

## **Accessory to the Time**

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The act of time keeping has a very simple objective. It is a tool every living being uses, to know where to be at a given point, when to be somewhere, when it is time to sleep or be awake, etc. The technology, art, and culture of time keeping may not be as simple. A time piece can be in the form of a gift that symbolizes a “rite of passage” into “manhood,” or, more specifically, the workforce. It can be a nonverbal, yet easily portrayed, representation of financial or social status. It can also be a collector’s hobby, putting the watches on display without use. In my case, the pocket watch that will be displayed in the Bard Graduate Center’s exhibit is a family heirloom. It holds a strong significance as a family heirloom that goes beyond monetary value. In addition to the sentimental value of my pocket watch to myself and my family, it is important to discover the cultural importance of the pocket watch and other keeping devices through an objective lens.

My pocket watch was given to me by my grandfather in 2012. It is an accessory that was given to him as a gift when he left Poland to permanently reside in the United States. It replaced a broken one he had received when he began working, which lasted through World War II and a short career in motor racing in Poland. The watch is gold in color, but it is fading. It has a button on the top that reveals the watch face when pressed in. Attached to that button is a ring that has a chain connected to it to attach to clothing to prevent losing it. The pocket watch is also much heavier than today’s wristwatches. Its function is simple, to tell time. The meaning behind it is more significant, it shows the transition from boy to man, a time in life when knowing the time becomes necessary. My grandfather gave it to me when I graduated from middle school. I do not know when he purchased the watch, but he said he received it before he married my grandmother. Obviously, pocket watches are not “in style” or practical so I did not use it in high school, but I’ve always held onto it. The following year he passed away and the pocket watch was even more meaningful to me as it was a constant

reminder of him. The love I have for this pocket watch has led to watches being a part of my everyday fashion.

Years later, my father became ill from stage 4 glioblastoma. In a pursuit of positivity and happiness as well as an effort to inspire my father to continue fighting, I created a tattoo design that incorporated the design of my grandfather's pocket watch with the time set on 2:05, or February 5<sup>th</sup>, the day my father was diagnosed. The tattoo has a cancer ribbon wrapped around the pocket watch, to show the control cancer has over time, as well as a Celtic cross, which is a particular design of the Catholic cross that signifies strength. The day I received the tattoo was the first time my dad received news that the tumor was shrinking, and he's continued the fight for almost 4 years.

Pocket watches were developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and was used commonly up to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mechanical engineering used springs that made it possible to create a time piece that did not require falling weights as a form of power. They were common among the working class in the eighteenth century, despite being expensive due to the materials that they're made of. They were important for tracking time, and many young men were gifted a pocket watch as a sign that they are entering a point of employment ("History of Pocket Watches" 2019).

I have estimated that the pocket watch I received from my grandfather was produced in the late 1950s-early 1960s. It was manufactured by a company called Colibri, which is still around today and continues to produce pocket watches. It is a quartz pocket watch, which is powered by an inner battery that sends electrical currents through a quartz crystal to provide power to the gears. Unlike a mechanical pocket watch, a quartz pocket watch does not require consistent winding to maintain the accuracy of time, making quartz power a better choice for someone that would need to use a watch every day (Styles 2008, 1-2).

Wrist watches are the most commonly used time keeping wearable accessory today, for both men and women. This wasn't always the case. When the wristwatch was designed and started to be produced, they were viewed as "feminine." They were petite, rendering them harder to view the time, making them more of a fashionable item, a

bracelet with a clock, opposed to the functionality of a pocket watch. This caused men to avoid the trend and continue using pocket watches until the early twentieth century (Clive 2014, 3). The mentality behind men wearing wristwatches suddenly changed as millions of men entered World War 1. This was in due part to wristwatches becoming an obligatory part of World War 1 soldiers' uniforms, making time keeping easily accessible (Friedman 2015, 1). The wristwatches worn during World War 1 was known as the trench watch. The trench watches were larger, similar to the watch face of a pocket watch, differing from the "feminine" version of the wristwatch. They were also different in its purpose, they were not considered fashionable like a woman's wristwatch, they were practical, freeing up the hand that would normally be used to check a pocket watch (Friedman 2015, 2-3). Furthermore, the fashionable changes of watches were not the only major change to time pieces and time keeping in the early twentieth century.

The time we keep today based on our location is a relatively new system, being developed in the beginning of the twentieth century during a time of technological advancements and a growing need for globalization. The zones were previously much more localized. For example, in 1875, the American Railways recognized 75 different local time zones across the nation (Beacock 2015, 3). This made it difficult to do things like keeping track of time for scheduling while transporting people and/or goods. As the industry of globalization grew, time reformers decided it was pertinent to get rid of the localized times and to create a universal system of 24 time zones that would be sprung forward or backward twice a year to preserve daylight. This was based off the ideas from Scottish-Canadian engineer Sandford Fleming, which was adopted by diplomats at the 1884 Prime Meridian Conference in Washington, D.C., where astronomers at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich would create this universal system (Beacock 2015, 5).

However, the global time reform was not viewed by everyone as a "helpful" act for the world. The Western intervention of abolishing local time zones resembled attempts to demolish local traditions of those outside of Western culture. Ian Beacock, journalist for *The Atlantic*, wrote "Time reform was modernity defined in Western terms, developed to suit the interests and assumptions of the world's wealthiest and most

powerful citizens. Synchronization made it easier for European elites to project their influence and sell their goods ... Around the world, local traditions and rhythms were erased in the name of progress (Beacock 2015, 7). For example, in Natal, a coastal South African province, the indigenous people were visited by missionaries who took away their right to mark time for themselves after they viewed the Zulu calendars as “wasteful and backwards” (Beacock 2015, 7). Despite being arguably the most unquestioned norm today, it is important to know how something as “simple” as time keeping has affected cultures throughout the world.

The time reform globalized time zones and technological improvements followed in the next 100 years. The ability to tell time is an easier, yet still important, action today. Pick up your phone, press the home or unlock button, and your digital clock that is synced up to the exact second of your location will display the time in a fraction of a second. Some phones will not even require the press of a button, just the action of raising it will display your time. Is your phone out of reach across the room? Not an issue, just ask Siri or Amazon’s Alexa while you continue folding your laundry or completing your assigned reading. This begs the question of why this technological advancement hasn’t led to the endangering of wristwatches similar to the way the use of pocket watches faded away during the rise of wristwatches? Well, the simple answer would be that the function of time keeping from a watch may have been replaced or improved upon, but the fashion statements they make cannot be replaced by cell phones and other smart devices... yet. In a society where cell phones and other smart devices are dominated by three or four different companies, a wristwatch can still individualize people in the fashion sense.

When you notice a watch on someone, some questions may arise, consciously or subconsciously. How much does that watch cost? What company makes it? Is this an appropriate time to be wearing that watch based on its value or size? Is it a good look for them or possibly myself? How does that watch make the wearer feel? How does it make ME feel? This action provides a person with a judgment of the watch

wearer. Financial status, cultural and social upbringing and if the person is fashionable or unfashionable. The simplistic action of time keeping has complicated representations.

When I began this project, I sat down with my grandfather's pocket watch and tried to identify physical and non-physical properties of it that I haven't before. The questions I mentioned above were what popped into my head during my analysis. I then answered the questions, maybe somehow giving some kind of grading to the watch based on both personal and objective reasoning. It is a family heirloom, containing stories, some that I know and some that I don't. It is not an expensive antique, yet it is my most valued time piece. Throughout my research process, I felt it was key to challenge some of my answers with a historical analysis of time keeping as we know it today as well as the aspects of the devices that we use for time keeping. Throughout the history of personal clock design, production and consumption, social norms, government (Western) interventions and financial obstacles have shaped the way we tell time. The evolution of our culture has, figuratively and literally, changed time.



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