

DIAL Q FOR QUARTZ

Will QUARTZ —
the bedrock of almost
every WATCH BRAND
— relive its *Golden
Age* again?



The original Seiko Astron that sparked the quartz revolution in the 1980s.

Quartz is a much-maligned material in watchmaking. Because of the affordability of quartz watches, people watch buffs or otherwise don't talk about them in the same breath as their mechanical counterparts. In fact, many watch snobs perceive quartz watches to be inferior but any connoisseur worth his Patek Philippe will remember the pivotal role quartz played in the history of watchmaking.

In 1969, Seiko released the Astron, the world's first commercially viable quartz watch. The ensuing years saw Switzerland grapple in vain to best employ the mineral, while the Japanese conquered the market, producing cheap, reliable quartz watches.

Sales of these electronic industrial term for quartz pieces were phenomenal, which inadvertently caused the Swiss watch industry to

crumble in the 1980s. Then, Nicholas Hayek, the late Swatch chairman, was hired by a consortium of banks to liquidate the flagging industry. Instead in 1983, he launched fashion watch brand Swatch, which would later sell millions of quartz pieces to the world. That allowed him to reinvest the profits into *haute horlogerie* the shot in the arm that the high-end segment needed badly. And as Bernard Kaplan, publisher of watch blog *watch-happening.blogspot.com* puts it: "Ironically, it took a Swiss quartz watch to save the mechanical watch industry."

Forty years on, quartz watches still account for the bulk of Swiss watch exports. The majority of watches sold — if not of the value — are quartz. According to the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry statistics, sales figures for electronic watches have steadied between four and five billion Swiss francs throughout the last decade. Which is a feat despite the two crippling economic

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BERNARD KAPLAN, PUBLISHER OF WATCH BLOG WATCH-HAPPENING.BLOGSPOT.COM

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ALON BEN JOSEPH, CONTRIBUTOR TO WATCHFREAKS.WORDPRESS.COM AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER OF ACE JEWELERS.

at the cradle of the quartz revolution, honour the first watches with a re-edition,” says Alon Ben Joseph, contributor to watch blog watchfreaks.wordpress.com. “But [I] do not think we can speak of the heyday of the 1970s.”

That said, Ben Joseph, who also heads Ace Jewelers in The Netherlands, rules out the possibility of quartz being phased out soon. “Of course, a mechanical watch has more detailing, passion, and complexity,” he says. “But a quartz movement has advantages that a mechanical one does not have. I believe they can live next to each other like *yin* and *yang*; a true symbiosis. Who says one should own only one watch anyway?” ■



crises — the tech bubble bursting in 2000, and the fall of the American banking system last year.

Also, it indicates the constant demand for quartz timepieces worldwide. And the demand is not just limited to the mass-market brands. Quartz watches bring home the bacon even for big names like Rolex, Patek Philippe and Cartier. “No question about it!” Kaplan points out. “Patek Philippe, one of the most prestigious mechanical watch *manufactures*, probably makes its highest gross margins on the quartz-driven Twenty-4.”

This year, watch cognoscenti

see the re-issue of two quartz legends. To celebrate the 40th anniversary of the original Astron, Seiko released 200 pieces of the new Quartz Astron. Likewise, Girard-Perregaux launches a limited-edition Laureato, equipped with a new in-house movement, the GP13500. It has been developed with utmost attention to detail — something more commonly associated with mechanical movements.

With the launch of these high-end quartz pieces, one can't help but wonder if a return to those halcyon days is on the horizon. “It is great that these brands, which were



Clockwise from top: A horological classic, the smallest-sized Cartier Ballon Bleu de Cartier is powered by quartz; Seiko is one of the top purveyors of quartz technology even today; the Twenty-4 by Patek Philippe is also quartz-driven; an advertisement of the Girard-Perregaux Laureato circa 1970.