



PAST MASTERS SECONDHAND BUT NOT SECOND BEST

swatches

The throwaway Swiss watch's bid for instant collectability is a story of precision design, says Sarah Murray.

What could be more outlandish than a collection of watches with coloured fur sprouting around the faces? And it's hardly practical. For as the collection's name – Puff – suggests, you have to gently blow the fur away from the watches before you can read the time. But then it's just this sort of wild experimentation, often mixed with a dash of humour, that has not only made Swatches highly desirable fashion accessories but has also created a community of collectors prepared to pay high prices for some of the more prized models.

It's a curious phenomenon – after all, it's not often that you see collectors fork out thousands of pounds for a piece of plastic. But that's the sort of money paid for a Kiki Picasso, a Swatch created in 1985 by French designer Christian Chapiro. At a Christie's Geneva sale in 1992, one of the unique designs fetched £11,604 and the 140-watch series is now one of the world's most prized.

Other models have made star appearances at the big auction houses. At the same sale, a Cardinal Puff (one of the six colours produced in editions of 20) went for £12,069, while a year earlier, the auction house sold an Oigol Oro, created by Italian neo-expressionist artist Mimmo Paladino, for £15,081. At a benefit auction at Sotheby's New York, held in 2001, pieces sold for more than £11,000, while the highest bid – £56,000 – was raised for the full Swatch Puff collection by a telephone bidder in Tokyo.

Helmut Newton achieved immediate Swatch collectability last year when his 1981 "California Finger Nails Hollywood" photograph was turned into a limited edition of 100 watches to raise money for a New York homeless charity. One sold for £7,240 in the auction for the charity.

And it's not just the watches that are of interest. Hardcore collectors pay big money for the packaging and straps as well as prototypes and dummies (watches without a mechanism inside). Real fanatics slaver over mint-condition, still-in-the-box examples and wouldn't dream of diminishing their value by wearing their finds. "All collectors are crazy – it's just that Swatch collectors are that bit more crazy than others," says Roberto Quadrini, an Italian collector with about 1,000 models currently in his possession.

Swatches have also taken their place in museums as examples of contemporary



From left to right: Vivienne Westwood's wrist action; Helmut Newton's nude hands; Keith Haring time.

watch-making.

But by the late 1970s, with sales threatened by cheap Japanese watches, two existing Swiss manufacturers and the Zurich-based engineer Nicolas Hayek, developed a watch with only 51 parts. By 1983 they had produced the first plastic Swatch, with the SMH company, headed by Hayek, taking over the brand in 1984.

Instead of a watch worn for life, the idea was that wearers could change models according to mood or outfit, and that styles would change with the seasons. "It's the Mini Cooper of watches – the sort of

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thing that's seen on the wrist of anyone from a multimillionaire to an eighth grader," says Thompson. "What they did was to take the ultimate haute couture piece – the Swiss timepiece – and bring the price right down; still claim reliability but start the range operating along the seasons of a fashion collection."

While Swatches are still mass produced and sold in city shops and airport booths, it's been the company's clever strategy of creating limited editions – only 140 models were ever produced of the first of the Art Specials, the Kiki Picasso – and one-season-only models that makes its watches instant collectors items.

A constant flurry of buying, selling and exchanging takes place directly between the serious collectors, who tend to know each other. And eBay is a key source for those trying to track down particular models. The company's own members-only club – Swatch The Club – helps foster much of the excitement, with a forum for collectors on its website, regular parties around the world, newsletters and special limited editions for club members. Some of the events to which collectors are invited are as offbeat as the watches themselves, from beach volley ball to snorkelling.

"They always organise provocative events," says Quadrini. "I have even been river rafting with the Swatch club people, which is

something I would never normally have done."

Some of the biggest collections began unintentionally. "It was Christmas 1989, and I

bought 13 Swatches to give away to friends," says Italian architect Fiorenzo Barindelli, who claims to own a copy of every single model produced and has even made it into the *International Guinness Book of Records*. "But I thought they were so beautiful, I decided to keep them." He not only kept them – he kept buying them. Barindelli has a collection that includes more than 5,000 pieces and is now on display in his World Museum in Cesano Maderno, near Milan.

And there are other collectors with even more watches, says Patrick Jaron, head of Swatch The Club. "I've seen some collections that are really amazing, with 7,000 or 8,000 watches – and with an

average price of \$70 each you can imagine the value of these collections."

But for aspiring Swatch collectors with more modest ambitions, and without the cash necessary for rarities such as Kiki Picasso, collectible Swatches regularly appear on eBay for between £100 and £1,000. And, of course, there's a chance you can pick up a future rarity at the airport – probably for less than the price of the taxi it took to get you there. ♦

Below: the deliberately impractical Puff; and the unique face of a Kiki Picasso.



SWATCH 46

WHERE TO BUY CHRISTIE'S GENEVA, 8 PLACE DE LA TACONNERIE, GENEVA, SWITZERLAND (004122-319 1766). EBAY: WWW.EBAY.COM. WHERE TO LOOK SWATCH: WWW.SWATCH.COM. SWATCH THE CLUB: WWW.SWATCH.COM/CLUB. WORLD MUSEUM, PALAZZO ARESE JACINI, 12 PIAZZA ARESE, CESANO MADERNO, ITALY (00390362-570 139; WWW.WORLDMUSEUM2000.COM). WHAT TO READ: SWATCH: A GUIDE FOR CONNOISSEURS AND COLLECTORS BY FRANK EDWARDS (FIREFLY BOOKS, 1998).