

CARTIER'S **Legendary** Timepieces

MYSTERY CLOCKS
DEBUTED A CENTURY AGO
— BUT LOYAL FANS ARE
STILL IN AWE



[ABOVE] Kellen Moss of Stephen Silver Fine Jewelry describes the allure of mystery clocks at an event held at Stephen Silver's newest boutique in the Rosewood Sand Hill. [RIGHT] The Dodge Clock: Art Deco Citrine, Ebonite, Diamond, and Enamel Mystery Clock by Maurice Couët for Cartier, Paris, circa 1920.

The times were ripe for every kind of extravagance. It was America's Gilded Age, glistening with optimism on the brink of the 20th century. The transformative era in United States history spawned new millionaires reveling in lavish excess thanks to an unprecedented economic growth. America's industrialists chased cultural refinement to match that of their wealthy European counterparts. Extraordinary works of architecture, decorative arts and jewelry emerged during that era to indulge the tastes of a self-made American aristocracy.



IT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE FRENCH

The maison de Cartier had been creating luxury goods from their atelier in France for Europe's royalty and titled nobility before coming to New York City in 1909. In no time affluent Americans embraced the sophisticated continental brand. Within three years, Cartier's star ascended to new heights with the debut of its first handmade mystery clock. The remarkable timepiece featured clear crystal faces with jewel encrusted hands that seemed to float mysteriously without any visible mechanism to make them function. Wealthy status conscious clients considered them as de rigueur for their lengthy European grand tours.

TROMPE L'OEIL TIMEPIECE

A forerunner to the *Pendule Mystérieuses*, or mystery clock was created by illusionist Houdin in the late 19th century and soon became Cartier's exclusive domain. The mechanism's secret lies within an ingeniously constructed clock face. Although its face appears to be solid, it is actually two expertly fitted pieces, sandwiched together with the clock hands in the center. The crystal disc faces of the clocks are powered by gears hidden in the frame while its mechanical movements are concealed within the base. The cost and complexity of their

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workmanship required up to a year of patient, intense labor before receiving the final application of sumptuous jeweled adornment.

FIRST FANS

Cartier's first mystery clock, the *Modèle A* produced in 1912 was snapped up by American financier J.P. Morgan. Other enthusiastic devotees nabbed the striking clocks as soon as Cartier turned them out. American industrialist Harold F. McCormick bought one for his opera singer wife Ganna Walksa, herself a notable Cartier patron. The Queen of Spain, Queen Mary, consort to King George V, and the Maharaja of Patiala treasured their mystery timepieces; some owned multiples.

WHY SO RARE

Stephen Silver, CEO Stephen Silver Fine Jewelry, has decades of experience in rare valuables including many Cartier mystery clocks he's examined over the years. His in-depth vantage point lends a unique perspective to understanding this type of clock. As with other luxury goods, he is able to separate the pricey from the rare. According to Silver, "These are true rarities. While several clocks were produced, it's difficult to say how many survived. Among the nuances that drive their value are extraordinary workmanship, a limited production, rare jewel embellishment, and the Cartier brand. In this case, price is a secondary issue for sure."

HAMMER TIME

The mesmeric effect of these horological wonders hooks even the most jaded. "Few objects capture the imagination like the Cartier mystery clock," reports top auction house Doyle New York who has sold these clocks. "With childlike amazement, the eye follows the hands as they float weightlessly, without a movement, dial or visible anchor. Truly sophisticated in its elegance, the Cartier mystery clock is as timeless as it is iconic." Doyle New York's April 2013 auction highlight was a rare Model A clock from the estate of Consuelo Vanderbilt Earl (1903-2011). A great-great-grand daughter of "The Commodore" Cornelius Vanderbilt, that lot achieved \$515,000, far above its pre-sale estimate of \$200,000-400,000. The final hammer price set a world auction record for a Model A Mystery clock.



[ABOVE] Original *Modèle A*
A crystal mystery clock;
Courtesy Doyle New York.

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IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES

These luxurious table clocks told more than time for their first owners. They also told about the times in which the collectors lived. By the 1920s, the clock's motifs reflected society's rabid preoccupation with all things Chinese, plus a chic interpretation of life during the Art Deco period. Although providing a window into the era of their production, they still resonate with the 21st century connoisseur. Their enduring style and consummate workmanship have made them the most valuable Cartier pieces of all time.

EXPERT EYE

The craftsmanship that defined Cartier as the dominant jeweler of the Art Deco era was palpable at an exhibit *Brilliant: Cartier of the 20th Century* at the Denver Art Museum that ran through mid-March 2015. DAM's Brilliant curator, Margaret Young-Sanchez, said, "Combining the mysterious mechanism with an incredibly ornate, colorful base is what makes these pieces so iconic for Cartier. I don't know that there is really any contemporary equivalent. Each piece is beautifully sculptural in and of itself, with the jeweled embellishments adding charm and novelty. The fascinating mechanism complements and justifies the over-the-top decoration."



WHAT PRICE RARITY?

In most situations, Silver says, "rarities like these mystery clocks at auction are poised to eclipse their previous price." And that happened at Sotheby's Geneva Magnificent Jewels and Noble Jewels auction held in November 2014. Global collectors were eagerly anticipating two special lots in that sale. First up was a Model A mystery clock produced in 1927. When the energetic bidding was all over, it had trumped its pre-sale estimate of \$250,000-\$450,000 US, selling for \$628,032 US thus creating a new world record for that particular model. The next lot offered up a sleek 1925 turquoise, onyx and diamond mystery clock which quickly earned \$877,169 US by the successful bidder.

HARD TO TOP

A century after the clocks were first produced, they still captivate collectors, says Brett O'Connor Senior Director- Senior Jewellery Specialist Europe, Sotheby's Geneva. "Their superb design and superior craftsmanship coupled with the avant garde mechanics make these rare clocks more desirable with each passing year. It is difficult to imagine that there will ever come a time when the level of creativity and craftsmanship combine to eclipse the examples which were created during the first half of the 20th century."

Keenly aware of their near-priceless potential, Cartier has begun buying back many of its own mystery clocks from owners or through auctions. Today the Cartier Collection now contains 17 different mystery clocks, including two Model A clocks, similar to the original creation of 1912.

"Astute collectors continue to appreciate these marvelous objects today, adding them to a carefully planned portfolio of tangible assets." Top-tier collectors, Silver points out, look for strategic value for the long horizon. "They are often managing their estate for their heirs, up to two generations." ■



[TOP] Chimera mystery clock, c.1926; gold, platinum, citrine, diamonds, nephrite, natural pearls, emerald, enamel, agate, coral, onyx; Photo Nils Hermann; Courtesy Cartier Collection®
[RIGHT] Rock crystal, enamel, onyx, turquoise, and diamond mystery clock, c.1925; Courtesy Sotheby's Geneva.

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