

# Progression of Wristwatch Styles: From Bracelet Watches to Smartwatches

## Part 1: 1800s to 1919 – Bracelet Watches, World War I, and the Birth of the Wristwatch

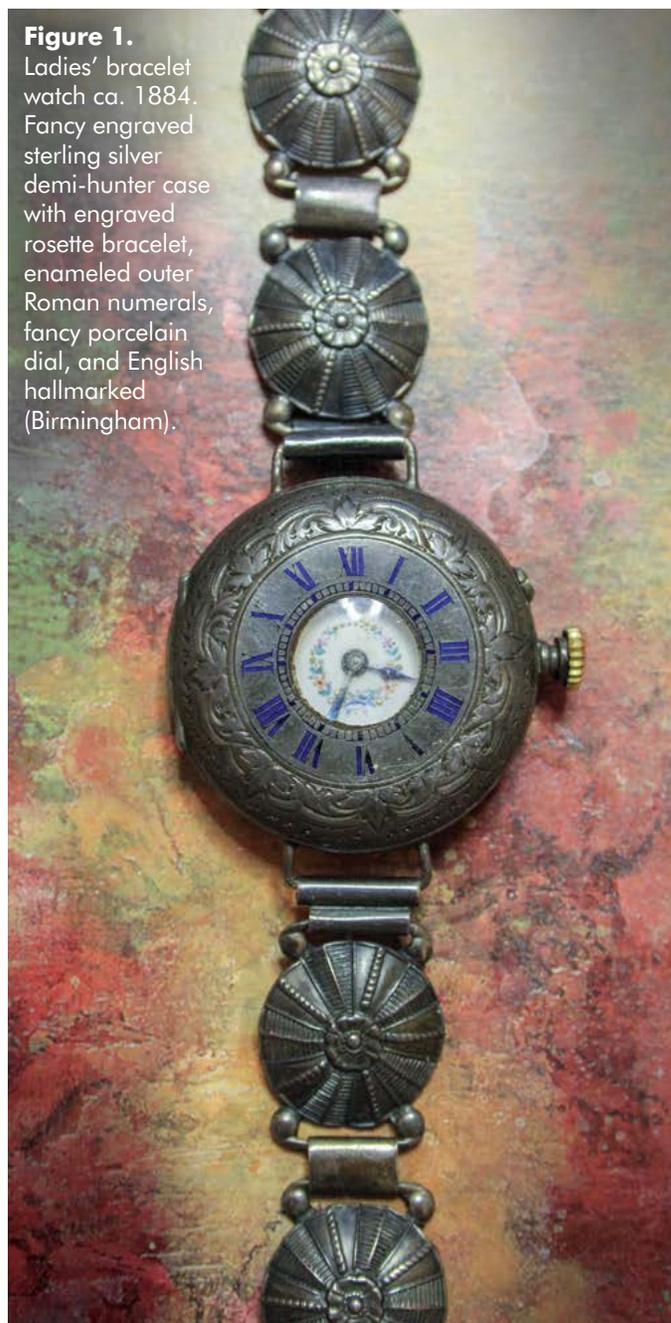
by Randy Jaye (FL)

*Author's note: Since the appearance of early commercially designed wrist-worn timepieces (starting with ladies' bracelet watches in the 1800s), many factors have influenced their styles such as wars, fads, art movements, technology, and economic conditions. This six-part feature explores the historical progression of many wristwatch styles and reviews many of the characteristics that have developed since the 1800s. Before World War I, watch manufacturers in countries including Switzerland, England, and the United States were producing wristwatches in small quantities for a limited customer base. Wristwatches gained worldwide mainstream popularity following World War I, and production quantities steadily increased until they surpassed pocket watch production in the early 1930s. With the proliferation of cell phone usage starting in the 1990s, wristwatch popularity seemed to be in decline. Since 2013, however, Smartwatch popularity has helped put wrist-worn timepieces, of various and unprecedented styles, back in the mainstream, offering stylish models that appeal to all ages.*

**W**ristwatches logically evolved from pocket watches and no one person is credited as the inventor of the wristwatch. History does not have an agreed-on account for the creation of the wristwatch. Following are three of the more plausible historical accounts that mention watches being worn on the wrist before the emergence of the contemporary wristwatch during the World War I (1914–18) era.

- In 1571, Elizabeth I of England received what was referred to as an “arm-watch” as a gift from Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester. This fashionable piece of jewelry had only one hand, and timing accuracy was obviously not its main purpose.

**Figure 1.**  
Ladies' bracelet watch ca. 1884. Fancy engraved sterling silver demi-hunter case with engraved rosette bracelet, enameled outer Roman numerals, fancy porcelain dial, and English hallmarked (Birmingham).



- In 1810, Abraham-Louis Breguet created “a watch that could be fit on the wrist” for Caroline Murat,<sup>1</sup> Queen of Naples. It was essentially a fashionable bracelet that housed a small and uncommon mechanical timepiece movement.
- In 1868, Patek Philippe designed a timepiece to be worn on the wrist for Countess Koscowicz of Hungary. This particular watch is recorded in the *Guinness Book of World Records*<sup>2</sup> as the “first wristwatch.” This claim can obviously be disputed based on many earlier accounts.

## Bracelet Watches

When watches were first worn on the wrist and available as a commercial item (mid-1800s to the early 1900s), they were predominately worn by women and sometimes referred to as “bracelet watches”<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1) because they were an extension of the bracelet. The styles for bracelet watches were more along the lines of fashionable pieces of jewelry; this included ornately engraved gold and silver cases and bracelets, some adorned with gemstones. Many historical accounts indicate that most people of the period thought that the bracelet watch would only be a passing fad because it was not seen as durable enough for everyday wear and tear. During this time, most men carried pocket watches as their timepieces and frowned upon ever wearing a bracelet watch, as bracelets in general were considered to be feminine. Additionally, small mechanical movements specifically made for bracelet watches were still scarce, fairly expensive, and not as accurate compared with pocket watch movements. A timepiece was considered a necessary investment and the pocket watch, being somewhat affordable and reliable, was the overwhelming choice for the majority of the mainstream market.

## Early Wristwatch Pioneers

News of soldiers (men) wearing wristwatches during the Second Boer War<sup>4</sup> (1899–1902) coupled with the development of new types of watch straps prompted various watch companies to start to design and produce wristwatches in limited numbers before and during World War I.

As proven during the Second Boer War, the wristwatch has an obvious advantage over the pocket watch as it is possible to read the time at a glance, without having to reach into a pocket to retrieve a



**Figure 2.** Omega’s first wristwatch (ca. 1900) was designed for military use and had the appearance of a small pocket watch. From Monochrome-watches.com. Accessed March 28, 2016. <https://monochrome-watches.com/watchtime-wednesday-history-of-omega-watches/>



**Figure 3.** An early Cartier Santos pilot’s wristwatch ca. 1910. From Monochrome-watches.com. Accessed March 6, 2016. <https://monochrome-watches.com/history-of-the-pilot-watch-part-i-cartier-santos-1904/>

timepiece. This advantage could be leveraged in more applications than just military operations. Subsequently, several early wristwatch pioneers risked their reputations and businesses on the premise that the wristwatch was the device for the “modern” timepiece. New concepts in technology and design before World War I were achieved, and wristwatches began to be marketed for men. Although many of the first wristwatches used pendant watch movements and had the styling of a pocket watch, different-shaped wristwatches started to be designed and taken seriously in the worldwide watch market.

In 1900, the Omega Watch Co. produced their first wristwatch (Figure 2) and it was used by British officers in the Second Boer War. These wristwatches withstood the test of battlefield use and military maneuvers and were considered an essential wartime instrument. They were available with the crown on the right for left wrist wearers and with the crown on the left for right wrist wearers. This feature is rare even in today’s vast watch industry with its multitude of available options.

In 1904, Louis Cartier<sup>5</sup> designed and built a pilot’s wristwatch (Figure 3) for his friend Alberto Santos-Dumont,<sup>6</sup> who was having problems checking the time during flight using a pocket watch. The style of this early wristwatch was dramatically different from round-cased traditional pocket watches of the time. It was easily accessible and fitted onto the wrist with a leather strap and secured with a buckle. This style

has withstood the test of time and is still in production today, more than 100 years after it was first designed. Cartier was a believer in the wristwatch as a practical commercial product, for both men and women, and he pioneered several other early wristwatches models of historical significance.

The Cartier Tonneau (Figure 4) was created in 1906 and featured a radically different barrel-shaped case and dial. This shape was innovative and a far cry from the traditional round designs. Tonneau-style wristwatches are still popular and produced today by many watch manufacturers.

The Cartier Tortue was created in 1912, inspired by the shape of a tortoise. It was another bold design that Cartier marketed successfully. It remains a popular style and is in production today.

The Cartier Tank (Figure 5) was created in 1917, introduced in 1918, and entered full production in 1919. It was inspired by the design of World War I military tanks. Its style has both square and rectangular features, and the strap was attached to the case using vertical sidebars referred to as brancards (today's models typically use spring bars to attach the strap to the case). A multitude of variations on the tank wristwatch have been released by Cartier and other watch manufactures since 1917. It is one of the most copied wristwatch styles of all time and remains popular in today's market.

Louis Cartier did not invent the wristwatch, but he surely paved the way for progressive wristwatch designs and was influential in the transition from pocket watches to wristwatches.

In 1909, Edmond Jaeger<sup>7</sup> invented the deployant buckle, which helped to affix a wristwatch to the wearer's wrist. The deployant buckle folds open and securely snaps shut, which proved more efficient than the traditional watch straps of the time.

Hans Wilsdorf<sup>8</sup> believed in the future and practicality of wristwatches. He concentrated on quality and precision during the development of his new Rolex wristwatches. In 1910, a Rolex watch became the world's first wristwatch to receive the Swiss Certificate of Chronometric Precision by the Official Watch Rating Center in Bienne, Switzerland. In 1914, a Rolex wristwatch was awarded the class "A" precision certificate from the Kew Observatory in Richmond, London, UK. This distinction helped legitimize the wristwatch as an accurate and dependable timekeeper.



**Figure 4.** Cartier Tonneau wristwatch ca. 1911. A radically different case style compared with traditional round pocket watches of its time. From ABlogToWatch.com. Accessed March 28, 2016. <https://monochrome-watches.com/watchtime-wednesday-history-of-omega-watches/>



**Figure 5.** Cartier Tank wristwatch ca. 1920. A square case style that resembles a World War I military tank. From ABlogToWatch.com. Accessed March 28, 2016. <https://monochrome-watches.com/watchtime-wednesday-history-of-omega-watches/>



**Figure 6.** Tissot heritage. This particular model is a newer release based on the ca. 1917 "Banana" original wristwatch. It features an art deco design with a long curved case. From AnyTimeWatches.com. Accessed March 28, 2016. <https://www.anytimewatches.com/en/tissot-history-more-than-a-century-of-precision.html>

A good example of an early radically designed wristwatch is the “Banana” model which was released in 1916 by the Tissot Watch Co. (Figure 6). It had an elongated and curved tank-style case with exploding (exaggerated) Arabic numerals on the dial. Its design was far removed from that of a traditional pocket watch and was surely influenced by art deco visual arts styling of the time. It was popular in Russia and one watch sent back to the Tissot factory in Le Locle, Switzerland, for service remains there. When the czar was overthrown in 1917, shipping anything to Russia was prohibited by law.

## Use of the Wristwatch during World War I

It is said that World War I was fought in the trenches. Because soldiers were wearing watches on their wrists that were built to withstand the thrashing of war (often fitted with what is popularly called shrapnel guards, which were actually a metal protective cover that acted as a crystal guard), the term “trench watch” (Figure 7) was coined. A common style for the dials on World War I wristwatches included a red numeral 12 to improve the orientation of the dial and the use

of radium on the hands and hour markers to increase brightness. Cases were also built to more robust standards to seal and protect against dust and moisture.

World War I proved the wristwatch to be a worthy and essential piece of military equipment. Because of the ease of use compared with a pocket watch, some soldiers provided their own wristwatch if one was not issued to them. The wristwatch was no longer a passing fad or a feminine piece of bracelet jewelry as it gained worldwide admiration and acceptance by proving itself a worthy and practical timepiece.

## Conversion Watches

After wristwatches started becoming popular with men, jewelers soldered wire lugs onto pocket watches (Figure 8) and pendant watches, removed the bow, and attached a strap through the wire lugs to enable the watch to be worn on the wrist (this technique is sometimes referred to as a “conversion watch”). As real wristwatch production increased using fixed lugs (which were often referred to as “horns” in the early years of wristwatch designs), the soldered-on wire lugs technique became obsolete.

**Figure 7.** Worcester World War I Swiss-made trench wristwatch (ca. 1917) with a snap-on crystal (shrapnel) guard fitted onto a contemporary period-correct broad leather military strap.



**Figure 8.** Waltham 12-size, 17-jewel pocket-watch-to-wristwatch conversion (ca. 1912). The bow has been removed and wire lugs soldered onto the outside of the case. A one-piece strap with locking buckle allows it to be worn on the wrist.



## Post-World War I Worldwide Acceptance of the Wristwatch

After World War I, the wristwatch became globally accepted as a masculine timepiece. Companies such as Waltham, Rolex, Cartier, Omega, Longines, and Elgin took notice, increased production of real wristwatches, and began to expand on the designs and styles for public sale. Not only were wristwatches useful in military applications, but modern commercial and societal requirements helped propel them to dominance as the reading of time quickly and in a single glance was now a necessity.

Men's wristwatch styles were quickly expanding beyond the traditional pocket watch designs as their sizes decreased and cases and dials took on various shapes. Innovations and technical inventions continued to increase the accuracy and durability of the wristwatch as it grew into the preferable timepiece for everyday wear. The wristwatch was now starting to challenge the pocket watch for worldwide timepiece dominance.

## Notes

1. Caroline Murat (1782–1839) was better known as Caroline Bonaparte and was the younger sister of Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon I of France). She became Queen of Naples in 1808.
2. The *Guinness Book of World Records* claims that Patek Philippe designed the first wristwatch in 1868. This information can be accessed online at: <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/first-wristwatch>.
3. Women's wrist-worn timepieces were referred to as "bracelet watches" as early as 1854 when the term appeared in the Munich Industrial Exposition catalog.
4. Second Boer War (1899–1902) is also known as the Second Anglo-Boer War and the South African War. Two independent Boer republics, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic, fought against British rule. The war was won by the British, and the two Boer republics were subsequently absorbed into the British Empire.

5. Louis Cartier (1875–1942) was a French watchmaker and businessman who created his own line of wristwatches and was instrumental in making the device popular worldwide.
6. Alberto Santos-Dumont (1873–1932) was a Brazilian aviation pioneer who designed, built, and piloted hot air balloons, dirigibles, and airplanes. He spent most of his adult life in France where he studied and experimented with aeronautical science.
7. Edmond Jaeger (1850–1922) was a French watchmaker, inventor, and designer who specialized in micro-engineering. He was co-founder of the high-end Jaeger-LeCoultre watch brand.
8. Hans Wilsdorf (1881–1960) was a pioneer in the wristwatch industry and founded the famous watch brands of Rolex and Tudor. In 1908, he created the Rolex brand name because it was easily pronounceable in many languages. During World War I he moved his business from England to Switzerland to avoid wartime tax increases on luxury imports.

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## About the Author

Randy Jaye has been the president of Chapter 154 in Daytona Beach, FL, for many years and was the General Chair for the 2016 and 2017 Florida Mid-Winter Regionals. He is a watch and clock collector and occasional restorer. He has contributed several articles to the *Watch & Clock Bulletin* and is planning on completing several more in the near future with a focus on wristwatches and "modern" horology. He also recently wrote and published *Flagler County, Florida: A Centennial History*.

## Museum of Time and RGM Watch Co. Celebrate 25 Years of Watchmaking

by Keith Lehman (PA)

Twenty-five years ago Roland Murphy founded RGM Watch Co. In September 2017 he celebrated this event by hosting an open house at his workshop in Mount Joy, PA, and by revealing his newest watches at the National Watch & Clock Museum in Columbia, PA. Murphy, a graduate of the Bowman Technical School in Lancaster, PA, and The Watchmakers of Switzerland Training and Educational Program (WOSTEP), conducted both well-attended events. RGM watch enthusiasts came from all over the country.



The watches that were unveiled were the Model 222-RR (Railroad) watch that features a restored Hamilton pocket watch movement, three Model 25 watches with different guilloché patterns and galvanic colors on their dials, and the 801SW-COE Corps of Engineers sweep seconds watch.

To read more about the event and the watches, go to [https://watchnews.nawcc.org/sept-18---sept-22.html#rgm\\_25](https://watchnews.nawcc.org/sept-18---sept-22.html#rgm_25).

Model 25. American-made case. Hand-cut guilloché (engine-turned) dial. PHOTO BY KEITH LEHMAN.