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WHAT'S NEW IN THE WATCH INDUSTRY

Swiss watchmakers unveiled two revolutionary new electric watches and startling advances in mechanical timepieces at the recent Basle Watch Fair.

Some 160 watch manufacturers, representing three-quarters of the entire Swiss horological production, exhibited their finest models at the Fair. The Watch Fair — actually a “fair within a fair” — is a major part of the annual Swiss Industries Exposition. Each spring, watch buyers and technical experts from every continent come to Basle to place orders for the coming year and to keep up to date on the most recent trends in the science of horology.

Visitors were attracted by window displays this year that ranged from restrained, quietly classic exhibits of high-fashion watches in platinum and precious stones, to an eye-catching world of puppets or a window transformed into a small swimming pool to set off the watches' waterproof qualities.

But the focus this year was on the electric movement. The Swiss introduced two different types.

The first was presented by several manufacturers, all using the same basic movement. Its regulating piece is a balance-spring system, the oscillations of which are maintained by a miniscule electro-magnetic motor. A tiny accumulator provides power for from seven to nine months of operation before recharging is necessary.

The second model, called the Accutron, is the development of a single watch firm and is the invention of a Swiss physicist. The classic mainspring balance and escapement system — the concept on which all timepieces have been based for centuries — has been replaced by a transistor-powered, vibrating “turning fork”. The high regularity or frequency of the vibrations provides extreme accuracy in time-keeping and eliminates potentially troublesome parts.

Classical mechanical time-keeping, however, kept pace with progress and demonstrated certain advantages — for example, trouble-free self-winding and greater adaptability to varied case design — which the electric watches cannot yet claim.

Under-scoring the wide variety of stylings and performances offered only by the mechanical watch were such models as:

The flattest self-winding in the world, only 2.3 mm. thick. This watch — as thin as a watch strap — attracted a great deal of attention and reports from other makers of ultra-thin models indicated a strong trend among buyers towards these highly-styled models. “The public is looking more and more for quality,” a buyer from New York told one exhibitor, “and the public apparently realizes or senses that high-quality is a natural side-product of the painstaking, infinitesimal work that must go into making these very thin watches”.

Self-winding men's watches designed for the water sportsman: waterproof at 20 to 40 atmospheres. The popularity of these watches has risen with the growth in skin-diving, but they are now enjoying an even wider popu-

larity: wearers who never venture further than a bath tub have begun to appreciate their rugged, trouble-free qualities.

Parking-alarm watches. As more and more cities plague the motorist with parking meters and time zones, Swiss watchmakers have rushed to the aid of the driver with a watch that not only will tell time, but will buzz an alarm at any set time to warn him his parking time is nearly up. These watches pay for themselves just in the fines they save the wearer.

The illuminator: a wrist watch which not only sheds light at night on the dial, but also is perfect for finding keyholes, reading theatre programmes, or address plates in apartment houses. Press the button and a minute bulb floods light over the dial of the watch.

Time for to-day's traveller. Swiss watchmakers have come to the assistance of jet-age travellers with a double-dialled watch giving the time in any two time zones simultaneously. No longer is it necessary to compute time zone changes during a flight and reset a watch accordingly.

The makers of table and alarm clocks were no less inventive. There were several electric clocks with built-in weekly automatic winding systems. One alarm clock permitted adjustment of the duration of the alarm. This is ideal in cases where the clock must be placed out of reach of the sleeper.

One appealing novelty was a “globe clock” — giving universal time in an unusual manner. Tiny “windows” are located at major cities in the various time zones of the earth. In these “windows” appears the local time of each city. Two other electric clocks should be noted here: one was a perpetual calendar showing the phases of the moon; the second gave universal time.

An outstanding success in the more serious, technical field was a marine chronometer. The size of a cigar-box, this electronic marine chronometer measures only 20 by 15 centimetres. The traditional hairspring, balance and detent escapement have been replaced by a quartz. The chronometer is transistor-powered, thus eliminating the defects inherent in any conventional electrical contact system (power failure, fuse trouble, etc.). For the first time, an ingenious, tiny, electric motor permits the beating of the half-second, a precision necessary to meet the exacting demands of marine navigation.

Watch stylings ran rampant this year and there were models for every taste. Classical round and rectangular models retained their popularity lead but manufacturers also presented an imaginative range of asymmetrical models, dials in various colours, some without time figures or with the hands set off centre. Cocktail models, especially, tended towards the eccentric — the “conversation piece” effect.

Last — but never last in horology — was a stunning array of high-fashion watches, set in the world's most expensive metals and sparkling with rare and precious jewels.

Perhaps the stand-out piece in this line was a fine Swiss watch set in a diamond-studded bracelet with a breath-taking central stone of 5.61 carats. Its price: 195,000 Swiss francs (or roughly £16,000).

A spokesman for the watchmakers of Switzerland said that most manufacturers were encouraged by buyer reaction during the early days of the Fair.

"There appears to be a definite preference for the good quality product," he said. "Since buyers reflect

pretty accurately the wishes of the consumer, the coming year looks a promising one for the makers of Swiss quality watches."

Financial News

A new Swiss investment trust has been set up under the title "Energie-Valor" with the object of offering investors an opportunity, through the medium of the trust movement, to take an interest in industries which are connected with the development and distribution of the various forms of industrial power supply, the demand for which is rapidly increasing.

The trustees will be the Swiss Bank Corporation, Basle, and the Swiss Credit Bank, Zurich, and the trust will be administered by Société Internationale de Placements (SIP), Basle, thus adding to the series of trusts (Anglo-Valor, Europa-Valor, Ussec, Canasec, Swissvalor, Swissimmobil, Canada-Immobil) already operated by this group. The certificates, which will be in bearer form, will be issued at Swiss Frs.100.— from 15th to 26th May, the subsequent price being assessed, in the usual way, according to the value of the underlying securities of the trust.

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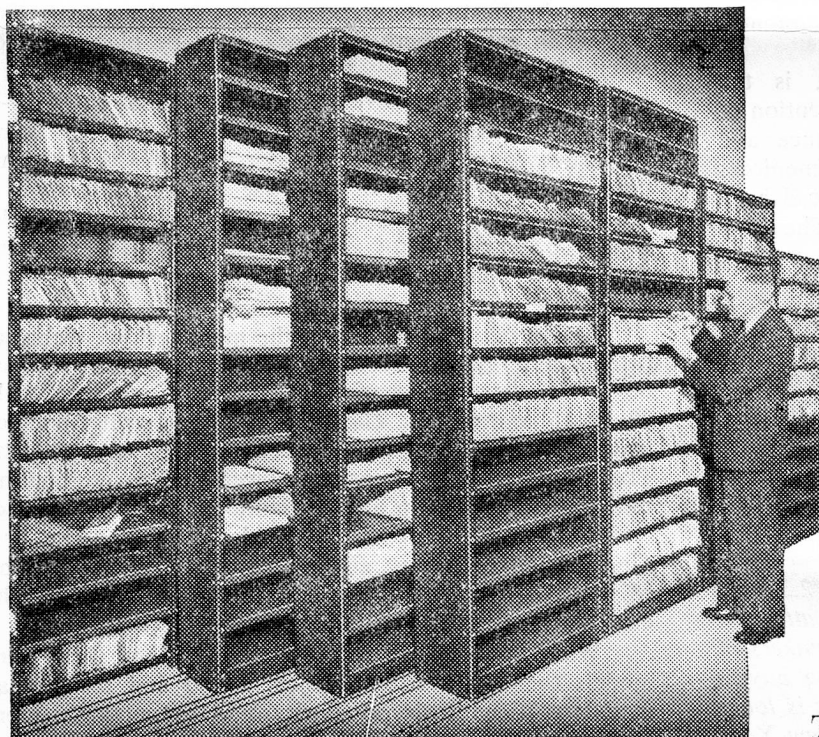


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