

THE FIRST CUT IS THE DEEPEST



PHOTOGRAPHY: SIDNEY TEO.

The Cat Stevens song referred to above alludes to the pain the debutant lover experiences when romance goes awry. But what of the anguish that besets those of us embarking on a love affair with a brand new watch, only to scratch, ding or dent it during the blossoming, heady early days of the courtship?

by Nick Scott

Around the 12th century, a community of Japanese monks, priests and tea masters, who had precisely bugger all to do except seek firewood and enlightenment, became immersed in a philosophy known as *wabi sabi*. Arguably a treatment for OCD, centuries before the condition was identified, it held that embracing imperfection was the first step to *satori*, or enlightenment. “Flawed beauty” is how the concept is invariably explained in the type of hardback tome that people temporarily focused on self-improvement purchase in foreign gallery gift shops.

The concept goes back way beyond medieval Japan. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, in his meandering journals now referred to as *The Meditations*, expresses an existential engagement with the divots found atop a crusty loaf. “When bread is baked,” he observes, “some parts are split at the surface, and these... have a certain fashion contrary to the purpose of the baker’s art, are beautiful... and in a peculiar way excite a desire for eating.”

So does this blithe cordiality towards imperfection extend to the owners of brand new, achingly pricey timepieces? Astonishingly, it does. Interrogating selected members of my own circle – from style gurus to devoted watch aficionados – I was astounded at the number of them who greet the first ding, dent or scratch on a new watch with reactions that run the gamut from stoicism to celebration. “For me it’s similar to getting that first mark on a pair of box-fresh sneakers or the first ding in your aluminium Rimowa suitcase,” says *Mr Porter* editor Dan Rookwood. “The first mark is heart-breaking – but then, after a while, the watch develops a patina that tells the story of your ownership.”

ON THE MARK

Simon Crompton, the menswear journalist behind the *Permanent Style* website, agrees. “Everything precious is supposed to become more personal with age, from a beautiful attaché case to one’s own home,” he says. “It’s no different with a watch. Accept the little scratches that come with use as a signature, as a sign that the piece is yours and no one else’s.”

This idea of damage equating to narrative was prevalent in the responses of most whose opinions I sought – including *Revolution* contributing editor and adventurer Jason Heaton, who managed to inflict more than a ding on his Rolex Submariner last summer. “I was crewing on a sailboat in the gruelling Rolex Big Boat Series in San Francisco Bay,” he recalls. “During one race, I was jumping halyards when the bezel of my submariner snagged on a line and popped off. Miraculously, it was later found on deck by a crew-member and I snapped it back in place, though it now lacked the click spring. Rolex offered to repair it for me but I like it the way it is – it’s a reminder of a great adventure.”

Inexplicably, avid watch collector Al Quinnet also tells what to me is a harrowing tale of horological annihilation with breezy enchantment. “I have a Rolex Air-King Date that I wore for 20 years on site as a carpenter,” he says. “I was chopping off a cement joint on the front of a building when a coal chisel disintegrated on my glove when I hit it with a hammer. My watch fell three stories down, hitting scaffolding and tin roofs before finally coming to rest under a car. I ran down and picked it up – it had a big dent just below the crown and the glass was broken. It was also going backwards and making a horrible noise.” Two weeks later, he says, the watch came back from the repair shop “as good as new”.

“All the scratches and wear add to the unique story of the watch, immortalising moments in time,” agrees Geneva-based watch writer Keith W. Strandberg. “Early in my career, I purchased a Zenith Chronomaster Open as a reward for finishing a big project. On my first day with it, my eldest son banged it on the corner of my desk and put a scratch in the case. I was horrified, but then I applied my philosophy on motorcycle wear-and-tear to it...” Businessman and collector Ahmed Shahryar Rahman also packs the same casual insouciance: “With something like an Audemars Piguet Offshore or a Rolex Sub, damage gives character to the watch, as scuffs do with a pair of shoes,” he says – although he does concede that he prefers his dress watches to stay intact.

NOT UP TO SCRATCH

So why is it that I can't help reacting to any newly acquired watch blemish like a slug reacts to having salt poured over it? I could snort crushed Kalms for a week, meditate until my pulse is reduced to an imperceptible throb and have a serotonin pump fitted inside my skull, and still the first miniature scrape on a new timepiece would have me shaking my fist at the moon. (Oddly, I'm even more galled by what might be called the opposite of a scratch: one of those gratingly buffed blobs of shininess on the brushed surface of a Rolex Datejust, which a going over with a Scotch pad will only make worse.)

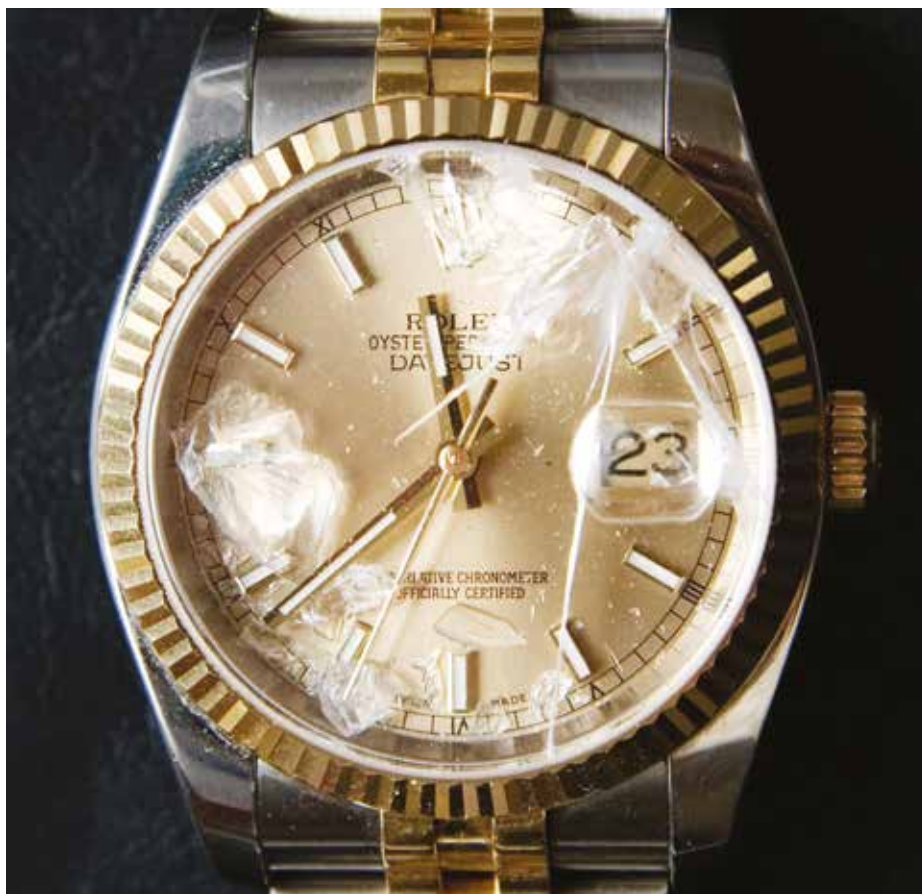
I want to be at the blasé end of the spectrum: I want, like Rookwood, Heaton *et al*, to see scratches on a timepiece as impressive battle scars from life's daily grind, as dignified and unavoidable as the crevices on Clint Eastwood's weathered forehead. I don't want to be like those bespectacled, fusspot classic car collectors who keep "garage queens".

Apart from anything else, as well as being undeniably effete, fearing the first scratch seems a tad prissy, like the anachronistic fetish for maidenhood that still persists in many cultures (perhaps, were the Qur'anic Paradise to be dreamed up in the modern world, it would feature 72 flawless perpetual calendars for devout arrivals?). I'm fearful that my horological amyphobia puts me in the same camp as the hordes of Apple Watch buyers complaining about how easily these tacky baubles can be scored by household objects when they should be dreaming of hurling them into the fires of Tolkien's Mount Doom.

It's not as if a lone scratch makes any functional difference to a watch – not like it does with a pair of sunglasses, for example – and besides, rough and rustic is riding the crest of the zeitgeist (when did you last see a rough-hewn hearth covered in plaster in any well-appointed home, or a perfectly quadrilateral sugar lump in a Shoreditch eatery?). But it seems I'm a hopeless case.

METER MADE

Perhaps my most recent first scratch incident stuck so doggedly in my craw because of how it happened. The damage was caused not by a scrape against the sun-bleached hull of a Sunseeker Predator 108 while skinny dipping in Monte Carlo, or during a



death-defying stunt which prevented a lorry full of orphan kittens from going over a precipice, but during an unseemly, Basil Fawlty/Austin 1100-style physical altercation with a stubborn parking meter. Undignified? Pitiful, arguably.

So what is one to do? One solution is scratch-proof products such as those by Bremont, who use hardening treatments to make the steel seven times more durable than your average stainless steel. Sapphire crystal is pretty hard to damage, too. A more outlandish – and expensive – approach would be to practise some kind of violent, hammer-and-tea towel cognitive therapy borrowing from Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive art movement. It worked for Pete Townshend, who regularly wrecked brand new Gibson Les Pauls and Fender Stratocasters on-stage between bouts of existential placidity at the hands of Indian spiritual master Meher Baba.

The strategy I'm going to opt for, though, is that suggested by the only person I cross-examined who shared my abject fear of "The First Cut", timepiece aficionado Mo Coppoletta – a man whose reaction to damage calls to mind Haitian Vodou. "Any new dent is like a painful, piercing stab in my side," he says. "A couple of days ago I got a minor ding on a polished bezel and now I have to go through what I call that period of purgatory – the mark is all I'll see for the next few weeks, until my system digests and accepts it. I like my watches pristine." His solution? "Buy as many watches as you can so that you wear each one very rarely," he says. "It's an excellent excuse to buy more timepieces."

Excuse me while I go and sell my kidneys on eBay. ★