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DWELLS IN THE SKY

MEMENTO MORI:
CREepy TIMEKEEPERS-
THEN AND NOW.

BELL & ROSS’
SINGULAR CHRONOGRAPH

CALL OF THE WILD:
AMERICAN-MADE
MONTANA WATCHES

PILOT’S WATCHES IN
modern and classic
FORMATIONS
By Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle

Long before military forces worldwide turned the skull into a symbol of courage, self-sacrifice and intimidation, pirates the Jolly Roger, and bikers and rockers a tattooed charm for cheating death, the skull represented the inevitability of death and the contemplation of eternity.

Memento mori (Latin for “Remember you must die”), a genre of art whose role is to remind viewers of their own mortality, is an age-old Roman tradition. According to legend, the roots of this custom date back to Ancient Rome where victorious generals returning from war were reminded of their own mortality by whispering in their ear “memento mori”, that despite their victorious battles, they remained mortal. This idea found fertile ground with the expansion of Christianity due to its deeply symbolic meaning of salvation, the theme becoming extremely popular in European art starting from the Middle Ages.

Few symbols throughout history have been so closely connected with memento mori as clocks and watches, which mark the time until our ultimate demise. Time-pieces featuring skull motifs, an unusual form of watch case, where the time is typically read by opening the jaw, apparently first appeared in the late 16th century and were popular from the 17th to the 20th centuries, attracting interest from watchmakers from Switzerland, France, Germany and England. During the 17th century, especially, there was a trend for skull-shaped watches, perhaps revealing what was on people’s minds at the time.

Mason Kennedy, Elite Decorative Arts’ 18th & 19th-century decorative arts specialist, says, “The concept of life, death and time intertwine seamlessly, so naturally with the creation of time devices, the idea to add meaning to the item through inscriptions and designs had begun.

Forget the ghouls and goblins this Halloween. Go for the skull, a symbol of mortality that the watchmaking world has long appropriated in view of the close connection between the passage of time and the inevitability of death.

1. Part of the Sandberg Watch Collection, a circa 1650/1660 silver Memento Mori watch equipped with a movement by Marc Lagisse, which is housed in the Patek Philippe Museum
2. This Renaissance-style gilt verge watch, circa 1880, with engraved figure of Chronos inside, sold for $5,000 at Sotheby’s London in December 2010; CREDIT: Photo courtesy of Sotheby’s
3. Silver verge watch by J.C. Vuolf of Germany, circa 1660, from the British Museum’s collections; CREDIT: © The Trustees of the British Museum
Inscriptions appeared on clock faces, and designs depicting devils, beasts and skeletons adorned the cases of mantle clocks. Later, with the creation of the pocket watch in the 16th century, the ability to create and incorporate miniature “mori” themes also grew—as well as the number of people who now owned a personal timepiece. The watch became a statement of class and even downright fashionable when in public.

Horological consultant Richard Chadwick, Director of Antiquorum London, offers “With death ever present, often at an early age and amongst all classes during the Renaissance, the potency of the message of memento mori was particularly strong. The Renaissance was one of those periods in history when many great artists and craftsmen were working for rich patrons. Memento mori clocks and watches were part of this flowering of artistic and technical achievement. Such pieces would have been extremely expensive and patrons would have shown these timepieces to their friends as objects to impress and show their wealth and sophistication. During the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, clients would have been limited to royalty, the aristocracy generally and rich merchants.”

Stephen Bogoff, antiquarian horologist, concurs, “Early watches were extremely expensive and owned only by the very rich, which is why they were often included in their portraits.”

Numerous historical examples of Memento mori survive, perhaps the most famous of which is the Mary Queen of Scots skull watch in the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers’ collection, made of silver gilt and engraved with lines of poetry of Horace, figures of Death with his scythe and hourglass, Adam and Eve, and decorative cut-outs of scenes of the Crucifixion. The skull is held upside down and the jaw lifted to read the dial. The movement occupies the place of the brain and the hour is struck on a bell. It was rumored to have been commissioned by the queen herself, who gifted it to her lady-in-waiting Mary Seton. The truth is that it was made either in the late 18th or early 19th centuries as a romantic evocation of the past and had no connection with Mary Stuart, who was executed two centuries earlier, though 19th-century writers firmly believed that it had belonged to her.

A circa 1660 silver verge timepiece with four inscriptions surrounding the skull and a movement made by J.C. Vuolf of Germany was collected by Sir Charles Fellows and bequeathed to the British Museum in 1874, along with his almost 100-piece watch and clock collection. David Thompson, Curator of Horology at the British Museum, notes, “Skull-form watches seem to be part of a fashion in the mid-17th century when all manner of subjects were used as designs for watch cases: crosses, skulls, flowers, seashells, etc. The most likely situation would have been that there were case-makers in various places who made the skulls, then sold them on to different watchmakers who put their movements and dials in them.”

1. This 1930’s Swiss watch by Paul Ditisheim has “nosce te ipsum” (know thyself) carved on the back and is for sale through Bizarre Bazaar on 1stdibs.com

2. Elite Decorative Arts sells this sterling silver skull pocket watch; CREDIT: Photo courtesy of Elite Decorative Arts
Similarly, Elite Decorative Arts’ 18th- to early 19th-century sterling silver skull pocket watch, with a crossbones fastener having hinged ends for holding watch tools was likely made by a jeweler who contracted outside sources for the movement. Kennedy explains, “This watch was most likely owned by a dignitary or someone of importance, as it rivals examples found in museums and royal estates. Skull watches created for the common man were often crudely made. Though he was not the first to do it, this master craftsman created a very lifelike human skull that in itself represents death and, when opened, displays the time mindful of its original movement replaced with a 19th-century one by Benjamin Russell of Norwich. The hinged lower jaw discloses a gilt dial engraved with a border of bead and reel ornament enclosing realistic flowers outside and inside of the applied silver chapter ring. Paul Drusheims’ 1830’s silver pocket watch has the Latin “memento te ipsum” (know thyself) carved on the back, and another Swiss watchmaker, Jean Rousses, had also made skull-form timepieces.

Housed in the Patek Philippe Museum is a circa 1650/1660 silver Memento Mori watch featuring a movement by Marc Lagisse, known for making shaped timepieces. The Patek Philippe PR department in Geneva discloses, “Skulls weren’t rare between the 16th and 17th centuries. Thorium and movement are generally enclosed under the case. Care is most often made in silver — the metal of purity — ivory or bone. The shape of these watches is a reminder to people that they are mortal and that their vanity and activities or interests are only earthbound.”

A rather unique model is a circa 1810 pocket watch in enamel, gold and diamonds, which reveals its dial when the upper dome of the cranium is opened. The eyes and teeth of the skull are encrusted with diamonds, and at the bottom there is a small round opening through which one may observe the movement. Bogoff comments, “Most of these watches had a hinged jaw revealing the movement, and this design with the opening cranium glass sides, opening to expose a silver cham- pion dial. The Churckel relates, ‘It would not be a particularly good timekeeper, but this was not necessary at that period as time was not standardized; each local time was slightly different, being set by reading from a sundial.’ A Renaissance-style gilt verge watch, circa 1880, with movement by N. Hohlt and silver dial with engraved figure of Greek god Chronos representing time at the center, sold for $5,000 at Sotheby’s London in December 2010.

MODERN-DAY SKULL WATCHES
A symbol of life for some, for others the skull was a sign of man’s powerlessness in the face of death or even of fearlessness, nonconformity or freedom. And it is only the passage of time itself that links centuries of different interpretations. As time-keeping and mortality have always been connected and every second that passes can never be regained, you should live your life to the fullest and what better way to do so than with these skull timepieces.

Richard Mille’s skull in a limited edition of 21 pieces in titanium or white gold showcases a skull-form baseplate and bridges, which take the form of a skull. The upper and lower jaws hold the ruby of the tourbillon cage, while the back of the skull is the movement’s center bridge. The entire movement is connected to the case by four bridges that are inspired by crossbones. Thus the skull is both a clever design element and an integral part of the movement.

Richard Mille says, “A skull is handy for building a watch movement because it is fairly sizable and its shape can encompass all the wheels and movement parts without too much trouble. Skulls have been part of Western art for many centuries. They were often seen in still-life paintings, and were allegories for the passage of time. Later,
the symbolism shifted: pirates used them, later still they were taken up as a symbol of self-expression. Since my watches are true expressions of ‘making timepieces my own way’, it just perfectly fitted together. Finally, I wish to open very high watchmaking to art, design, lifestyle, architecture, and the RM 052 Skull, at the same time very technical and elegant, combines all these influences into a stunning watch.”

Hublot’s rebel-spirit black ceramic Skull Bang is perfect for the rock star in you, depicting a black stylized skull on the dial and a transparent skull outline on a black background through which the movement can be seen. It was specially developed by Hublot for its friend and long-term partner in Paris, Laurent Picciotto, founder of Chronopassion and among the first to demonstrate its rebel-spirit by opening its first boutique in the world in 2007 in Paris, where the RM 052 Skull, at the same time very technical and elegant, combines all these influences into a stunning watch.”

Launched in 2004, Corum’s historical Classical Vanitas limited-edition timepieces in gold with transparent casebacks feature dials depicting skulls adorned with handmade precious stone and marble marquetry, and skeleton hour and minute hands. Valérie Debély, Corum’s PR Manager, reveals, “More than a symbol of death, the watch is an instrument of measuring its form. This to me was very much like the mechanics of a watch movement.”

Krieger’s limited-edition Skeleton available in stainless steel, rose gold, white gold or PVD presents not only skull-themed designs but also skeletonized movements. Only four timepieces are manufactured per month, and the hand-carved, engraved open-worked movement depicts a skull as well as human bones in the shape of a “K” for Krieger.

A silver Memento Mori watch was created last year by Alsace-based Swiss watchmaker Daniel Strom, features hand-cast and hand-finished cases and comes in silver, gold, palladium or platinum. Skulls and vaults adorn the timepiece, which are even presented with skull-shaped buckles. Strom says, “Six years ago, I wanted to create a timepiece where the ‘big themes’ of our life would be more important than the movement itself. I wanted to create the case as a jewelry piece to make a sculpture of the theme. My inspiration was what I’ve found in churches and in pictures, vanity themes.”

She worked with independent watchmaker Peter Speake-Marin, who looked over her design, put her in contact with suppliers for each component – the laser-cutting and engraving of the dial, plating for the dial pieces, complicated mineral glass, case and caseback engraving – and assembled the timepiece. The dial is integrated into the movement and plays with layers of different shapes and finishes. She remarks, “The layering was important as a watch movement is made up of layers, so using this same language to construct the dial was key. Each individual part doesn’t obviously look like a skull, but when assembled, each piece plays a role in creating its form. This to me was very much like the mechanics of a watch movement.”

This Memento Mori watch was created last year by Fiona Krüger for her ECAL University of Arts and Design Lausanne thesis project; Credit: Photo ECAL/Damien Ropero
In tribute to US Airborne military paratroopers who constantly face death, Bell & Ross released two limited editions in “phantom black” last year – the BR01 Airborne II and BR01 Tourbillon Airborne – both sporting a seemingly-defiant skull-and-crossbones integrated into the square of the case and dagger- or sword-shaped hands on the dial. The BR01 Tourbillon Airborne incorporates four watchmaking complications – tourbillon, precision indicator, regulator and power-reserve display – thereby combining military symbolism and fine watchmaking.

Bell & Ross CEO, Carlos Rosillo, discloses, “Bell & Ross’ design is driven by function. Military units use tools to fly planes or drive tanks (like altimeters, etc.), but they also use symbols to drive courage and scare enemies. We were inspired by these symbols to create a model that is at the center of military myth and symbolism: the talisman watch. There is a connection between timepieces and the brevity of life because each second passing is approaching us to death. But to end on an optimistic note, at the same time, time is a relative concept that man has always wanted to punctuate with markers, and watches are those markers!”

Left: The Bell & Ross Airborne is a limited edition tourbillon with a regulateur type display. Airborne Center: Gothic, by Franck Muller applies the Memento Mori theme to the Cintree Curvex Case. Right: Toxic by Perrelet - death by diamonds.