

Press release
Bienne, September 2018

PERFECT TIME AHEAD

9.09 – 18.11.2018



L'astronaute Kathryn D. Sullivan, 41-G mission specialist, dans la navette Challenger, 6.10.1984

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PERFECT TIME AHEAD

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Perfect Time Ahead explores the commercial iconography that accompanied the development of watchmaking houses in the 20th century. The exhibition retraces a particular history of watchmaking, and sits at the crossroads of its techniques, advertising and trade, photography and graphic design.

In addition to the technical virtuosity of the photography of watches, the medium has produced a remarkable corpus of images that has accompanied the development of watchmaking houses and contributed to shaping their image. Here, The Photoforum proposes a critical and contemporary re-reading of this history, by presenting original historical advertisements, in conjunction with a site-specific re-staging of these iconographies.

Recurring themes run through the history of watch advertising. Firstly, the watch is a technical object, an indispensable tool for industry, whether it is a question of making trains run on time or winning a war. Advertising draws on these achievements to encourage potential customers to wear on their wrist the tools whose performance goes beyond the simple indication of time. Space conquest, aviation or ocean exploration - which associate watchmaking with human and technical prowess - are frequently represented in advertising. While developments in the watchmaking industry have often proved decisive for these fields, watch companies have in turn used their figures - NASA astronauts, Pan Am captains or field scientists - as spokesmen. In doing so, the ordinary man - it is suggested - might approximate such qualities, by possessing the same wristwatch.

Sport in all its disciplines - from classical dance to tennis, swimming and mountaineering - is also a major theme in these advertising campaigns. The masculine and feminine bodies highlighted in these campaigns are adorned with the same qualities as watches: perfection, precision, strength and resistance. Political power, and more generally the ruling classes also figure among the recurrent subjects, and watchmaking houses boast more or less openly, of the distinguished figures, influential politicians, stars and other prominent personalities they count among their customers.

Finally, some watch companies do not hesitate to weigh in on major debates such as gender equality, by using slogans such as "Equal pay, equal time". Environmental issues have also been a theme since the 1970s, gaining importance when the conquest of the oceans or airspace was gradually replaced with concern for their protection instead.

Curators: Clément Gicquel & Danaé Panchaud

Perfect Time Ahead fait partie de Zeitspuren, une collaboration du Photoforum Pasquart, du Centre d'art Pasquart et du NMB Nouveau Musée Bienne, articulée autour du temps et de la mesure de son passage

Zeitspuren is supported by OMEGA SA and the Fondation Vinetum



Themes of the exhibition

Perfect Time Ahead explores the commercial iconography that accompanied the development of watchmaking houses in the 20th century. The exhibition retraces a particular history of watchmaking, and sits at the crossroads of its techniques, advertising and trade, photography and graphic design.

The exhibition addresses some of the major themes that have marked the history of watch advertising in the 20th century. Beginning with a historical approach, it presents original material (with the exception of a few facsimiles) acquired by the Photoforum or on loan from museums and the archives of watchmaking houses. This history retraces our relationship to this object whose technical, social and symbolic functions have evolved over time and are reflected in advertising campaigns.

The second chapter of the exhibition offers a reinterpretation of these iconographies, which relate as much to political history and the history of techniques as to advertising imagery, highlighting certain prominent themes.

The watch and the technologies of a society in motion

At the beginning of the 20th century, the watch was presented in some advertisements as an outstanding technical object contributing to the significant technological progress of society and history. It offered trains and railways a new level of time accuracy. Many of the campaigns of this period were based on the prestige of wearing on one's wrist (or in one's pocket) a tool that contributed directly to the progress of society. Beyond its practical usefulness, the watch is thus adorned with a symbolic value that puts its owner in tune with a society in motion.

The patriot watch of the world wars

Watchmaking was associated with the world wars in several ways. The watch is first of all a tool directly used in combat, presented in advertising campaigns as the soldier's ally, allowing pilots to follow their route, for example, and more generally as a "vital bolt of the American defence wheel" (Hamilton advertisement, 1942). In these campaigns, watch companies also showcase their precision instruments used in weaponry. Some capitalise freely on patriotic sentiment and promote their relations - sometimes limited in reality - with the army. Buying their watch thus becomes a patriotic act, and a gifted watch strengthens the ties between the soldier and his - or her - family.

The watch and the conquest of air, sea and space

Air, sea and space exploration fascinated the public and led to campaigns that readily combined the technical abilities of watches with the glamour of adventure. The qualities of the watch echo those of the heroes of these missions, such as precision, endurance, or reliability. Watch companies were keen to highlight their contributions to these explorations, or sometimes simply their association with their leading figures. The perspective evolved with time, and the notion of conquest tends to shift over the century towards scientific research and environmental protection.

The watch and heroic bodies

The male body dominates many watchmaking campaigns. It is endowed - as in most advertising campaigns of all fields - with stereotyped and often exacerbated qualities of virility: power, aggressiveness, endurance, audacity, perfection, seduction - traits which of course echo the watch's own qualities, and which it will not fail to provide its future customers.

The women in some advertisements also adopt these traditionally virile qualities. While watch campaigns do not lack stereotypical representations of women, some of them present a different vision of women: sporty, audacious, powerful, wilful - and requiring a watch worthy of her lifestyle.

The watch as an object of status and power

The body in these campaigns is mainly, but not exclusively male. It is not only a young body meeting standardised beauty criteria, older bodies are also widely presented. They are generally those of powerful and prominent men and women: politicians, business leaders, media celebrities, former elite athletes or artists, for example. Their clothes, gestures and hands give clues to their social status. These advertisements thus encourage symbolic access to elitist circles through possession of the same watch. Some campaigns also play with images where situations and people are only just recognisable: being able to identify them flatters the reader by already giving him a form of symbolic belonging to this community.

The watch to the rescue of everyday life

A large proportion of magazine marketing campaigns rely on a mix of images and texts, which take a form relatively similar to that of the magazine's non-advertising content, and where the text provides details about the qualities of the watch or the accomplishments of the brand's spokespeople. Some advertisements put photography more directly at the centre, and this alone conveys a story underlining the importance of a reliable watch. Based on scenarios from everyday life, these highly narrative images make the watch the indispensable tool for an accomplished professional and sentimental life. While some of them remain in the realm of the plausible, other campaigns are willingly tinged with humour, even parody, or sometimes take on a frankly goofy dimension.

The watch in constant technical progress

The watch has undergone countless technical developments during the 20th century, some of which have been particularly highlighted in advertising. Water resistance, for example, is at the heart of many campaigns which inflict champagne baths, scalding temperatures, or diving with turtles on various watches. The arrival of electronic watches is also the subject of numerous campaigns promoting all the imaginable properties of these watches and inviting readers to join this modernisation movement (and to extend it to their wives, according to some particularly sexist examples).

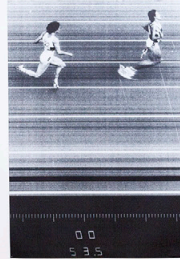
The watch in phase with its time

In an effort to forge a progressive image, some watchmaking houses do not hesitate to weigh in on the social issues and concerns of their times. Their campaigns have taken up themes such as gender equality and the environment, particularly since the 1970s, and of course presented the purchase of a watch as a demonstration of adherence to certain ideals.

Exhibition views



Four Colorful Versions of the Truth.



Power. Conquest. Record. Home.

Automation. Thinness. Unfailing Accuracy. Jaguar Focus. Flair of the Future.



Champagne-Proof.

We Cannot Mention their Names.



Others Use it for Timing a Walk on the Moon.



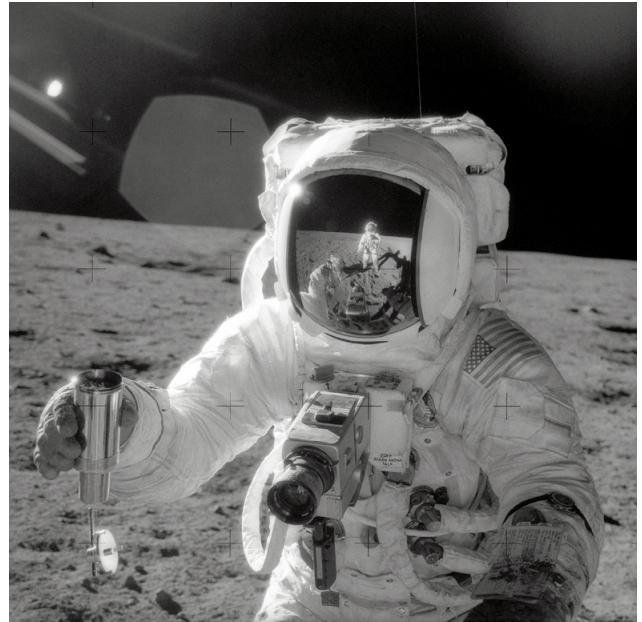
**Luminaries. Visionaries. Champions.
Men who Guide the Destinies of the World.**



Other visuals



L'astronaute Edwin E. Aldrin, Jr., lunar module pilot, during the lunar landing mission. Picture taken by Astronaut Neil A. Armstrong, commander, prior to the moon landing, 20.07.2018



Astronaut Alan L. Bean, Lunar Module pilot for the Apollo 12 lunar landing mission, holds a Special Environmental Sample Container filled with lunar soil, 20.11.1969



US Department of the Air Force, Elizabeth L. Remba Gardner; WASP (Women's Airforce Service Pilots), Harlingen Army Air Field, Texas, c. 1943



Alfred T. Palmer, Marine with the training gliders at Page Field, Parris Island, S.C., 1942

Useful information

Exhibitions	Perfecti Time Ahead
Public opening	Saturday 8 September 2018 from 17.00
Dates	9.09.-18.11.2018
Hours	Wednesday 12.00-18.00 Thursday 12.00 - 20.00 Friday 12.00-18.00 Saturday/Sunday 11.00-18.00 Monday/Tuesday closed
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