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EARLY ARTISTIC WATCHES

BY GEORGE FREDERICK KUNZ

Illustrated from photographs of watches in the Marfels collection, now in the possession of Tiffany & Co.

THE year 900 after Christ may be taken as about the time when clocks with wheel-works (the power being given by hanging weights) were first made.

All such clocks, however, had a permanent place, the most of them being tower-clocks. Later on, indeed, smaller clocks were made, which could be removed from place to place, but it was not until the beginning of the sixteenth century that an ingenious locksmith of Nuremberg constructed a portable watch, made entirely of iron. It was long supposed that the so-called "Nuremberg eggs" were of earlier date. It is true that pieces of jewelry in the form of an egg were made in Nuremberg some centuries before; but the egg-shaped cases which contained works for measuring time were not made until the middle of the sixteenth century, and they were then designated as "Nuremberg live eggs" (Figs. 1, 4, 5). The first portable watches were intended to be carried in the saddle-

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(Figs.
2, 3, 5,
2 I),

FIG. 1. AN ENGRAVED EGG-WATCH: SIXTEENTH CENTURY

and by degrees, as they were successively made smaller and less clumsy in external aspect, they were worn in the fob or hung about the neck. They were always thick in proportion to their breadth. Pocket-watches were first made and carried in Germany, then in England and France. In Shakespeare's time they must have been already common, for the melancholy Jaques tells the Duke that he met a fool, a motley fool, who

"drew a dial from his poke,
and thereby hangs a tale."

The object of the present paper is to give a short notice of some remarkable time-pieces which it was

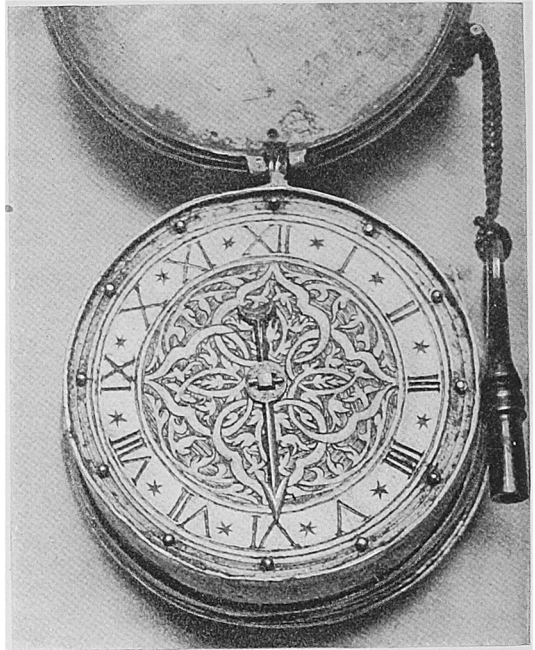


FIG. 2. THE OLDEST EXISTING WATCH: SIXTEENTH CENTURY



FIG. 3. AN EARLY SADDLE-WATCH. STYLE OF PETER FLÖTNER: SIXTEENTH CENTURY

not later than 1520. The works are entirely of iron. The back of the case and the cover, which are of bronze, and the dial, are beautifully ornamented with arabesques of ingenious design, cut into the surface and delicately chased. The dial is divided into twelve hours, but has no minute-marks on the spaces. Above the figure twelve there is a small thorn, and



FIG. 5. ENGRAVED DIAL: SIXTEENTH CENTURY

my privilege to examine in a Berlin private collection, one of the most important and the most complete of its kind in existence, and which has since been brought to New York.

It contains the first watch that was ever made, and one that is still in working order—an iron watch of Peter Henlein, now universally accepted as the inventor of the pocket-watch, who was a locksmith of Nuremberg, and was born in 1480. The present watch (Fig. 2) was made certainly



FIG. 4. AN EGG-WATCH: SIXTEENTH CENTURY

above each of the other figures a small knob, for convenience of feeling the time at night. The early watches had but one hand, the hour-hand, and the main-spring, of hardened iron, had no casing, but was merely confined by four pillars supporting the back plate.

Another piece of the same materials, of a little later date, shows the main-spring already in a casing. The balance is not yet in wheel form, but in the form of a small beam, with knobs at the end. The decorations of the rim are of the

richest Renaissance (Fig. 4). A watch of the year 1600, not more than an inch and a quarter in diameter, has the back of the case engraved with a scriptural subject, which is a masterpiece of art.

An egg-shaped watch of the sixteenth century has upon its face three dials touching each other at the rims like a clover-leaf (Fig. 5), and the remainder of the oval ornamented with the richest foliage intertwinings. This watch shows the hour, day of the week, and of the month, the signs of the zodiac, and the progress of the moon from day to day; and the back of the case is an exquisite example of the engraver's art. At that period, and indeed,



FIG. 7. A SMALL CHASED WATCH, WITH GOLD COATING À QUATRE COULEURS: EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



FIG. 6. AN ENGRAVED IRON WATCH: ABOUT 1630

almost up to the beginning of the present century, each watch was a work of art (Fig. 6), distinctive in its character.

Not only were painter and sculptor artists in those days, but every handicraftsman sought to give to the soul of his work a befitting body that should gladden the eye and refresh the senses at the same time it was performing its useful part. The smallest piece of jewelry had a distinctive design, thought out and worked by the mind and the hand, giving to each production their whole strength, their whole power, and their whole cunning; and both the mind and the hand were guided by love and reverence for art.

An oval watch of the sixteenth century, made at Grenoble, shows upon the back of the bronze case a spirited composition, "Queen Esther before Ahasuerus," in the finest style of chasing and engraving. The dial, of silver gilt, is much smaller than the entire contour of the face of the watch. This dial is surrounded by an exquisite chased design of birds and stags, and the figure of a man playing the viol, intertwined with light foliage. The inner parts—the bridge, the barrel, and the click—are minutely ornamented in the same rich style. This watch has an alarm attachment, and a sprightly little tinkling is heard at the hour set for its starting.



FIG. 8. GOLD-ENAMELED REPEATER SET WITH DIAMONDS: LOUIS XV

Although the first pocket-watches were large, thick, heavy, and bulky, we find never-

theless that soon after the invention became known, very small watches (Fig. 7) were made, and the sixteenth century furnishes a large number of most exquisitely ornamented watches not more than an inch or an inch and a quarter in diameter. These were still much thicker in proportion to their breadth than the watches of the present day. As the art advanced and the demand increased, more costly materials, of course, were made use of for the casings. Bronze and brass were succeeded by silver, which was often gilt, and then solid gold, and this latter was then

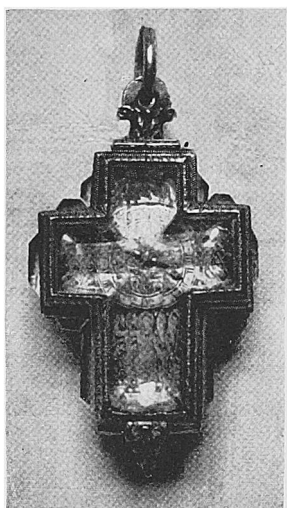


FIG. 9. A BISHOP'S CROSS-WATCH, ROCK-CRYSTAL: SIXTEENTH CENTURY

studded with jewels (Fig. 8). As curiosities, other materials were used for the cases. Agate and rock crystal were much liked; the latter was often used, especially for watches in the form of a cross (Fig. 9), which were given to high dignitaries of the church, and were worn upon the breast, suspended by a ribbon or chain around the neck. These crosses, which were rarely more than an inch broad and an inch and a half long, were made of a single piece of crystal, hollowed out with the greatest accuracy, and with the faces bevelled; and the transparent lid opened on a hinge of gold. The cross at all its angles and edges was framed in with a delicate band of gold, ribbed, or beaded, or foliated. The dial, not more than half an inch in diameter, was of silver, minutely engraved, within the circle inside of the figures, with a Scriptural subject, which can properly be seen only by the aid of a magnifying glass. The intervals surrounding the dial and extending to the four ends of the cross were of silver-gilt, also richly engraved with figures and emblems, the whole face of the cross forming a harmonious design, rich



FIG. 10. ENAMELED ON GOLD BY HUAT FRÈRES: SEVENTEENTH CENTURY



FIG. 11. ENAMELED ON GOLD: 1640

in tint, and to which the sharp, brilliant edges of the crystal gave a heightened lustre. One of these crosses—one of the finest specimens of its kind—shows upon its dial the annunciation of Christ to the shepherds; and surrounding this the resurrection and the emblems of crucifixion. It is the work of Antoine Arlaud, of about the year 1550. The casings of smaller watches of other forms, such as oval and octagonal (Fig. 20), were during the sixteenth century often made of crystal.

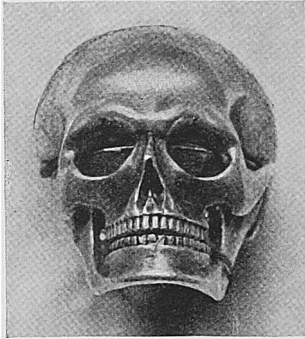


FIG. 13. A SILVER SKULL-WATCH:
ABOUT 1670

An egg-shaped watch of the sixteenth century, of silver fire-gilt, has upon its dial and the space surrounding the same an allegorical representation of the elements, earth, air, and water (it is singular that fire was omitted) in figures of the utmost grace and faultlessly drawn. The interlacing of the foliage is extremely rich, and the rim is engraved with attributes of the chase and of war. It is signed Denis Martinot, of Paris. Another rare piece is a silver watch signed Jean Vallier, of Lyons, and made about the year 1630. A bold design of flowers covering the back and reaching around the rim to the front is a masterpiece of skilful and patient workmanship. It is open-work, sawed out and chased with mar-

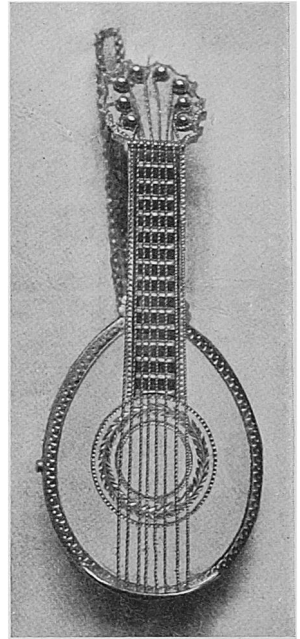


FIG. 14. A FRENCH GOLD MANDOLIN-WATCH:
FIRST EMPIRE



FIG. 12. A SILVER REPEATER, WITH CASE IN OPEN-WORK
AND PIQUÈ: EIGHTEENTH CENTURY



FIG. 15. A CASE PAINTED BY V. MARTIN: EIGHTEENTH
CENTURY



FIG. 16. AN EARLY ENGLISH WATCH

vellous care. The dial inside of the figures is a representation of a fortified, mediæval city, with its towers, walls, moat, and portcullis. It requires the aid of a powerful lens to discover with what fineness each minute object is portrayed.

From the time of Louis XIII. on, we find magnificent enamelled watches, each piece a work of art of the highest grade. One (Fig. 10) by Huat *frères*, has a beautiful picture of the Holy family. One by Le Baufre, of Paris, of about the year 1640, had paintings on the outside and the inside of the case and upon the dial, of subjects taken from the Trojan war.

The composition and drawing of the figures and the draperies are equal to that of the best French painters of the period. The coloring is brilliant and harmonious,

and the gradations of the flesh tints are of peculiar softness.

Another piece of about the same year, signed G. Camod, of Paris, and of equal value with the former, has for its subject scenes from the loves of Anthony and Cleopatra (Fig. 11).

Another has upon the back a picture of "Rebecca at the Well." This is one of the softest and richest pieces of enamel painting that I have ever seen. The coloring of the flesh is remarkable for its purity and correctness of shading, and is of a luminousness seldom found in such paintings. These enamels, which were at their best about the middle of the seventeenth century, were popular for a long period, extending to the time of the First Empire, when very fine specimens were still produced, though they had lost much of the broadness of handling and of conscientious composition of those of the earlier years. An English watch of Eardly Norton, of London, has a domestic scene—a mother and two children—which is rather stiff; and a small lady's watch of Betems, of Paris, also of the time of Napoleon, has a mythological subject—two female figures at an altar—which is quite conventional. The altar and the urn were great favorites at that time and were to be seen everywhere.



FIG. 17. CHASED SILVER: DIOGENES AND ALEXANDER: EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Besides pictures, there were enamels of a single color or of several tones, sometimes delicately shaded, or waved or clouded, or scaled or beaded (Fig. 12). The backs of many watches are in a set pattern of the most brilliant colors; and the more prominent lines of the design are often closely beaded with small pearls or other stones. The beginning of the present century brought many variations of form, which were designed to make the watch look as little like a watch as possible. They were expensive toys, but exquisite pieces of ornamental jewelry. They took the form of miniature guitars and mandolins (Fig. 14), lyres, drums, sea-shells, etc. The guitar, which was a favorite subject, is represented in the present collection by an exquisite piece made by Jacques La Pierre, of Vienna. It is

about two and a quarter inches long, and is a perfect model of the instrument, and elaborately ornamented in colored enamel. On opening it, the face of the watch is displayed. One watch, as early as 1670 (Fig. 13), was in the form of a skull. The eighteenth century brought a new style of decorative painting, the so-called Vernis-Martin, which gave more freedom to the artist in the handling of his medium, and the effects are like those of the finest miniature paintings. The subjects were mostly portrait heads, lacquered on gold. A watch of C. H. Hahnel, of London, has

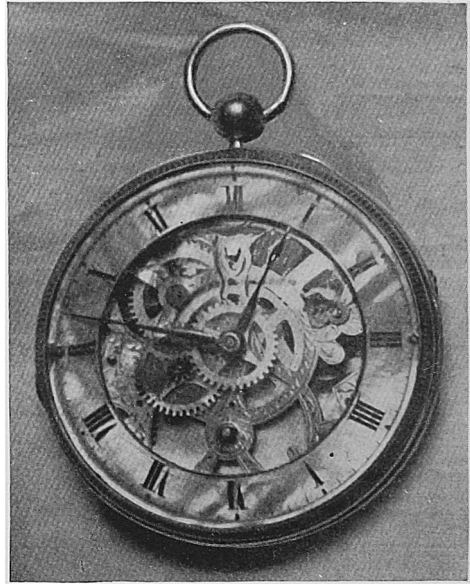


FIG. 18. MOTHER-OF-PEARL: FIRST EMPIRE

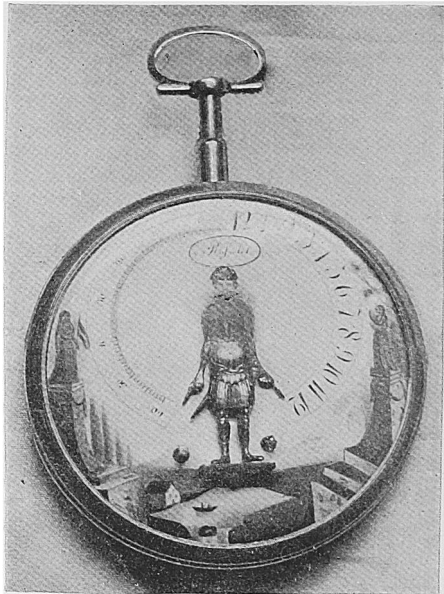


FIG. 19. GOLD, DECORATED WITH A MOVING ROMAN WARRIOR: FIRST EMPIRE

an outside removable case, which is embellished with the heads of Joseph II. of Austria and his family (Fig. 15). This is certainly one of the best specimens of its kind. The delicacy of touch, the freshness of the colors, the life-like expressions of the features extorts the admiration of every artist. The face is of white enamel without any ornament. The back, which is bulged, is of open-work of an intricate design.

Another French watch, of the First Empire, is wholly of mother-of-pearl in all its parts (Fig. 18), and this, as well as the wooden watch, are still in working order. Many watches of this period have porcelain cases painted with flowers, birds, and figures.

An English watch of the seventeenth century, the case of which is of pearl most elaborately inlaid with enamelled gold, showing flowers, fruits, figures, and emblems of the chase, was undoubtedly a royal present to



FIG. 20. AN OCTAGONAL EGG-WATCH: CHASED AND SAWED WORK: SIXTEENTH CENTURY

some favorite. Everything that the jeweler's art could accomplish was lavished upon its case. The face also is richly ornamented. The back of the case has a spirited representation of a stag-hunt. Toward the top is a small opening half an inch long and a quarter of an inch high. On touching a spring, two knights, with lance in rest, on richly caparisoned steeds, advance, retreat, and charge at each other at full speed. These figures are of gold enamelled. They are scarcely more than an eighth of an inch high, and yet man and horse, and every detail of their tournament armor is minutely portrayed. It can be imagined what a complicated mechanism is required to set these figures in such life-like motion. (Fig. 16.) The works are said to be of equal merit with the setting; and, as is the case with most old watches, all visible constructional parts are fully decorated.

Another (Fig. 17), of chased silver, represents Diogenes before Alexander.

Many were the curious devices resorted to to give variety of appearance and to make the watch something of a plaything besides performing its useful part. Besides repeaters, the first of which was built by Barlow, of London, 1676, and alarm-watches, which were of much earlier date, we have watches with music, watches with bells and gongs, and watches with all kinds of movable figures. One has a figure of a Roman soldier with his arms hanging down (Fig. 19). On touching a spring, he shows the time by raising his arms and pointing to the hours with his left hand and to the minute with his right forefinger. Another has a male and a female figure standing on either side of the dial, above which hang two little bells, upon which the woman strikes the quarters, and the man the full hours, with their hammers. On the face of an English watch of the time of the first Napoleon, is a painted landscape, a park scene, with a lady sitting near an arbor playing the guitar; a dog is at her feet. When set in motion, the lady twangs upon the strings, keeping time with her foot, and gently moves her head, while the dog wags his tail and appears to bark. At the same time a sprightly waltz is heard, almost as loud as that of an ordinary musical-box.



FIG. 21. A SADDLE-WATCH, WITH STRIKING PARTS: OPEN-
WORK: SEVENTEENTH CENTURY