

OUR TIME

Egor Appolonov went to Singapore to see the biggest collection of Soviet watches and clocks in the World.

All kinds of rarities are kept in the house of Mark Gordon, an expert in international marketing. One of the rooms (the study) has been converted into a depository. Velvet boxes are stacked to the full height of the wall on shelves and in cabinets. There are about ten watches in each box. All of the watches are classified by theme, year of issue and factory.

Here you can see wrist-watches and pocket-watches, watches with inscriptions and watches set with jewels, mass produced watches and limited edition pieces. There is even chronometer from the Orbiting space station "MIR", which descended from orbit on 23 March 2001. Mr. Gordon bought it in an auction not long before the spaceship came down. Mark smiles: 'You can buy everything in Russia. It's a pity that I didn't have enough money, otherwise I would have bought the entire instrument panel.'

It's obvious that Mark is frankly upset about that might-have-been bargain. The price of the instrument panel was only \$2000. But the marketing expert was focused on collecting watches and clocks at that time and such an expenditure seemed unreasonable. 'I would surely buy it now. But those days are gone. Unique items at reasonable prices have settled into private collections a long time ago'.

All of this started from a Poljot chronograph made in 1999 by the First Moscow Watch Factory in commemoration of détente, which eased the cold war tensions of the 1970s. The case of the watch is made of titanium recycled from the hull of an SS-20 missile. Gordon came across the chronometer on Ebay and bought it without hesitation for \$200. Being impressed by the beauty of the watch, Mark Gordon realized that he wanted to collect Russian watches.

Over the last 10 years Mark Gordon has found and classified 1250 items. This is the most extensive collection of Russian watches and clocks in the World. My interlocutor knows everything about each example in his collection. Taking a deck watch in a wooden case from the shelf, the collector accurately remembered the year of issue – 1977 – and said that the clock is based on a Ulysse Nardin movement that was improved in the Soviet Union.

Essentially, our watch and clock history was born from the idea of the borrowing. Gordon calls Vladimir Lenin the father of Russian time. 'The leader of the proletariat clearly realized that "time" was a crucial ingredient in the recipe for success. That's why he urged the study of western watches and clocks and how to improve them.' – the collector says.

The First watch Factory came into existence when the Soviet's purchased the bankrupt Dueber-Hampden watch factory from America. Machine tools and uncompleted production were brought to Moscow. Changing the original design of the movements, Soviet engineers fiddled with the trophy for a long time. Gordon has many examples from that time. Every example is little piece of art.

And German watches were significantly modified too. After WWII whole factories from Glashutte, in Soviet sector, were moved to Moscow. Also some Swiss models were brought to Moscow. The best soviet intellects improved on them, laying the

emphasis on reliability and durability. In contrast to Switzerland, the Soviet Union considered reliability to be the most important feature of watches and clocks.

Not long before Yury Gagarin's space flight, the Soviet watch and clock industry made a significant breakthrough. All of the navigation systems in the space capsule were based on Soviet chronographs. And there was a "Sturmanskie" watch on Gagarin's wrist. Gordon has the same watch. And it is crowning glory of the collection. It's amazing but if you want one you can buy it for \$150 [true, you have to look for it]. "The pricing of soviet watches is a mysterious thing. Unique items are sometimes very inexpensive." – the collector is amazed and glad simultaneously.

But what attracted Gordon to Soviet watches in the first place? History. Reliability. Durability. All items in the collection of the marketing expert from Singapore are in working order. As proof of this statement, Gordon picks up the first watch that he comes across. It is a model that the First Moscow Watch Factory issued for the Olympic games of 1980. Mark winds the crown and as if by magic the second hand, which has slept for decades, rouses itself and begins its circular marathon. Mark said that it is not magic, but the peak of the watchmaker's art. And, he added with regret that that Russian masters could teach much to their Swiss colleagues.

Looking at the shelves crammed with watches and clocks, I call Gordon the 'keeper of time'. He smiles and says that what he really collects is history. Watches and clocks are an excellent way to know more about people and past ages. My interlocutor can't estimate the value of his collection. It's not a commercial secret. He just doesn't know the value. When he was asked the question, he became thoughtful for a long time and then made a gesture with his hands: "I've never thought about it. Maybe \$250 000 or maybe \$300 000." Anyway the estimate is not of great importance for Mark. He will never sell the collection. Time, he says, is priceless.

Captions

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Leon Trotsky, delivering a propaganda speech in Bukhara, is depicted on this clock.

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Mark Gordon has been collecting Soviet watches and clocks for 10 years.

Piece goods

A Poljot wristwatch, issued in a solid gold case by the First Moscow Watch Factory, is officially recognized as the thinnest watch produced in the Soviet Union. Moreover, the watch is one of the thinnest watches in the World

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[only one model of Audemars-Piguet is thinner than Poljot]: the thickness of the watch is only 1.85 mm. It is a very rare watch. It's impossible to buy this model. Only 100 pieces were issued [according to other information the quantity was less]. Mark Gordon considers that the watch in his collection is the only one of the batch that survived to our time. The head of "Poljot International", who recently visited the collector, has the same opinion. The entire collection is represented on the website www.ussertime.com .

Watches with engravings and commemorative inscriptions take special place among the collection. Gorgon says that by reading inscriptions you can get more information about past ages.

A Poljot chronograph, issued in 1999 in commemoration of détente of international tensions, was made from recycled hull of SS-20 missile. It is the first item in the collection.

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The thinnest watch ever produced in the Soviet Union. Only 100 pieces were issued. Only one watch of the batch has survived. It's in collection of Mark Gordon.

This model was issued in commemoration of the 1980 Olympic Games. The case is made of solid gold. Mark likes it very much.

Reserve chronometer for the orbiting space station "MIR". Gordon bought it on an internet-auction for \$200.

This watch was issued in 1967 for the expedition "North Pole -15".

This "Sturmanskie" has pride-of-place in the collection of Mark Gordon. The same watch was on the wrist of Yury Gagarin when he said 'Let's Go'. The price of such a watch is \$150.