manufacturer called Aegler in the Swiss town of Bienne that was making precision movements that could fit inside a wristwatch. Wilsdorf placed a large order, and soon Wilsdorf & Davis became one of the leading British wristwatch firms.



In a bid to establish his business as a brand rather than simply a dealer, Wilsdorf wanted to create a new name for the company; a catchy one that would look good on a dial and be easy to pronounce in many languages. He had experimented with many combinations of letters in search of this made-up name but failed to find anything that worked. Then, while riding through London's Cheapside on the upper

deck of a horse-omnibus in 1908, it came to him. Or as he would later jest: "A genie whispered 'Rolex' in my ear."

Under this new name, Wilsdorf continued his quest to create reliable wristwatches with quality movements. In 1910, Rolex had a breakthrough when one of its products, powered by an Aeglar movement, became the first wristwatch in the world to receive the Swiss Certificate of Chronometric Precision – a mark of horological excellence. Four years later, another milestone would be achieved when the Kew Observatory in London awarded a Rolex wristwatch with a Class A precision certificate. This had previously only been given to marine chronometers used for navigation, and it further solidified the reputation of Rolex as a purveyor of precise timekeeping instruments.

In 1914, World War I broke out, and the following year the British government introduced a 33.3% customs duty as part of the war effort. By this time, Rolex's London office, which had a staff of 60 people, was exporting its watches all over the world and the tax change would make that difficult. As such, Wilsdorf made the decision to move the company to Bienne in Switzerland. It already had an office in La Chaux-de-Fonds, which it opened in 1917 for marketing purposes, but this move would remove it from the British watch industry altogether.

And, so, the legacy of Rolex's Swiss-made watches began, with the Swiss company Rolex S.A. registered in Geneva in 1920.

OPPOSITE TOP: A watchmaker assembles a Rolex movement in Bienne in 1942, a task that requires much dexterity.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: A powerful microscope allows a watchmaker in Geneva in 1949 to take a closer look at a Rolex watch.

## The Origins of the Oyster

With Rolex settled into its new home in Switzerland, the company continued to develop its watch offering with a focus on precision and durability, as well as building its brand. Though certainly catchy, the name Rolex had not become an overnight success. Tired of waiting for it to catch on, Hans Wilsdorf launched a major marketing campaign in 1925, pledging to invest at least £12,000 a year – nearly £1 million in today's money. He also increased the number of watches Rolex was producing with its own branding on the dial, as it has been producing both branded and unbranded watches up until that time.

A major leap forward for Rolex's brand was the launch of the Oyster in 1926. This new style of watch promised to be waterproof and dustproof thanks to a hermetically sealed case, proving its durability. It also made it an obvious choice for sporting activities, which would prove to be a rich source of marketing for Rolex in the years ahead.



The Oyster case had a patented system of screwing down the bezel, caseback and winding crown against the middle case to seal the movement inside securely. The winding crown, which is made from 10 individual parts, was key as it acted as a go-between between the sealed inner world of the case and its functional external elements.

The Oyster case would become the backbone of Rolex. Nearly every watch in its contemporary range features an Oyster case, and the names of all the models reference it. A Submariner is technically named an Oyster Perpetual Submariner and a GMT-Master II is an Oyster Perpetual GMT-Master II, and so on. The only exception is the 1908 dress watch, which does not have an oyster case.

Rolex's iconic fluted bezels are a throwback to the early Oyster cases. Although these flourishes are decorative now, the ridges originally served a purpose to allow a special tool to screw the bezel securely to the mid case.

OPPOSITE: A 1959 Rolex Oyster Perpetual on a brown alligator strap.

ABOVE: A close shot of a Rolex Oyster Perpetual dial and fluted bezel.



## Rolex at War

Despite his German heritage, Hans Wilsdorf was a staunch opposer of the Nazi party, and during World War II he found an ingenious way to show his support to British troops. From his office in neutral Switzerland, he made it known that British soldiers could place an order for a Rolex watch and that payment would not be required until after the war.

It is believed that 3,000 soldiers ordered a Rolex during World War II, including many in prisoner of war camps in Germany. Requests could be made in writing via the International Red Cross and soldiers were allowed to pick any model.

One of the soldiers who ordered a watch was Flight Lieutenant Gerald Imeson. He was one of the men involved in the mass escape attempt from Stalag Luft III prisoner of war camp, which was later made famous by its depiction in



the 1963 film *The Great Escape*. As Imeson covertly shook soil collected from digging secret escape tunnels out of his trouser legs and onto the camp grounds, he did so with a Rolex Oyster Chronograph Ref. 3525 on his wrist. Sadly, Imeson was not one of the 76 soldiers who made it out, and his chronograph would accompany him on gruelling enforced marches through Germany as the Nazis tried to evade the Russians.

After the war, it was time for Rolex to collect. Although the watchmaker didn't chase a single invoice, it is said that every soldier paid. The families of fallen soldiers who had ordered a Rolex often attempted to settle the bill on their behalf. Imeson paid his £15 in 1947. The watch would later sell at auction via Christie's for £155,000 in 2022.



LEFT: The Rolex ref: 3525 that Flight Lieutenant Gerald Imeson wore as a prisoner of war in World War II.

OPPOSITE: Steve McQueen in character as Captain Virgil Hilts in the 1963 film *The Great Escape*.



## The 1950s

The 1950s was a prolific period for Rolex, during which it would create seven of its iconic models. The reason for such rapid innovation was that the Swiss watchmaker was chasing a new market for its timepieces by creating professional tool watches for specific sports or jobs. These were watches that would not just tell the time but could aid their wearer in some other way, too.

Rolex targeted activities on land, in the sea and in the air, including diving, climbing, aviation and exploration. This period would see the launch of the Explorer for adventurers, the Submariner and Sea-Dweller for divers, the Milgauss for scientists, and the Cosmograph Daytona for racing car drivers.

Although commercial versions of these watches would make it into the mainstream, each model genuinely started out

from the  
TOP OF  
THE WORLD

to the  
BOTTOM  
OF THE SEA

**ROLEX** *proves dependable!*

In the most perilous of the world's sea  
as last summer by the Rolex equipped French expedition,  
the Rolex Company produced a special "Oyster" model watch which, after months  
of the Submariner, "Oyster," submerged to 10,000 feet...  
and after surfacing was in perfect condition... keeping perfect time.

With the sea being your only... "lifeline" and as a result of  
dangerous diving, Rolex is now able to tell the difference of time-keeping  
with complete and waterproof precision-made watch - the "Submariner".  
This instrument has a special rotating bezel, enabling the user to determine  
depth time as a check. Its compass is built in. It is also able to keep exact  
time for the entire day of an expedition. The "Submariner" has  
shown all the advantages of a top watch with none of the complications.  
Exceptionally guaranteed against any water pressure... here is another  
very important Rolex innovation.

BE SURE TO WRITE FOR THE SPECIAL 1954 BROCHURE ON THE ROLEX "SUBMARINER"

**ROLEX**  
A Division of Rolex S.A. of Geneva  
THE SWISS MADE WATER COMPASSION - 100 FORTY SEVEN - NEW YORK, N. Y.

Climbers pay tribute to Rolex

...and as a result of  
dangerous diving, Rolex is now able to tell the difference of time-keeping  
with complete and waterproof precision-made watch - the "Submariner".  
This instrument has a special rotating bezel, enabling the user to determine  
depth time as a check. Its compass is built in. It is also able to keep exact  
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THE SWISS MADE WATER COMPASSION - 100 FORTY SEVEN - NEW YORK, N. Y.



as an experimental timepiece designed for professionals. As such, most were put to the test in real-life situations, such as expeditions to Mount Everest. Chosen professionals would feed back information to the watchmaker, allowing it to improve the functionality of the timepieces.

Another launch during this decade was the Lady-Datejust, which was an important development of a different kind. It targeted another new audience for Rolex as the brand's first watch made specifically for women.

Rolex also launched its Day-Date model in the 1950s, which would prove to be one of its most sought-after timepieces and worn by many world leaders and celebrities. Such was its association with powerful men that it would pick up the nickname 'President'.

OPPOSITE: Adverts from the 1950s promoting Rolex's professional watches.

ABOVE: The Explorer series was a result of a flurry of innovation in the 1950s.



### Rolex Oyster Perpetual 1035

Chronometer made in 18 carat gold only, "moiré" finish bezel with matching 18 carat gold "moiré" bracelet.

### Rolex Oyster Perpetual 1013

Officially certified chronometer, selfwinding movement, guaranteed waterproof to 165 feet (50 m.), available in 18 carat gold only, with a variety of dials.



### Explorer 1016

Worn by Sir John Hunt in his conquest of Everest, the Explorer is a specially robust version of the fabled Oyster. Officially certified chronometer. Guaranteed waterproof to 330 feet (100 m.). Stainless steel case. Highly luminous dial.

### Explorer II 1655

Known as the "Explorer II" this chronometer is of particular interest for speleologists. It is equipped with a 24 hour hand and the very strong winding crown is further protected by a special shouldering.





## The Crown



Perhaps just as famous as the name Rolex is the crown symbol that appears on all of its watches. In fact, for watch collectors, 'The Crown' is interchangeable with the brand's name when discussing Rolex.

The five-pointed Art Deco-style crown, which is also referred to as a coronet, was first trademarked by Rolex in 1925. The crown had two marginal redesigns, one in 1965 and a second in 2002. These tweaks enhanced and updated the silhouette and colour schemes, but as logos go the Rolex crown has been a fairly constant piece of branding since its conception.

The symbolism of using a crown to represent Rolex is to present its watches as markers of success that should be aligned with personal or professional milestones. As its marketing suggests: a crown for every achievement.

Today, you will find the iconic crown on Rolex's winding crowns as well as on the dial, positioned just above the word 'Rolex' or standing in place of a numeral at 12 o'clock. You will also see it littered through marketing and advertising material, as well as on boxes and in stores, and on many other items associated with the brand. Wherever there's Rolex, there's sure to be a crown.

PREVIOUS: A vintage catalogue showing Perpetual, Explorer and Explorer II models.

OPPOSITE: The crown branding embossed on documentation for a 2003 Datejust.

BELOW: Rolex's motif on the 18-carat gold winding crown of a Cellini Moonphase.







## Moments in History

A spirit of adventure has always been at the heart of Rolex watchmaking, as well as a desire to test out its watches in extreme, real-world conditions. This has led to Rolex watches being present during some of the most famous moments in history.

When two soon-to-be-famous climbers scaled Everest, Rolex was there. When scientists plunged to the depths of the undiscovered Mariana Trench, Rolex was there. When the King of Speed broke the land speed barrier, Rolex was there.

And in every celebration of human endurance and accomplishment is a subtle reminder to the watch lover that its timepieces are not only capable of surviving the pressures of such quests, but that the adventurers themselves rely on Rolex to assist them.

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LEFT: A view of Mount Ama Dablam in the Everest region of the Himalayas in Nepal.



## Swimming the English Channel

Mercedes Gleitze was a long-distance swimmer born in Brighton, England, in 1900. She shot to fame when – after her eighth attempt – she became the first Englishwoman to swim the English Channel in 1927, completing the feat in 15 hours and 15 minutes.

Unfortunately, the triumph was tainted by Dorothy Cochrane Logan, who claimed less than a week later to have completed the same swim. She was exposed as a fraud, but this cast doubt on Gleitze's claim. Under pressure from the media, Gleitze offered to swim the Channel again to prove her innocence.

Rolex seized on the 'vindication swim' as a marketing opportunity to put the waterproofness of its Oyster case to the test. It asked Gleitze to wear an Oyster watch around her neck during the swim.

By the time she got back in the water, the temperature had dropped significantly. After more than 10 hours in cold water, Gleitze had to be pulled out after falling in and out of consciousness. The attempt had failed, but her resilience was enough to quiet naysayers and her original record remained intact. So too did the Oyster watch, and Rolex celebrated this achievement with a full-page advert in the London Daily Mail the next day. Rolex would continue to work with Gleitze in its marketing campaigns, making her the first ever Rolex ambassador.

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OPPOSITE LEFT: Mercedes Gleitze preparing to set off from Folkestone for her seventh attempt to swim the English Channel.

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OPPOSITE RIGHT: A photograph taken as Lord Clydesdale and David McIntyre flew over Mount Everest on April 3rd, 1933.

## The First Flight Over Mount Everest

With the Rolex Oyster proven at sea thanks to Mercedes Gleitze, Rolex looked to the skies. Captain Charles Douglas Barnard, who would go on to set records for long-distance aviation, was the first pilot to take the watch on a flight. He reported to have found it "eminently suitable".

In 1933, Lord Clydesdale and David McIntyre were planning their own aviation adventure as they prepared to attempt the first flight over Mount Everest, the world's highest peak at more than 9,000 meters (29,528ft) above sea level.

The aim was to conquer the feat, but also to get some ariel photographs. Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart Blacker joined Lord Clydesdale in his bi-plane, camera in hand and Rolex Oyster on his wrist. Blacker later said: "I can hardly imagine that any watches have ever been subjected before to such extremes."





## Breaking Land and Air Speed Records

Sir Malcolm Campbell was a British journalist and racing motorist who had an obsession with speed. His passion for fast cars and boats would lead him to break several records for speed on land and water.

Campbell broke the land speed record for the first time in 1924, hitting 146.16mph at Pendine Sands in Wales. He would go on to break the world land speed record eight more times over the next decade. He achieved his final land speed record in 1935 at the Bonneville Salt Flats in Utah, USA, when he became the first car driver to exceed 300mph.



Campbell wore a Rolex Oyster during many of these drives but famously rejected payment from Rolex, which had offered him remuneration in exchange for testing the durability of its watch at high speeds. Despite this, he did provide a testimonial, writing: "I have now been using my Rolex watch for a while, and it is keeping perfect time under somewhat strenuous conditions." Rolex would later make a version of the Oyster with 'Campbell' printed on the dial.

Other thrill-seekers to wear a Rolex while breaking speed records included Chuck Yeager. In 1947, the US Air Force captain broke the speed of sound barrier wearing an Oyster when he flew a Bell X-1 rocket engine-powered plane at Mach 1.06 over the Rogers Dry Lake in the southern California desert. Another was stuntman Stan Barrett. He exceeded the speed of sound on land in 1979, hitting 739mph at Edwards Air Force base, where Yeager had taken off for his historic flight. Barrett did this driving the Budweiser Rocket, a branded rocket-powered three-wheel vehicle, and wearing a Rolex Cosmograph.

OPPOSITE: Malcolm Campbell in his Bluebird car in 1935 when he became the first man to exceed 300mph.

ABOVE: US Air Force test pilot Chuck Yeager in front of the Bell X-1 aircraft in Palmdale, California, in 1953.



## Summiting Mount Everest

In the 1930s, Rolex started equipping mountaineering teams on Himalayan expeditions with its watches. It did this to test how the watches would react when exposed to extreme conditions at high altitudes.

As the climbers fed back on how the watches performed, improvements were made to subsequent models. This is a fundamental pillar of Rolex's strategy: to test its watches in real-world situations, or – as it describes it – in the 'living laboratory'.

While many had tried, no climber had succeeded in reaching the summit of the Himalaya's Mount Everest until New Zealand beekeeper Edmund Hillary and Tibetan climber Tenzing Norgay in 1953. They were the first people to reach the summit of the world's highest mountain at 8,848 metres (29,028 ft).

The pair were part of a British climbing expedition led by British Army officer Sir John Hunt. Only two men made it to the top, but there was a larger team of 16 climbers supported by hundreds of porters carrying supplies and equipment. Some of the other climbers on the expedition, including Sir John Hunt, were equipped with Rolex Oyster Perpetual watches.

Hunt reported back on the performance of the watches, noting how the Perpetual movement proved useful. As the watches did not require winding, climbers were not required to remove their gloves and fiddle with crowns in freezing temperatures. He also noted that the accuracy allowed the team to synchronise effectively, and that they had "come to look upon Rolex Oysters as an important part of high climbing equipment".

Based on feedback from this historic expedition, Rolex launched the Explorer model that same year, which offered increased dial visibility in extreme conditions.



ABOVE: The cover of an Everest colour supplement published by The Times in 1953, showing Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay on the summit of Everest.

## Record-breaking Commercial Flights

The 1950s was commercial air travel's golden age, and Rolex went along for the ride. In 1954, the watchmaker developed a tool watch for Pan American airline pilots that was released commercially the following year as the GMT-Master.

Rolex became the official watch brand of the now-defunct airline known affectionately as Pan Am. When Pan Am set out on an ambitious plan in 1959 to complete the first non-stop commercial flight between New York and Moscow, the GMT-Master was in the cockpit on the wrist of Captain Clarence Warren Jr for the 11-hour 25-minute flight.

GMT-Master watches were also worn by the French and British pilots who flew the test flights in 1969 for Concorde, the first supersonic passenger airline.



LEFT: A Pan Am seatbelt and Boeing 707 emergency instructions brochure from the 1970s.

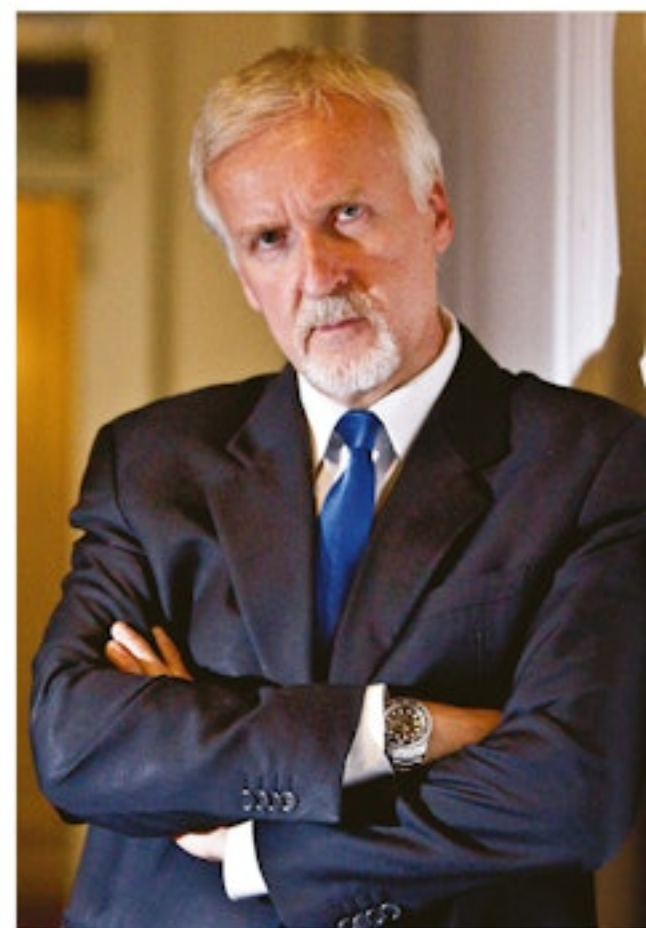
## Mariana Trench Dives

In 1960, Lieutenant Don Walsh and Jacques Piccard descended to the bottom of the Mariana Trench, the deepest known depression on Earth at 10,916 metres (37,800 ft) below the surface. They took with them an unusual passenger: a Rolex watch.

Rather than wear the watch, they attached an experimental timepiece called the Rolex Deep Sea Special to the outside of their bathyscaphe vessel. Rolex requested this so it could discover whether the watch would survive the pressure of the deep. It did.

The next diver to successfully descend to the bottom of the Mariana Trench was James Cameron, director of fantasy film *Avatar*, who completed a solo dive in 2012. Rolex created a new experimental watch for this feat. The Deepsea Challenge was attached to the arm of the submersible and successfully withstood 17 tonnes of pressure without cracking.

ABOVE: Filmmaker and record-breaking diver James Cameron wearing a Rolex Submariner.







## Pioneering Innovations

Rolex started out as a pioneer. First it foresaw the potential of the wristwatch over the pocket watch. Then it conceived the idea of a case that was waterproof and dustproof, boosting watches' durability. Next came the perpetual movement that put an end to the tedious daily task of winding your watch.

This spirit of innovation has never stopped. The watchmaker is constantly seeking out new ideas, many of which have shaped the entire watch industry, and elevating popular watch features by adding its own spin to them.

From being the first watchmaker to add a date window to the dial, to developing a watch that can travel to the bottom of the sea, and inventing new colours of ceramics previously thought impossible, these are just a few of those innovations.



OPPOSITE: A Rolex Submariner, which will remain waterproof at depths of up to 300m.

ABOVE: An Explorer II on a green NATO fabric strap.



## The Oyster Perpetual

When Rolex first started out, all watch movements had to be wound by hand to keep them running. Hans Wilsdorf envisioned a future in which this daily chore would be eliminated.

In 1931, Rolex heralded the age of the self-winding watch with the launch of its Oyster Perpetual, fitted with a movement equipped with a perpetual rotor. The calibre harnessed the kinetic energy created by the movement of the watch wearer's arm to power the watch via an oscillating weight. As long as the watch was in motion, it would stay wound. A variation of this Perpetual movement is at the heart of every Rolex watch today.

It is often thought that Rolex was the inventor of the automatic watch, but this is not true. A self-winding wristwatch mechanism was first invented a decade earlier by English watchmaker John Harwood, who it is said got the idea by watching children playing on a seesaw.

Harwood received a Swiss patent for his self-winding wristwatch in 1924 and sold the rights to the movement to watch brand Fortis. Two years later, Fortis launched a line of mass-produced self-winding wristwatches called the Harwood Automatic at the Schweizer Mustermesse Basela watch fair in Basel, Switzerland.

Harwood's invention and Rolex's movement did differ. Harwood used a hammer-winding mechanism while Rolex used a weighted rotor turning through a full circle. Marketing zeal did lead Rolex to claim to have invented the first self-winding wristwatch in 1955, but the brand ran an apology in The Sunday Express newspaper a year later. It

also created an ad crediting Harwood for his invention, and paid homage to Abraham-Louis Perrelet who created a self-winding pocket watch in the late 18th century.



ABOVE: An Oyster Perpetual Submariner.



## A Date Window

The Oyster Perpetual was a huge success. It was a highly precise wristwatch that was proven to be waterproof and dustproof, and thanks to its perpetual motor it never required winding. So, what was next?

The answer was something that will seem so obvious to watch fans today that it is hard to imagine it once had to be invented: the date window.



With the launch of the Datejust in 1945, Rolex added a new novelty by displaying the date in an aperture on the dial, positioned at 3 o'clock. Prior to this, watches that carried the date had done so by using an additional hand to point to markings on the outer edge of the dial.

Once the date was set on the Datejust, it automatically changed at midnight each night. In 1956, Rolex's watchmakers improved this so that the change became instantaneous. Blink and you'll miss it.

LEFT: A Datejust showing the date window at 3 o'clock.



## The Cyclops

The Datejust's date window proved to be hugely popular, and so thoughts at Rolex turned to how it could be improved. The answer was legibility, and the solution was to overlay the window with a magnifying glass to make it easier to read at a glance.

Rolex created a patented lens to perform this function in the early 1950s. It named it Cyclops, after the one-eyed giant from Greek mythology.

When the Cyclops made its debut on a Datejust model in 1953, it was made from plexiglass. It would later be made in sapphire crystal when Rolex upgraded the glass covering its dials to this tougher material in the 1970s. The Cyclops was further enhanced with a double layer of anti-reflective coating.

ABOVE: A 1959 Rolex Oyster Perpetual watch on a leather strap.



RIGHT: A Rolex  
Oyster Perpetual  
Datejust with a  
Jubilee bracelet.





## An Anti-magnetic Watch

Magnetic fields can be a problem for watches, interfering with the working parts of mechanical movements and compromising precision. Rolex sought to create a workaround, with the needs of scientists working in fields such as telecommunications, medical technology, aerospace and electrotechnical industries in mind. It wanted to create a watch these professionals could wear at work without worrying about loss of accuracy or damage due to magnetism.

By 1956, its watchmakers had cracked it. Inserting a magnetic shield made of two ferromagnetic alloys within an Oyster case meant the movement within could resist interference of up to 1,000 gauss (80,000 a/m). At the time, most anti-magnetic watches on the market could only stand up to about 4,800 a/m. The watch was named Milgauss, combining the French *mille* for thousand and gauss, the unit used to measure magnetic induction at that time.



LEFT: The distinctive blue Milgauss dial with a lightning-bolt seconds hand.

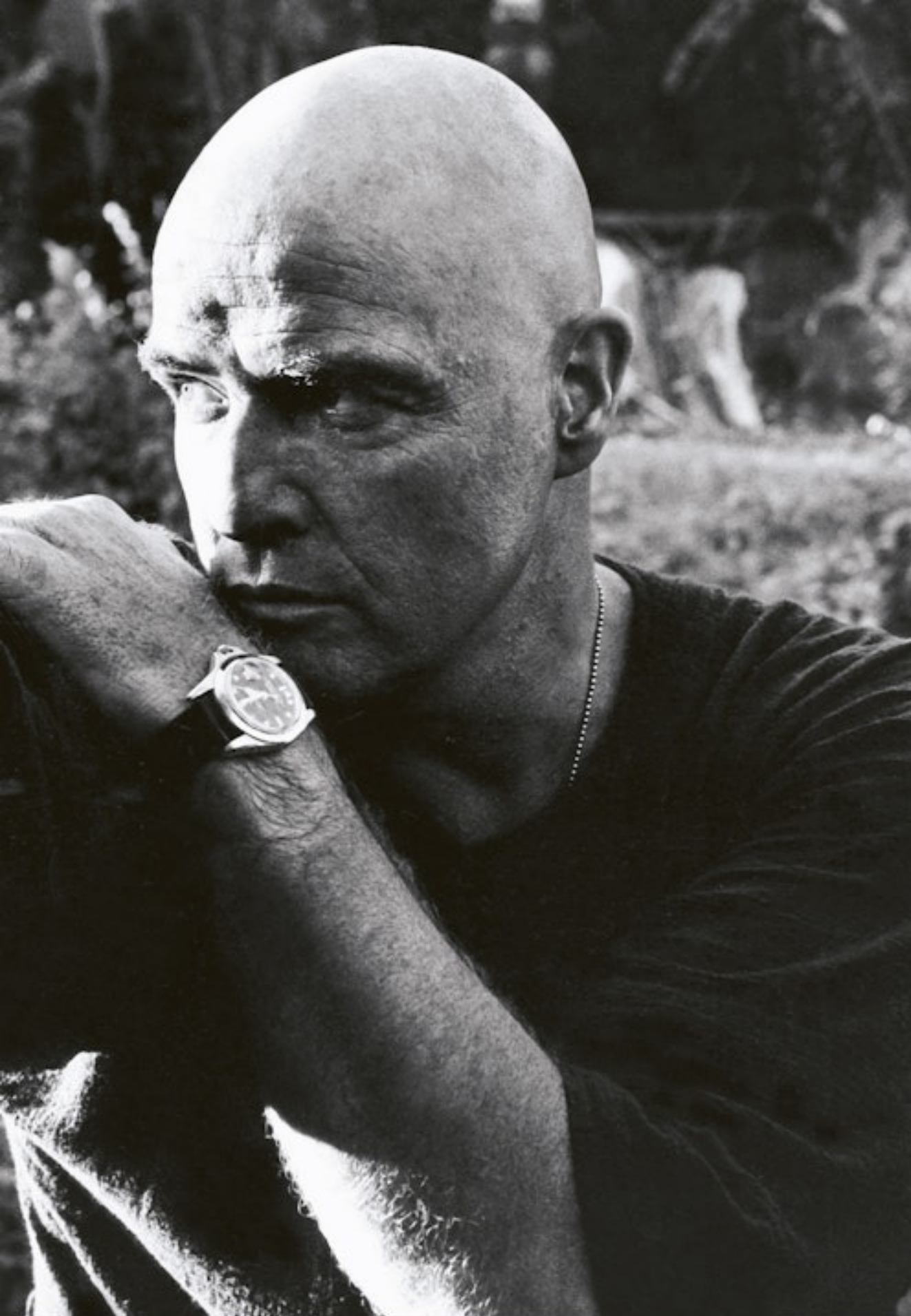
OPPOSITE: A steel Milgauss with a black dial and green sapphire glass.

Rolex asked for the Milgauss to be put to the test at CERN, the European organisation for nuclear research in Geneva, which is today home to the Hadron Collider. After stringent testing, the Milgauss passed. It would later become the watch of choice for CERN scientists, who it is said lobbied Rolex to develop the anti-magnetic watch in the first place.

To highlight the antimagnetic alteration to the Oyster case, the caseback of the Milgauss was decorated with a 'B' with an arrow above it, which is the symbol for magnetic flux density.

When the Milgauss was relaunched in 2007, following two decades of non-production, the watch's antimagnetic capabilities were further enhanced by making the oscillator and the escape wheel – key components within the movement – from paramagnetic materials to further limit the chance of interference.





## The Movies

*The Jazz Singer*, the first talkie (film with sound), and the Rolex Oyster were launched just months apart; an early indicator of the intertwining destinies the watch brand and movie industry would have.

Rolex watches have appeared on the wrists of actors in many films, often as a way to give an additional wordless insight into the character. Sean Connery's James Bond wore an action-ready Submariner in *Dr No* in 1962, while the luxurious gold Day-Date on the wrist of Paul Newman's Fast Eddie in 1987's *The Color of Money* denotes his success as a hustler.



ABOVE: Ben Affleck wears a Deepsea as CIA agent Tony Mendez in *Argo*.

OPPOSITE: Marlon Brando wearing a GMT-Master as Colonel Walter Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*.



In 2017, Rolex formalised its partnership with the movies by becoming a sponsor of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the organisation behind the world-famous Oscars awards ceremony. That same year it signed legendary director Martin Scorsese to be an ambassador. He would also become part of the brand's Mentor and Protégé Arts Initiative that pairs established and aspiring talents.

Rolex is now the official watch of the Oscars, and sponsor of its greenroom – a space where nominees and presenters gather before stepping out on stage. Each year, Rolex creates an immersive experience in this room. In 2023, for example, the design was inspired by tropical rainforests, and Rolex used the space to promote its work around environmental preservation.



ABOVE: David Oyelowo wears a gold Rolex Datejust as Martin Luther King, Jr. in *Selma*.



Rolex also sponsors the Governors Awards, given out to those deemed worthy of lifetime achievement awards in cinema. Previous winners have included Michael J. Fox, Elizabeth Taylor, Sidney Poitier, Angelina Jolie and Steven Spielberg. In 2021, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures opened in Los Angeles, and Rolex was a founding supporter. This temple to cinema has 50,000 square feet of gallery space, including The Rolex Gallery on the third floor.

ABOVE: Michael Caine wore a gold Day-Date as hitman Jack Carter in *Get Carter*.



## Expeditions



LEFT: Marine biologist Sylvia Earle prepares to survey coral off the coast of Florida.

OPPOSITE TOP: GMT-Master owner Scott Crossfield was the first person to fly at twice the speed of sound, in an X-15 plane.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Rolex adverts celebrating the successful arctic and underwater expeditions of its ambassadors.

Rolex and adventure are synonymous, and some of the stories about its watches accompanying expeditions are legendary. Being on the equipment list for the famous Mount Everest summit made by Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953 is one example. Others are less well known, but no less important. While that first Everest summit story is the one we all remember, Rolex watches actually accompanied 17 expeditions to the world's highest peaks between 1933 and 1955.

The Arctic and Antarctic hold particularly gruelling challenges for explorers, and some of those who have dared to venture there have used Rolex watches to help them navigate the vast, frozen landscapes. In the early 1990s, Norwegian adventurer Erling Kagge wore an Explorer II while undertaking a solo expedition to the South Pole. It was an incredible journey, with Kagge spending 50 days entirely alone, travelling 815 miles on foot.



Another fan of the Explorer II is high-altitude mountaineer Ed Viesturs, who became the first American to climb the world's 14 peaks over 8,000 metres without supplemental oxygen. Rolex ran an ad campaign celebrating the successes of Viesturs, who became an ambassador of the brand.

Biologist and underwater explorer Sylvia Earle has also partnered with Rolex on expeditions. Over the course of her career, Earle has spent nearly an entire year underwater and once lived on the ocean floor for 14 days for a research project. She is also a champion for the protection of marine life, and, as such, is a close collaborator with Rolex's Perpetual Planet initiative. She has also been part of the Rolex Awards for Enterprise judging panel.

### The Sirius sledge patrols and their Rolex watches are deep-frozen most of the year.

Explorers in the frozen heart of the Arctic... The Sirius sledge patrols... Rolex watches... The Sirius sledge patrols... Rolex watches...

### Walking to the Pole in the footsteps of Scott.

Placing footprints on the frozen tundra... Rolex watches... Walking to the Pole in the footsteps of Scott... Rolex watches...

### Aquonaut Sylvia Earle probes earth's other space.

Exploring the depths of the ocean... Rolex watches... Aquonaut Sylvia Earle probes earth's other space... Rolex watches...



## The Arts

While Rolex branding is glaringly obvious at sporting events, its involvement in the arts is more subtle. It describes itself as “moving quietly in the background”, providing financial backing to both individuals and institutions for creative pursuits.

The relationship between Rolex and the arts dates back to 1970 when New Zealand soprano Dame Kiri Te Kanawa became the first Rolex arts ambassador. She would be the first of many singers to be connected to the brand, from Italian mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli to Canadian crooner Michael Bublé.

Rolex has also partnered with major cultural institutions, including the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, London’s Royal Opera House, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Opéra national de Paris, the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, and the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing.

The brand has a special relationship with the Vienna Philharmonic orchestra that goes back to 2008, and every year it sponsors its famous New Year’s concert. The classical music performance is broadcast live from Musikverein in Vienna to millions of people around the world. Rolex also sponsors its open-air Summer Night Concert that draws 100,000 people to the city’s Schönbrunn Palace.

Rolex has engaged with many other artforms, including theatre, literature and film, mostly through its Mentor and Protégé programme. This links leading creatives, including Lin Manuel Miranda, creator of the hit musical *Hamilton*, with emerging artists to support the development of new talent. To mark the 20th anniversary of the Rolex Mentor and



Protégé Arts Initiative, the watchmaker organised an arts festival in Athens in 2023. More than 60 Rolex protégés and mentors shared their achievements and ongoing creative relationships through multidisciplinary performances, exhibitions, readings, screenings, installations and discussions.

ABOVE: The auditorium of the Palais Garnier in Paris, France.

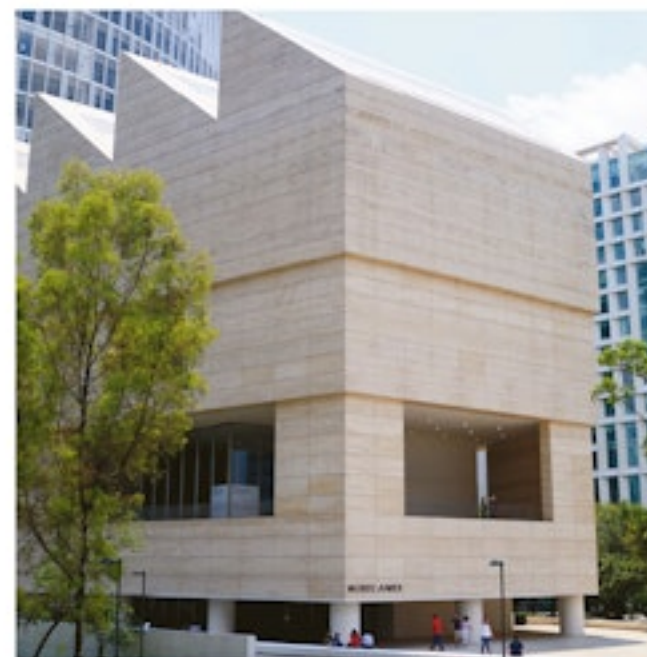




## Architecture

Architecture might seem an offbeat interest for a watch brand, but Rolex is deeply involved in this world, which it sees as having parallels to its own in terms of an appreciation for precision and design.

It has built relationships with leading architectural events, including becoming the official timepiece of the Biennale Architettura, part of La Biennale di Venezia. It has also engaged top architects to be part of its Mentor and Protégé programme, including Sir David Adjaye, Sir David Chipperfield, Kazuyo Sejima, Álvaro Siza and Peter Zumthor. Much care is taken over the design of its own buildings, too. It engages top firms including Onsitestudio, Kengo Kuma, SANAA, Michael Graves and Fumihiko to create spaces that are aesthetically provocative. Rolex uses this as an opportunity to strengthen its commitment to its Perpetual Planet initiative by favouring sustainable architects and builds.



OPPOSITE: Lorenzo Quinn's Building Bridges installation at the 58th Venice Biennale.

LEFT: The Jumex contemporary art museum in Mexico City, designed by Sir David Chipperfield.









## Philanthropy

While most watch brands have philanthropic activities, or even entire divisions dedicated to philanthropic pursuits, Rolex itself is owned by a charity. Founder Hans Wilsdorf set up the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation in 1945 to commemorate his first wife Florence May Wilsdorf-Crotty, who had passed away the year before. When Wilsdorf died in 1960 he transferred his 100% ownership stake in Rolex to the Foundation.

At that time, five Foundation trustees took control of the company, serving as custodians rather than owners or shareholders. The trustees oversaw the operations at Rolex and ensured that it supported good causes.

The Foundation still owns and controls Rolex today. As a not-for-profit organisation, it uses much of its income to support charitable and social causes, including through its Rolex Awards for Enterprise and Perpetual Planet initiatives.

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PREVIOUS: The Hans Wilsdorf Bridge in Geneva, named after Rolex's founder.

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RIGHT: Snow-capped mountains in Antarctica.





## Enterprise

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Oyster in 1976, the Rolex Awards for Enterprise were launched. In an advert promoting the initiative, the watchmaker said the Awards' aim was to "stimulate new projects, which carry on the tradition of enterprise and achievement associated with the name Rolex".



The first Awards offered to pay 50,000 Swiss francs each to five enterprising souls seeking funding for worthy projects. The competition was originally intended to be a one-off event, but it proved so popular that it returned in 1981, 1983 and 1987, by which point Rolex committed to making it a regular event that now happens every two years.

The type of projects that win the Awards for Enterprise tend to reflect the concerns of the day. In the 1990s, many of the winning pitches were related to environmental concerns, such as monitoring ozone levels, reforestation, reducing CFCs and providing solutions to

agricultural problems. In the 2000s, Rolex's judging panel selected projects related to natural disasters caused by climate change and the emergence of unknown diseases.

The technological advances of the Noughties made it possible for the Awards to go global. Potential laureates, the name given to winners, could enter from all over the world, and ceremonies began to be held in multiple cities. In 2010, a new offshoot of the awards, the Young Laureates, was launched with the aim of supporting ideas brought by those aged between 18 and 30.

Since its launch, the Awards have attracted more than 35,500 applications from 190 countries. There have been 155 laureates, ranging in age from 24 to 74. Projects have focused on a wide range of issues, from saving India's rainforests to conflict prevention in Chad, and eradicating malnutrition in Tanzania.

OPPOSITE: Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim's plan to use mapping to reduce climate-related conflict in Chad made her a 2021 Rolex Awards laureate.

RIGHT: An advert for the 1987 Rolex Awards for Enterprise.

**EXPLORING UNDISCOVERED AREAS IN THE WORLD**

The world's highest ruins by far are found in the southern Andes. Nearly one hundred sites, including the Spanish invasion of 1532 have been found above 5,000m - with some well-built structures up to 6,700m. They contain one of the most awe-inspiring archaeological sites that have survived from ancient times.

Being almost inaccessible, only a few of these sites have been examined by archaeologists. Their origins, distribution and purpose were largely unknown before Johan Reinhard began work in 1980. He has developed a subfield of archaeology called high-altitude archaeology. Strongly diving in one of his specialized techniques, for mountain lakes were often preserved as shown into the mountains where the gods dwell.

Reinhard's findings indicate that mountain gods were believed to control the weather and consequently crop and animal fertility. The hypothesis - which his project is designed to test - is that the Incas built the sacred sites to help increase production, thereby strengthening the local state and its religion. Reinhard's pioneering techniques in high-altitude archaeology will greatly increase understanding of traditional Andean religion-economic beliefs and ancient religious sites.

*Johan Reinhard*

A book about The Rolex Awards for Enterprise will be available in the spring of 1987 either from bookshops or from the publishers, Van Nostrand Reinhold. It will give full details of the projects of the five Laureates as well as 238 other projects selected from the many submitted, including 32 that were awarded Unesco World Heritage status.

Further information about The Rolex Awards for Enterprise is available from The Secretary, The Rolex Awards for Enterprise, P.O. Box 270, CH-1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland.



## Emerging Talent



Rolex has long been a passionate supporter of the arts, and in 2002 it launched an initiative that would not just deepen its own connection to this world but forge new connections for emerging talents. This was the beginning of the Rolex Mentor & Protégé programme.

The aim of the programme is to find emerging talents in music, film, literature, theatre, visual arts and architecture, and pair them with an inspiring mentor who is well known in the same field. Prospective protégés are not allowed to apply but must instead be nominated by a board made up of artists and arts executives. The board changes every two years to encourage diversity.

Once a protégé has been selected, the leaders of the Mentor & Protégé programme will consult with them to discover

what type of mentor would suit them best. It is important to find the right fit as the mentor and protégé must commit to spending a minimum of six weeks together over two years.

Previous mentors have included *The Handmaid's Tale* author Margaret Atwood, who was partnered with English writer Naomi Alderman. The pair soon found common ground, with Atwood challenging and guiding Alderman's writing, and the partnership was so successful that the two women co-wrote a zombie novella for Canadian online literature platform Wattpad.

Rolex provides financial support for protégés to allow them to travel to see their mentors. Protégés can also apply to the programme for funding to facilitate new work. The supportive relationship between Rolex and these rising stars is long lasting, and some creatives who have gone on to have successful careers since being protégés have returned as mentors to coach the next generation.

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OPPOSITE: Literary protégé Naomi Alderman with her mentor, the author Margaret Atwood.

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RIGHT: Film director and Rolex mentor Martin Scorsese.







## Learning

The Rolex Learning Centre in Lausanne, Switzerland, embodies two of the watchmaker's great loves: architecture and learning. The building, which opened in 2010, is part of the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and it is open to the public as well as students. It holds a library with 500,000 books, a learning centre and a cultural hub.

The building itself, designed by Japanese firm SANAA, is an architectural marvel. It has no walls, creating 20,000 square meters of uninterrupted space; the idea is to bring multiple disciplines, such as mathematics, engineering and science, together to share knowledge. Rolex's involvement in this project goes beyond providing enough funding to ensure its name is on the building. The watchmaker has a long-standing relationship with EPFL as a research partner, and collaborates with the university when developing new materials and microtechnology to support its watches.

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LEFT: Rolex Learning Centre on the EPFL campus in Lausanne, Switzerland.



## The Planet

Whereas once Rolex supported expeditions for the sake of pure discovery, the watchmaker now seeks out partners with a deeper mission through its Perpetual Planet initiative. The shift in focus is a reaction to climate change, and expeditions must have a secondary purpose: discovery that will help us to protect or better understand the planet.

A great example of this shift is Mount Everest. In 1953, Rolex equipped members of the climbing team behind Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary's famous summit just to see if the watches would survive the extremes. In 2019, it teamed up with the National Geographic Society to fund an expedition to Everest not simply to measure human endurance, but to learn more about our planet. The climbers' goal was to install the two highest weather stations in the world and collect the highest ice core ever recorded.



LEFT: Clown fish peek out of a sea anemone.

OPPOSITE: A group of climbers ascend Mount Everest.

Other Perpetual Planet initiatives have included the Tompkins Conservation project to rewild the southwestern cone of South America, and explorer Alison Criscitiello's expedition to retrieve an ice core from Canada's highest summit, Mount Logan.

As well as recording data and restoring nature, Perpetual Planet initiatives work hard to share awareness of little-known environmental issues. This was the case with an expedition called Under The Pole, which sent divers into the freezing waters of Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago in the Arctic Ocean, in search of marine animal forests. These forests consist of hydrozoa, animals related to jellyfish, and corals that spend part of their lives attached to the seabed and resemble flowers. The dives were tough for both the team and the equipment, but they were rewarded with the discovery of the first ever identified marine animal forest in the Arctic.





## The Legacy

Rolex isn't just any Swiss watch manufacturer; it is the most famous watch brand in the world. Ask anyone on the street if they have heard of Rolex, and the answer will be yes. This legend has been built slowly over more than a century, with its executives careful to link it to all the right initiatives: sports, adventure, precision and innovation. Its legacy, however, is somewhat out of its hands. This is the part of the story written by the fans.

There is always something to keep us interested in Rolex, from its use as a status symbol in celebrity circles and hip hop lyrics, to the mania for certain 'holy grail' models whipped up by competitive collectors and record-breaking auctions.

RIGHT: A gold Rolex Day-Date on sale at a store in Moscow, Russia.







LEFT: A Rolex store  
on Gran Via in  
Madrid, Spain.





## Star Power

A key focus of Rolex's early marketing strategy was to get its watches on famous wrists. In 1947, for example, Hans Wilsdorf gifted British prime minister Winston Churchill the watchmaker's 100,000th certified chronometer, a gold Datejust. Since then, it has become the watch of choice for many well-known faces in music, film, sports and politics.

Indeed, the political world stage has been particularly rich pickings for Rolex, with the Day-Date so popular with world leaders that it picked up the nickname the 'President'. One president to receive but never publicly wear a Day-Date was John F. Kennedy. The reason is that it was gifted to him by his secret lover Marilyn Monroe, and engraved with "Jack, with love as always, from Marilyn."

Rolex's suggestion that every achievement should be marked with a crown rings true in celebrity circles. When tennis player Roger Federer lifted the Wimbledon trophy in 2009, thereby smashing Pete Sampras' all-time Grand Slam record, he wore a Datejust II, and says the watch acts as a reminder of this moment. In 1970, singer Elvis was gifted a gold Rolex King Midas by his concert organiser after selling out the Houston Aerodrome six nights running.

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OPPOSITE: Victoria Beckham wears an Everose Cosmograph to the *Viva Forever!* Spice Girls musical press launch in London in 2012.



While many celebrities are Rolex owners – Daniel Craig, Jennifer Aniston, David and Victoria Beckham, Ryan Gosling, Rihanna, Brad Pitt, Tiger Woods and Jennifer Lopez, to name just a few – some stars' watch choices have become legendary. Actors Paul Newman and Steve McQueen are so synonymous with Rolex that they both had models unofficially named after them: the series of 'Paul Newman' Daytonas and a 'Steve McQueen' Explorer.



TOP: Nick Cannon wears a diamond-set Sky-Dweller to host America's Got Talent in 2017.

BOTTOM: Cara Delevigne wears a Rolex to the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival.



OPPOSITE: Stormzy wears an Everose 'Rainbow' Daytona Ref 116505 to the 2020 Brit Awards.





## Hip Hop Legends



Horology has become a hot topic in hip hop. If you know what to listen for, you'll hear lyrics about watches in lots of songs, with some artists flexing their watch knowledge by weaving in obscure models and niche brands.

Though these references can often be sophisticated and nuanced, the crux of it is bragging about wealth and possessions. There is no status symbol more universal than a Rolex watch, which is perhaps why it has been referenced in so many songs.

In 2017's 'Plain Jane', ASAP Ferg refers to his "president plain Jane" in reference to a 'President' Day-Date with no diamonds, bucking the hip hop trend for all-out bling. The rapper later explained that he feels adding diamonds lowers a watch's value and

"ruins the art". To do so, he says, is "like taking a Picasso and just saying, 'You know what, I think I should add green on it.'"

A popular Rolex brag in recent years centres on a horological function of Rolex watches: the sweeping seconds hand that

travels around the dial smoothly rather than in a ticking motion. Future, Lil Uzi Vert, Iggy Azalea and Travis Scott all have songs stating that their 'Rollies' don't tick; this is often used as an insult to describe another's fake Rolex that does. British artist Skepta pre-empted them all, writing a song called 'Rolex Sweep' in 2009. In the video, he initiated a dance move of the same name in which he circled his arm at full length.

The next generation of artists seem just as entranced with Rolexes. Ayo & Teo, two Gen-Z brothers from Michigan, released a song called Rolex in 2017 that has the lyrics "All I ever wanted was a Rollie" and "My Rollie don't tick tock, it just glide".



OPPOSITE TOP:  
Photographer Renell Medrano wears a gold Rolex while posing with her partner ASAP Ferg.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM:  
Pusha T wears a gold Rolex on stage at the 2019 Pitchfork Music Festival in Chicago.

LEFT: ASAP Rocky wears a Rolex while performing at Wireless Festival in London in 2015.

OVERLEAF: Ayo & Teo show off their diamond-set Rolexes at the 2017 BET Awards in Los Angeles.







## Rolex at Auction



With Rolexes typically getting snapped up straight off the production line, actually owning one can prove a challenge as there are often long waiting lists. This is perhaps why there is a bustling secondary market, with pre-owned dealers serving up a wide selection of vintage and nearly new timepieces.

The most exceptional examples of Rolexes can be found racking up the bids at auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christie's. This is where the very rare, and therefore incredibly expensive, models will be sold to a global audience.

The highest price ever paid for a Rolex at auction was reached in 2017, and it has yet to be beaten. The model in question was a 1968 Paul Newman Rolex Oyster Cosmograph Daytona Ref. 6239 that was owned by the actor Paul Newman. It had been gifted to him by his wife, Joanne Newman, while he was acting in the film *Winning*.

The price? When the final hammer blow fell at Phillips auction house in New York, bidding stopped at \$17.75 million. This makes it the third-most expensive watch ever sold at auction. The top two slots are held by Patek Philippe for a Grandmaster Chime Ref. 6300A-010 that sold in 2019 for \$31 million at Christie's, and the 2014 sale of a 1932 Henry Graves Supercomplication for \$23.98 million at Sotheby's.

Another major auction moment for Rolex came the year after the sale of Paul Newman's watch, again at Phillips auction house. This time, bidders were vying for a super-rare 18-carat white gold Oyster Cosmograph Ref. 6265, nicknamed 'The Unicorn'. It was donated by legendary watch collector John Goldberger to raise funds for charity Children Action. The final hammer price was \$6.5 million.



OPPOSITE: Geoffroy Ader, former Sotheby's European head of watches, holds a 1972 'Paul Newman' Cosmograph Daytona.

ABOVE: A rare 1972 British Royal Navy-issued Submariner Ref. 5513, sold at Bonhams in 2019.



## Holy Grails

Rolexes tend to be a good investment, but what sets a watch apart to make it highly collectible, and therefore likely to go up in value? The answer is rarity or provenance. Watch collectors are constantly in search of the unusual, and demand sets prices.

This extends to weird and wonderful examples, not just the best Rolexes. The so-called Tropical dials of the 1950s and 1960s are proof of this. Exposure to UV light caused the black dials to turn brown, which should have rendered them faulty, but for watch collectors hunting for Rolexes nobody else has, they are appealing.

The same goes for discontinued lines and early editions, such as the Submariner Ref. 6204 with its lack of crown guards. Or just incredibly limited lines like the Split-Seconds Chronograph Ref. 4113 of which only 12 were made in 1942.



LEFT: A GMT with Dubai ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum's signature on the dial, sold for \$162,000 at Christie's in 2018.

OPPOSITE: A gold and diamond Day-Date that belonged to Elvis was auctioned at Christie's in 2012.



Provenance – meaning who owned the watch – can also add some zeros the price. A good example is the 1972 GMT Master Ref. 1675 that Marlon Brando wore as Colonel Kurtz in the film *Apocalypse Now*, and into the case of which he hand-carved his name. The watch would have cost a couple of hundred dollars new, but when it came up for auction at Phillips in 2019, it sold for \$1.95 million.

Rolex fans have coined nicknames for many of the most coveted models and features. Particular GMT-Master II models with black and blue Cerachrom bezels are referred to as 'Batman', or 'Batgirl' if paired with a Jubilee bracelet. A Bart Simpson is a Submariner from the 1960s that has a gilt-printed coronet on the crown that some think looks like the cartoon character's hair. Bubbleback refers to the curved ovular caseback of Oyster Perpetuals made in the 1930s to 1950s. Dig into one of the many watch forums online and you'll find more.



RIGHT: The caseback of Elvis's watch auctioned at Christie's in 2012, engraved with a personal message from his manager Col. Tom Parker who gifted it to the signer. The relationship between the two men was documented in the 2022 Baz Luhrmann film *Elvis*.





## A Watchmaking Legend



The fact that Rolex still can't keep up with demand for its watches more than a century after its launch is testament to its strength. Collectors show little signs of falling out of love with the brand, making its watches both a status symbol for now and a solid investment for the future.

Rolex started its life as a disruptive innovator, creating never-before-seen complications and functions. It has cooled somewhat in recent decades, relying on updating its tried-and-tested roster of Oyster Perpetual spin offs, letting other brands charge ahead with more provocative horology.

What it has done instead is bolster its manufacturing capabilities through acquisition and investment. The look of

a new Day-Date might not be wildly different to a vintage model from the 1980s, but what has changed is that all its components, from the movement to the gold used to craft the bracelet, have been produced in house by Rolex. And this perfectionism is what appeals to true watch fans. While other manufacturers might offer up flashier, more exciting launches, Rolex is pleasingly steadfast.

You will now find Rolex watches stocked at more than 1,800 stores around the globe, the majority of which will have long waiting lists for the most coveted models. And for those who are yet to get to the top of those lists, there is a world of vintage Rolex watches just waiting to be discovered, with plenty of associated online forums connecting enthusiasts and sharing knowledge.

Discussing his ambitions for his watch brand, Hans Wilsdorf once said: "We want to be the first in the field, and Rolex should be seen as the one and only – the best." In the eyes of many watch fans, he has certainly succeeded.

OPPOSITE: A Rolex store in Dublin, Ireland.

RIGHT: A Rolex clock in Singapore, in front of a billboard for the brand.







LEFT: A Rolex sign on Nathan Road in Hong Kong, a famous shopping street in the Chinese city that is known as the 'Golden Mile'.





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RIGHT: The iconic Rolex crown motif on one of the brand's signature green watch boxes.





