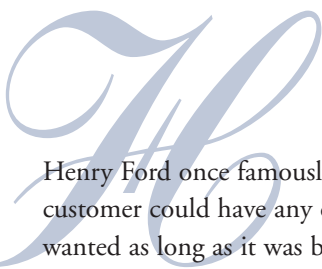


BLACK IN STYLE



The MB&F HM1—Black in white gold with black PVD coating and blackened tourbillon cage. Opposite from left—the Panerai Luminor Regatta Rattrapante 44mm in steel with DLC; Glashütte Original Senator Navigator perpetual calendar in black ceramic; Breguet Tradition Ref. 7027 in white gold with anthracite gray alloy movement and black electroplated 18 karat gold off-center dial.



Henry Ford once famously proclaimed that any customer could have any color model T they wanted as long as it was black. If there were a Henry Ford of the watch world today, he might be saying much the same about watch cases. Black has become the color of choice for brands across the spectrum, whether they are looking to reinvent themselves as contemporary marvels or stay in front of the competition in an ever-evolving high-tech materials race.

Instead of customers having black shoved down their throats—as they did for a dozen years with the model T—they are driving the demand for it, and the industry has responded in a major way. Even the grandest names of horology, which have traditionally stayed within narrow design lines, have begun offering a ride to the dark side with sometimes radical design departures.

Black's popular rise in modern watchmaking has a lot to do with the cutting-edge materials now being used in case construction, including tungsten carbide, ceramic, carbon fiber and diamond-like carbon (DLC) coating. These materials often resemble hues of dark gray or black, so their use falls perfectly in line with the dark angle the watch industry is embracing. Ceramic has been showing up in many a watch brand's arsenal because it is durable, nearly 30 percent lighter than stainless steel and virtually impossible to scratch. It is also water- and fade-resistant and hypoallergenic, so it won't cause skin irritation for its wearer. Ceramic ball bearings and rotors are also being used because they are much more resistant to wear and don't require the lubrication that

traditional parts do. Tungsten carbide shares many of the same properties as ceramic and commonly takes the form of bezels, rotors, bridges and clasps. Carbon fiber is tough, lightweight and increasingly found in dials and cases. It is usually bonded with a polymer for improved strength and durability.

DLC is a type of PVD (physical vapor deposition) coating that is becoming more commonplace because of its increased scratch-resistance and pure black color, says Jack Alexyon, owner of International Watch Works (IWW) in Cary, NC. IWW has been offering PVD coatings to customers for approximately six years, and Alexyon says he has seen an increased demand for the treatment over the past year. "People like to customize and change the appearance of their watches. They like the tool look that black brings," he says, adding that Panerai, Rolex and Kobold are brands that commonly appear before him to be treated.

Despite the advantageous properties these materials offer, there is something more that has given rise to black's use in watchmaking. The color black is, much like time itself, eternal and even austere. Black is contemporary yet classic. It never goes out of style. Even the fickle fashion world likes to champion the latest trend as "the new black" as a way of stating that something has importance and staying power. And black, while remaining in the arena of mainstream culture, has enough edge, enough of a hint of menace, that it remains the ultimate outlaw color. There is a reason why movie villains rarely do their evil deeds while outfitted in pink.

A black watch is stealthy and even lends an



The Hublot Big Bang All Black in black ceramic; the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak End of Days limited edition in PVD-coated stainless steel.

air of mystery to its owner. The demure gentleman at the corner Starbucks, wearing a chunky black chronograph and sipping a double decaffeinated mint chocolate chip Frappuccino, may only be the dentist from down the street, *or* he may be a member of a special ops team who likes his coffee a certain way. How can we know for sure? Certainly, hundreds of thousands of consumers purchase dive watches with no intention of ever diving with them or of ever diving, period. They simply like what the watch conveys to others—he’s adventurous, he’s sporty. Black watches suggest these things and more. The suggestion comes with an edge of something perhaps a bit sinister. Black fits a world conscious of war; a world where ’round-the-clock terror threat levels rise with every release of grainy videos from shadowy groups; a world where silent intelligence operations perpetually simmer and everyone is potentially a person of interest.

Octavio Garcia, creative director at 134-year-old Audemars Piguet, says black watches are now a staple in the manufacturer’s offering. “Black is appreciated because of its sturdy appearance and technical look,” he says. “The color black conveys both elegance and strength.”

In 1999, the firm launched a highly successful limited edition Royal Oak Offshore called the End of Days, named after the film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. The watch’s stainless steel case has a black PVD coating accompanied by a large black Kevlar strap. “This piece has a strong image not only because of its association with Arnold, but also because of its original looks,” says Garcia, who adds that black ceramic, blackened steel and blackened titanium have been very present in Audemars Piguet’s developments and collection, and points to the Survivor watch introduced in 2008. The Survivor blends a black ceramic bezel, blackened titanium case, blackened pushpiece guards, pushers and crown. “It’s an astonishing piece with a futuristic connotation,” he says. Audemars Piguet has also been using other exotic materials such as forged carbon, found in the Royal Oak Carbon Concept and the Alinghi Team Royal Oak Offshore. Forged carbon has been used in the aviation industry for large components, but Garcia says Audemars Piguet is the first company to adapt it to the diminutive dimensions required of watchmaking. Forged carbon is ultra-light and ultra-sturdy, and these technical qualities also offer the aesthetic appeal of a multitude of black shades that change under different



from top left—The Blancpain All Black Fifty Fathoms in steel with DLC; the Blancpain Super Trofeo Chronograph also in steel with DLC; the Hublot King Power All Black in microblasted black ceramic with PVD-coated titanium screws; and (above) the Jaquet Droz Quantième Perpétuel Céramique in black ceramic.

light conditions. And no two forged carbon watches look exactly the same, says Garcia, because of the way the material is crafted.

When the End of Days watch was released ten years ago, black watches were still largely considered to be within the domain of military culture, but they gradually spread into the sports niche in less expensive watches before exploding in numbers all the way to the top in some of the most sophisticated timepieces offered today.

One top company in particular has paralleled black's rise without coincidence. When Jean-Claude Biver came aboard Hublot in 2004, he said the company represented "fusion" more than anything else. After all, Hublot made its name by combining gold cases with rubber straps, and had built a loyal following in the 1980s. In more recent times though, the company had begun to sleep a bit, according to Biver, and was ready for a re-launch. This came in the form of the Big Bang, a watch whose primary concept was based on "sandwich" case construction that combined unusual materials such as ceramic, carbon fiber and tungsten. This exotic concoction of materials immediately associated Hublot with the all-black stealth aesthetic as well, especially after the company began setting its hour markers and hands in black so even the dial was cloaked in darkness. Hublot uses micro-blasted black ceramic on one of its latest models, the King Power Foudroyante All Black. The bezel reveals a new look owing to the original rubber molding around the ceramic. It shows off six raised, H-shaped, black PVD-coated titanium screws. The hands are coated in black nickel, and the HUB44 RTF caliber includes a tungsten carbide oscillating weight coated in black PVD. A rubber strap coupled with a black ceramic clasp completes the package. The All Black is limited to just 500 pieces.

Blancpain, another company Biver previously revived, recently shook off its traditional dress watch lineage with a new Fifty Fathoms All Black. The famous diver has been updated with a 45mm black DLC-coated steel case and scratch-proof black sapphire bezel. The darkened numerals and hands have applied black luminous material, giving the piece a certain netherworld appeal. The manufacture in Le Brassus is not stopping there though. The company recently announced the release of the Super Trofeo Flyback Chronograph, which pays homage to the world's fastest and most demanding automobile championship. The steel case is specifically inspired by the sleek profile of the Lamborghini Gallardo and is coated with DLC to give it an unmistakably powerful profile.

Girard-Perregaux has recently developed its own proprietary DLC coating, which it describes as a scratch-proof, high-temperature coating, offering near flawless color consistency. The Laureato USA 98 Flyback Chronograph is its first example, and it proudly displays the striking contrast between its red and blue dial accents and deep black titanium case.

IWW's Alexyon emphasizes that despite the recent boom in everything black, dark watches are not necessarily that new. "Black colored watches go back to the 1970s," he says, citing Heuer chronographs and IWC's Porsche Design watches that were made of black aluminum. The difference today, he says, is that the PVD coating process has become a lot more reliable with the advent of technology and experience. "Our PVD process is a DLC-like coating that is permanent. It

GLOSSARY: BLACK MATERIALS & FINISHES

Blackened—a term describing a finish created on metals, such as steel or titanium, by either a chemical process or by plating.

Carbon Fiber—a woven carbon filament material with a high strength-to-weight ratio, natural graphite color and decorative texture; sometimes used as a dial material in watches, carbon fiber can also be found in case and bracelet construction.

High-tech Ceramic—an engineered non-metallic material that is both extremely hard and lightweight; it can be produced in many colors and molded to almost any shape, making it ideal as a case and bracelet material.

Diamond-like Carbon (DLC)—a material composed mainly of hybridized carbon atoms and exhibiting some of the properties of natural diamond; DLC can be applied as a protective coating to a wide range of materials via vapor deposition.

Forged Carbon—carbon formed into various shapes under high heat and pressure, an extremely light and strong material.

Physical Vapor Deposition (PVD)—a form of vacuum deposition that applies a thin coating of a vaporized material to a surface by purely physical processes.

Tungsten Carbide—a chemical compound of tungsten and carbon, typically dark gray in color, used as a coating that enhances the hardness and scratch-resistance of metals such as stainless steel.

will not chip or flake off like it might have when the industry first introduced it,” he says. This is important to note, because while experimentation with new materials in the watchmaking industry is at an all-time high, there is little doubt that the big players would not be signed up if they felt the technology was unreliable.

Rado was the first brand to use scratch-resistant materials in 1962 when it introduced the DiaStar, then crafted in a titanium and tungsten carbide alloy. The brand has continued to push the envelope in this area, often introducing all-black watches with minimalist dials and off-the-charts scratch-resistance numbers. In 2007, it launched an entire line devoted to black ceramic chronographs, called Ceramica.

IWC is another pioneer of alternative materials and was one of the first brands that used ceramic in casemaking, debuting the ceramic Pilot's Chronograph in 1994. It has since continued to produce black watches, offering its Top Gun Chronograph series in a black ceramic case with a black nylon strap.

Zenith is another old-school name that has reinvented itself as perhaps the most avant-garde brand around. There has been plenty of discussion surrounding Zenith's trajectory, but there is

no denying that the materials this manufacture currently uses are nothing if not space age. The Defy Extreme collection comprises many darkened timepieces with bridges, balance and pallet cocks containing Zenithium, a proprietary, ultra-light and ultra-shock resistant alloy, which is a combination of titanium, hyper-density steel and niobium, exploited for its “form memory.” The brand describes Zenithium as indestructible, and uses it in watches like the Defy Extreme Power Reserve Elite, which has a micro-blasted black titanium case and a multi-layer dial made of carbon fiber and black-varnished aluminum.

And if rebirth is the name of the game, few come close to Concord. The brand was staid for years, approaching irrelevancy before being reborn as a torchbearer for case construction. The new Night Race Edition Worldtimer is presented in a 47mm black DLC-treated steel case that is made of a staggering 53 different elements.

If there remains any lingering doubt about black's arrival in watchmaking, it is not necessary to look any further than a brand that has built itself on its classic pedigree of clockmaking and elegant dress watches. Jaquet Droz is still a name to turn to if one is searching for an enamel dial or wanting a high complication, but now it can equally fill the bill of stealth sports watch. The Grande Seconde Céramique is made with a 44mm all-black ceramic case, enclosing a black enameled dial. The case is attached to an integrated black rubber strap with a black PVD-coated folding clasp.

It is clear why black is now found everywhere on watches: it is at once sophisticated, mysterious and enduring. If the watch world's big players were gathered around the roulette table, smoking cigars with Henry Ford, it is obvious where their money would lie. In fact, they have already doubled down. Black is back. Black is the new black. Long live black. The watch world has reached its conclusion and hedged its bet that black will be a winner for years to come. ❖

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The Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Carbon Concept tourbillon and chronograph in forged carbon with ceramic bezel, crown and pushers; the movement features a carbon mainplate and additional components with amorphous carbon coating or PVD coating.