

Who said that collecting fine writing instruments and complicated timepieces is merely an indulgent extravagance? For ENT/Head and Neck surgeon, Dr. Ralph Stanley, it is a form of therapy ... to relax and delve into a new dimension. Although appreciating the finesse and craftsmanship of a timepiece is a joy to him, the deepest pleasure in watch collecting is in the process of hunting down a rare timepiece, striking and negotiating a deal, and finally getting his hands on it.



Dr Ralph Stanley

What's the story behind your collection? My interest in photography and subsequently collecting Leica cameras started my 'acquisition syndrome.' My father-in-law who was a Leica enthusiast fuelled the 'acquisition syndrome' even further. In the early 90s, Montblanc launched Patron of the Art series, their annual limited edition series of writing instruments to honour famous individuals from the art and cultural fields. This drove my fervour for pen collection for about 7 years. Their first limited edition was the 'Lorenzo de Medici', which I still have in my possession - both as a pen inked and used, as well as a factory sealed piece ... It was fortunate that my collectable writing instruments rose in value but the flip side was that these writing instruments were just stored in boxes. I didn't have the chance to use the best pens because once they are dipped in ink, their value would be reduced. My enthusiasm for pen collection started to wane because of this and there was no more space in the cupboard to keep these pens ... So in 2000, I switched to watch collection, a collectable item which I could use and appreciate during my waking hours!

What was your first watch? An Omega Dynamic which my parents gave me after my 'O' levels. I used it throughout my surgical training days. I still have it in mint condition and it's still beautiful.

And your first fine writing instrument? I think it was a Caran d'Ache ballpen.

Is there a particular type of watch that you go for? I like modern watches and some vintage Rolexes. I'm a traditionalist and I am fond of watches with a classic look, something that will be in fashion today as it would be 50 years from now. I don't fancy the esoteric, independent watch makers that create pieces in bizarre futuristic designs or use different materials in cases and dials. Some of my favourite brands include Panerai, Patek Philippe and IWC. When I entered my late forties, I treated myself with my first Patek Philippe Complications, an Annual Calendar for \$20,000.

IWC Portofino Moonface



Bell and Ross PVD coated watch

What about your taste in fine writing instruments? I collect mainly fountain pens and a few ballpens. I used to collect Namiki pens for their artistic quality; they are hand-painted with the special Maki-e lacquering technique and gold dust by master craftsmen. But my main interest is in collecting the earlier series of Montblanc limited editions as well as the Parker 51, an all-time classic.

Where do you buy your watches from? Thanks to the internet, there's the whole global market to source from. I'm in touch with serious collectors from around the world. We share our experiences and trade timepieces with each other. Today, collectors are not limited by boundaries or the offerings of authorised dealers in one's locality.

Would you say that different occasions call for different watches? For office-wear, I prefer a classic and exquisite time piece. I wear my most treasured watch during consultation at work because it's under a controlled air-conditioned environment. My after-work watches are bigger, bolder and more fun. On weekends, I would wear something more fashionable with a cult status, for instance a Panerai or Bell and Ross.

How do you maintain your watches in mint condition? The only maintenance needed would be to send the watches for servicing when the lubricants in them dry up. But I do custom my long sleeve shirts with a wider cuff to prevent my watches from being scratched. Other than that, I'm careful not to drop or ding my watches. They are kept away from water as much as possible and occasionally, I use a micro fibre cloth to wipe the case clean. One has to be mindful entering lifts and opening doors and drawers, as these are the most vulnerable moments when one might accidentally knock the watch against a hard surface.

What's your idea of a perfect watch? It may be a silent and elegant dress watch or a Grand Complication with perpetual calendar and chronograph function. Most importantly, it should be from one of the top brands in the world, coupled with a classic look that represents the brand which has stood the test of time.

What's the price range of your watches? Weekend watches cost between \$5,000 to \$10,000. Simple dress watches may vary from \$10,000 to \$20,000. The complicated high-end versions will be in a higher price range. Buying a high-end collectable is expensive because demand is high while supply is limited. But you are assured of value appreciation because there will be a definite demand for it. The watch will smile at you, at the same time appreciate in value. How can you go wrong!

What's your most expensive buy? The 5970 Patek Philippe Grand Complications with a perpetual calendar and chronograph function.

And the next piece that you are eyeing is? The Patek Philippe 5004. It is currently way beyond my reach. The dream and thirst for it is pleasure on its own ... you do not have to own it physically!

Patek Philippe Grand Complication with a Retrograde Perpetual Calendar, Model 5050 in Rose Gold



Will you be saving up for it? No. Although the watches that I've bought over the years have been increasingly more expensive, I think I've reached my financial threshold for this high-end model.

Watch collecting is your passion, but how much of it is an investment? When I contemplate buying a watch in the \$5,000 to \$10,000 range, the decision to make the purchase lies in my heart. If I fancy it, I will go ahead and get it regardless of the resale value. However, for a watch that costs say \$50,000 and above, the decision will be governed by the head. My criteria for such purchases are very strict and disciplined - I must love the watch, its value must be preserved and appreciate with time. I will acquire it only if ALL these three conditions are met.

Do your friends and family often give you watches and fine writing instruments? I have advised them not to. Never give any collector something that he collects, unless he expresses his desire for a particular model.

Have you given a loved one a watch? Yes, of course, to my wife and daughter. However, I always make sure that she has tried it on prior. The unfortunate thing is to dislike a watch which is a gift. A watch is a very personal item and it reflects your personality.

Speaking of watches and time, if you could time-travel to another era, when would it be? The 1990s. That's the period when watches were much cheaper as demand was low, at the same time, modern watch making techniques ensured its quality control. Now, with the advent of internet, demand far exceeds supply and the prices of watches are more transparent, so it's difficult to get them at a bargain. Prices have gone through the roof! 📈



Patek Philippe Perpetual Calendar and Chronograph



Specially customised cuffs