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HAS MINIMALISM IN WATCH DESIGN GONE TOO FAR?

By A Collected Man

Much has been written about the over-the-top ornamentation or complexity usually associated with traditional watchmaking. A quick search of terms such as guilloché, anglage or Zaratsu polishing will prove just how closely watchmaking is linked to such adornment. However, for almost 100 years, there has existed a small subset of watch designers and brands that have opted for a more pared-back aesthetic. To some, this is the road to clarity of visual language, while others in recent times have taken to this philosophy almost in opposition to the established standards in watchmaking and the premium it places on decoration and complexity. The aesthetic is often dismissively referred to as minimalistic.

Anyone who is familiar with brands such as Nomos, Ressence, Ochs und Junior or H. Moser & Cie. will agree that clubbing these disparate design philosophies under the often-abused blanket term of 'minimalism' does the watchmakers a disservice. Then there is the term 'minimalism' itself. It probably goes without saying, as is the case with any such term that becomes a part of our everyday lexicon, it has become far removed from the 1960s' artistic movement it shares its name with. So what then is minimalism when it comes to watch design? Is it simply marked by an absence of design elements rather than the presence of key defining characteristics? Moreover, is there a line beyond which minimal design risks going too far? That is if we agree that the line, for the sake of this discussion, is performing the very basic functions of a watch by informing or engaging visually.

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The Nomos Tangente, Ochs und Junior Settimana Classic White and Ressence Type 1 Slim all represent very different visions of minimalist watch design, images courtesy of [Nomos](#) and [Ochs und Junior](#).

To answer this basic question, we must examine the schools of design most closely aligned to minimal watchmaking. By exploring the history of the aesthetic and by speaking with current practitioners, we aim to better understand this overused and under-appreciated term in modern watchmaking. For balance, we also speak with a founder of a watch brand that champions an aesthetic that is decidedly the opposite: maximal design, if you will. Instead of cataloguing every minimal watch design ever, we think it a more fruitful exercise to use watches that have defined the minimal aesthetic of an era, and to study the thought behind them.

DEFINING MINIMALISM

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design in watchmaking has very real meaning in the art world. “Today minimalism in design is a modern lifestyle buzzword. It is used to refer to any reduction of a thing to its essential structure,” says Todd Levin, a veteran art advisor whose collection includes pieces from independent makers such as Philippe Dufour and George Daniels.

While it is understandable why this became the case, it is not entirely clear when this practice started. What we can say for certain is that minimalism refers to a very specific era in the art world that started in the United States in the early 1960s. “It is based on simple geometric forms – mostly the square and rectangle,” says Levin. “The conceptual idea was that art should have its own reality, it shouldn’t imitate something else, like an image of a landscape, still life, or a portrait would. Minimalists wanted their objects, as they referred to them, to only be of their own reality and not reflect or refer to something else. Therefore, it serves no practical purpose. The whole purpose is to illustrate a conceptual idea.”



Frank Stella's Harran ii, with its use of overlapping geometric shapes and colours, is in many ways the quintessential minimalist work. Tony Smith's Cigarette is another example of the total originality of content and form that was core to minimalism, images courtesy of The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation and Public Delivery.

This alone makes the term minimalism ill-suited to anything to do with watchmaking. “Watches are not abstract art forms because, fundamentally, they are functional – they tell the time. Watches, unlike minimalist artwork, are supposed to refer to some other thing, namely, this abstract concept of time, and they’re supposed to mark that abstract time. So, minimalism in the fine art world and horology seem to be polar opposites in that sense,” Levin explains.

In fact, the aesthetic of the first minimalist watch designs was heavily inspired by a visual language born from the coming together of the world of craft and industry. The Deutscher Werkbund, founded in 1907 in Munich, was a think-tank that united artists, architects, and craftspeople with those who owned the means of large-scale production with a view to make Germany a powerhouse of design and manufacturing. The Werkbund still meets to this day.



The Staatliches Bauhaus building

This congress brought about a unique aesthetic marked by clean, standardised design, be it in the production of furniture or architectural materials. Ornamentation, unsuited to mechanical mass production, was eschewed. Among its many influences, The Werkbund is credited with inspiring Walter Gropius, a German-American architect, to set up the Staatliches Bauhaus school of design, art, and architecture in 1919. It aimed to codify and educate the next generation in this uniquely German design language.