

# THE TANK ROLLS ON



Cartier's Tank watch has undergone many design incarnations since it first appeared in the early years of the 20th century.

Nearly 100 years ago, Louis Cartier created a wristwatch that is still coveted as a style icon today. By Frances Chan.

Since jeweller Louis-François Cartier took over his master's workshop in 1847, Cartier has become one of the world's desirable brands. Louis-François' son Alfred inherited the business and, in turn, Alfred's sons Louis, Pierre and Jacques, established the name worldwide.

Louis Cartier (1875-1942) first made an impact in 1904 by designing a watch for Brazilian aviator Alberto Santos-Dumont. Instead of a pocket variety, the Santos watch was worn on the wrist so the pilot could check the time easily during flight.

The Cartier brothers knew wristwatches would become an essential accessory and dedicated the early 20th century to developing a streamlined design that incorporated the case, lugs and strap. Louis Cartier's breakthrough was a simultaneously square and rectangular shape, modelled on the top view of a tank: the case represented the cockpit and the side lugs the treads. Its crisp and strong lines appealed to both men and women – a fortuitous marketing tool – and production of six Tank Normale models began in 1919.

Several Tank models were launched over the decades, inspired by technology and fashion, and worn by the celebrities of the era. For example, the Tank Chinoise, first released in 1922, mimicked the interlocking lintels of Chinese temples in a square design. The Tank Louis Cartier of the same year introduced softened corners to the rectangle shape: a forerunner to Cartier's art deco period. This ultra-thin watch was only 4.75mm thick.

The Tank à Guichets of the late 1920s, modelled by Duke Ellington, had a face covered by a gold case, with only two small apertures revealing the hours and minutes. Gary Cooper owned a Tank Basculante; the case pivoted lengthwise so the glass could face downward for protection.

The rectangle form turned into a parallelogram in the Tank Asymétrique (1936), an ingenious design with 12 o'clock and 6 o'clock moving into the corners and the winding mechanism placed at 2 o'clock. The 1963 version was named the Tank Oblique.

In the 1960s the Tank Allongée and Mini Tank Louis Cartier were set with diamonds, for feminine appeal. The 70s saw the radical minimalist Tank Must de Cartier – a bright vermilion case with solid gold dials, devoid of numbers, and the winding crown topped with a sapphire. Andy Warhol was a big fan and amassed a collection of Tanks.

The Tank Américaine of the late 80s harked back to the Tank Cintrée of the 20s – a compact rectangle that curved to the wrist. It was the first Cartier watch with a curved water-resistant case and it had a new folding buckle so the strap could be precisely adjusted to the wrist size.

In contrast, the Tank Française, launched in 1996, had a square face set in a gold chain-link bracelet, its corrugated edges reminiscent of armoured tank treads. Not to forget the bling, its crown was decorated with a sapphire cabochon.

Cartier's ability to continually update its watch and jewellery collections shows market prowess, and the Tank range is no exception. In the pursuit to marry horological precision and elegance in distinctive designs, Cartier deserves its enduring success. ©