

# Diamonds are a boy's best friend

Fashion has long embraced 'metrosexuality'. The Swiss are catching on, says Claire Adler

Diamonds have been edging their way on to men's watches with rapper-inspired pieces that scream high-octane bling. But a new breed of sophisticated, refined timepieces embraces the notion that gentlemen can wear diamonds too.

Anyone who keeps their eye on fashion advertising campaigns will agree that style distinctions between men and women have blurred. Sometimes, it's hard to tell whether the models are men or women.

We have been witnessing a certain feminisation of fashion. But more broadly, there has been a merging of gender identities, with men and women switching between each other's traditional roles with relative ease.

So perhaps it is no surprise that high-end watches also reveal this trend.

Women are wearing bulky watches, traditionally symbols of masculine success, while men are adopting that feminine bastion of style, diamonds. Many new gentlemen's dress watches have much less to do with bling than with good taste – for those who can actually pull off wearing them.

Historically, eastern markets have always showed an interest in diamond-clad men's watches. But more recently, American and European markets are waking up to the benefits of diamonds and at Baselworld this year, most brands showed bejewelled options for gentlemen.

Patek Philippe recently saw its entire UK allocation of diamond-set Gondolos and Calatravas snapped up within a month of arriving in store. UK managing director Mark Hearn expects growing demand in the UK for diamond-set complicated men's watches.

At Baselworld, Zenith introduced a stunning collection of limited edition handcrafted dress watches by the reassuringly masculine name of Black Tie.

Even those concerned about compromising their manly image may be persuaded to think differently once they have slipped on the Grande Chronomaster XXT Tourbillon El Primero – a watch three years in the making, encrusted with trapezium shaped diamonds and containing an El Primero chronograph, a tourbillon and a 55 hour power reserve.

Meanwhile, Zenith's Quantieme XXT Perpetuel El Primero with diamond-set bezel accurately indicates the hour, day, date, month and year for an entire century, no need for adjustment. If interest continues at the present rate, more gents diamond watches will be added in 2007, says Zenith UK brand director, Rebecca Edwards.

Harrods watch department even went so far as to commission an exclusive diamond-set version of the double retrograde watch by Maurice Lacroix. Three pieces were delivered late last year and were bought immediately.

While Vacheron Constantin insists haute horlogerie and complications are its core business, the Malte Chrono Jewellery in white gold, boasting baguettes on its bezel and brilliants on its 41.5mm case, is another show-stopping piece.

Indeed, the world record for a diamond-set watch at auction was achieved for a Vacheron Constantin in May 2005 at Christie's Hong Kong. The Vacheron Constantin King Kalla, set with 103.37 carats and 190 rectangular cut diamonds, fetched \$500,000.

In some cases it seems men's watches with diamonds are being favoured by women. "Setting watches with diamonds is an easy way for a manufacturer to attract a female client to an established masculine watch," says Watches of Switzerland's head buyer.

Geneva-based Aurel Bacs, co-head of Christie's watch department, reports increased interest in gentlemen's diamond watches, but points out the phenomenon is far from new.

"From the 1940s to the 1960s, many evening watches featured diamonds. By the 1980s, excessive diamonds on watches became a faux pas and were associated with the red light district, dubious car dealers and pseudo-oil sheikhs," he says.

"Then in the 1990s, hip-hop mogul and trendsetter P Diddy became an important customer of Swiss manufacturers, choosing complicated timepieces and littering them with diamonds to create bespoke versions.

"The publicity this engendered proved a blessing and a curse for some luxury brands. Excessive bling is still considered tacky but, recently, diamonds have crept back into the minds of western customers as a mark of good taste, if worn by the right person."

De Grisogono president Fawaz Gruosi confirms that the market is opening to a new audience. "Diamond timepieces that used to be bought by sports and showbiz people are for the first time being bought by businessmen," he says.

"In the past, the Middle East was a primary market. Now the new markets are, surprisingly, in Europe, the US and eastern Europe," he says. "The first diamond watches we brought out were unisex. Now, more and more men are wearing diamond timepieces."