

Watchmaking, the Old-Fashioned Way

Watchmaker Roger W. Smith looks to England's illustrious horological past for inspiration

From a workshop that used to be his home, British watchmaker **Roger W. Smith** and his team of six artisans hand-build exquisite wristwatches the old-fashioned way: Thick and meaty, they'll outlast your children's children without sacrificing elegance. With the exception of straps, crystals, main and balance springs, some jewels, and a few screws, everything is shaped, turned, polished, designed, and engineered by Smith—a serious but funny young Briton who holds tight to British watchmaking traditions with a terrier's tenacity.



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British watchmaker Roger W. Smith, at his workshop on the Isle of Man. Nearly every component of Smith's watches is hand-crafted by Smith and his small in-house team.

Many of the best Swiss houses today are exploring ultra-thin movements and modern materials, but Smith prefers classic designs and materials. He points to two centuries of British watchmaking to support his approach: three-quarter plates over individual bridges, gold and nickel over silicon, and a love for robust, three-dimensional architecture that he says makes for better longevity.

Smith produces just ten pieces a year, so to satisfy the current demand for his watches, he'll have to live forever. Christie's caught up with him recently to learn what the venerable watchmaker wears on his own wrist.

CHRISTIE'S: You make watches for a living, but what pieces do you own?

ROGER W. SMITH: One of them is an **Omega** chronograph made in 1967, which has a 321, a very sort of classic mechanism and it's just brilliant. The watch still keeps as good a time as when it was first made. I've serviced it and that's just down to good design, good strong parts. Not overly thin, just good design ethos, really, which is what I look for in a watch.

I have a couple of military watches—**Jaeger LeCoultre**, a Mark XI as it's called. As you can imagine, [it has] a military case and dial, but a brilliant mechanism inside. I have an **Omega**, which has this 30mm movement inside, center seconds, and it's just a brilliant movement.

I would like to buy some good English pocket watches at some point. I would go for a Smiths wristwatch to say that I had one of those—or two.

What do you wear on a daily basis?

(Laughing) I have [a **Rolux**] Explorer my wife bought me. I think it's about eight-years-old, with a black dial. They're brilliant watches, fantastic movements, tried and tested, with a good sort of scale to the mechanism. They're real work horses, one of the best modern mass-produced watches you can buy.

What other mass-produced watches are you interested in?

[Lange's] Datograph is a pretty handsome watch—good quality dials, good quality hands. They've got a bit of depth to them, the mechanisms. Lots of interest within those mechanisms; they stand out above everything else in my view.

If you were to buy any watch today—and price was no issue—which would you choose?

If it was a modern one, I think I'd go for a **Rolex** because I know that I'd be wearing that watch another thirty, forty years. You can wear them anywhere; I think they're pretty bulletproof sort of watches. For a vintage piece it'd have to be a nice chronometer pocket watch.

A pocket watch chronometer?

I think so. Not because I'd wear it...but because of the qualities of the casing and the dials and the hands—even the mechanism. When people like Dent and Arnold were making their watches, they were staggering pieces. They were making watches to a quality that you just can't find generally today.

This interview was conducted and drafted by Chris Greenberg.