

# Just Hold Your Watch Next to the Screen

Horology fan clubs traditionally meet in pubs, bars and restaurants. But the coronavirus has forced them to adapt.

By Victoria Gomelsky

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Watch collectors are all about sensory details: the ticktock of a movement, the play of light on a dial, the feel of a strap on a wrist. For years, they have congregated in bars, pubs and private clubs around the world to admire one another's timepieces in convivial settings where it was easy to keep the conversation — and drinks — flowing.

Before the coronavirus forced everything from birthday parties to doctor's appointments into virtual sessions, many watch fans might have dismissed online get-togethers as rather pointless.

Yet organizers say that, in the current crisis, they have found a surprisingly receptive audience.

"People still need to feel connected," said Adam Craniotes, co-founder of RedBar Group, a global community of watch collectors that in April began scheduling Zoom events and weekly Instagram Live discussions. "For some people, this might be the only thing they're doing to reach out."

Every week, watch lovers who want to fall down the horological rabbit hole now can join virtual meetings, as observers or participants. Some have speakers and demonstrations, such as a live Zoom drawing session that RedBar held in late April with the London-based artist Lee Yuen-Rapati, a.k.a. @onehourwatch.



A Zoom drawing session that RedBar held in late April with the artist Lee Yuen-Rapati, a.k.a. @onehourwatch. Every day he draws a watch for one hour or less, a project he has been doing for years.

Other collector groups thrive on banter, with horological quips zinging among the grid of faces on a Zoom screen — like recent sessions of the Classic Watch Club, a by-referral-only group that, before the pandemic, met monthly at the Classic Car Club in Manhattan.

Henry Flores, the watch club's founder, serves as something of a master of ceremonies for the group's biweekly virtual events, which feature guest speakers such as the vintage dealer Eric Wind.

The May 20 Zoom session centered on a discussion of watch photography by two members, Skip Powell and Chris Barry. But about a week before, Mr. Flores had asked some expected attendees — including Gary Shteyngart, an author ("Little Failure"); the actor Fred Savage ("The Wonder Years"); and Jimmy Margulies, an editorial cartoonist — to answer the week's question: What is your favorite new release of 2020?

About a half-hour into the virtual gathering, Mr. Flores, who had prepared a PowerPoint presentation with photographs of each person's selection, clicked to a page featuring the new Grand Sport Tourbillon from the independent Swiss watchmaker Laurent Ferrier.

Morgan King, a vintage watch collector based in Southern California, began the commentary:

**Mr. King** What is this? It's got, like, an onion crown, the Panerai font, an A.P. [Audemars Piguet] look; it's got a little bit of everything. But the best thing about it is that it's a tourbillon. Look at the back — it's like a dashboard. It's ridiculous. And they only made 12 of them.

**Mr. Flores** \$178,000.

**Mr. King** Only!

**Mr. Margulies** When you get the second government stimulus check, you can afford it.

**Mr. Flores** I'm going to call Laurent and ask him if he takes layaway.

The meeting, which had begun at 5 p.m. Eastern time, ended around 2 a.m. — with about a dozen men still on the Zoom, Mr. Flores said the following day, acknowledging that he had a wicked hangover.

“My signature cocktail is the Penicillin: whisky, ginger syrup, which I make from scratch, lemon and honey, topped by a little peaty Scotch,” he said. “We always ask, ‘What are you drinking?’ It creates camaraderie and a sense of being around the same table.”

Mr. Flores is hardly the only one who likes to lubricate his watch talk with whisky.

In early April, LA Chrono, a year-old watch collector group based in Southern California, began its continuing series of Zoom events with “Watches, Wine, Whisky and Whatever Wednesday!”

“After a couple drinks, everyone loosened up a bit,” said Jarrod Cooper, the club founder and president of Project Solo, a high-end fashion brand that he began in his native Australia. “A lot of guys were nervous to begin with — they weren't in that kind of industry, doing conference calls. After everyone settled their nerves, it was a hit.”

By the time LA Chrono had a virtual meeting in early May — a Q. and A. session with Jason Lim, founder of Halios, a Vancouver-based boutique watch brand — members were comfortable enough with the format to show off their collections much like they do in real life.

“You know you're a true watch nerd if you change watches at least once during the course of this video call,” said Matthew Goodman, a.k.a. @PhillyTimeCo, as he brandished a tray of timepieces.

Watch enthusiasts who aren't keen on casual chitchat might enjoy the weekly Time 4A Pint virtual events organized from London by Chris Mann and Mat Craddock. The 60-minute Sunday talks, which are named after the watch-centric pub events that Mr. Mann began in 2016, are like “a four-way podcast conversation with viewers,” said Mr. Craddock, known as #watchnerd on social media.

On a recent episode, the pair spoke with the Finnish watchmaker Kari Voutilainen and James Thompson, the Canadian designer of the jewelry company Black Badger, about treasured timepieces in their collections.

Unlike many collector events, which involve brand presentations designed to entice people to buy, the Time 4A Pint virtual get-togethers intentionally avoid any hint of promotion.

“The point of these things is hanging out with collectors and talking about things we've spent money on,” Mr. Mann said.



Clockwise from top left: Kari Voutilainen, Chris Mann, James Thompson and Mat Craddock during a web meeting of the watch-centric Time 4A Pint in May.

Not all watch fans, however, feel that online events capture the spirit of a real party.

“We had a Zoom meeting hosted by Oris, where they released their Momotaro watch. I didn't think it worked that well,” said Daniel Sum, co-founder of the Shanghai Watch Gang, a prominent group of collectors in China and Southeast Asia. “You can't just invite random people. Some are too shy to talk.”

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Updated June 5, 2020

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So far, the evidence seems to show it does. A widely cited paper published in April suggests that people are most infectious about two days before the onset of coronavirus symptoms and estimated that 44 percent of new infections were a result of transmission from people who were not yet showing symptoms. Recently, a top expert at the

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Seeking to avoid such awkwardness, Tom Chng, founder of the five-year-old Singapore Watch Club, decided against doing online meetings when the government there issued stay-at-home orders in late March. Instead, Mr. Chng began posting quizzes, puzzles and photography challenges to the group's Instagram account as a way of keeping members engaged.

"The first one was a questionnaire trying to learn about each other's watch journeys," Mr. Chng said, citing prompts such as, "If I had to wear one watch for the rest of my life, it would be the ..."

"At a time like this," he said, "when people can't get their minds off what's happening in the world, we got a lot of great responses."

Still, the appeal of face-to-face interaction is so strong that some people are looking for ways to bridge the gap between in-person and on-screen events.

"We need to push it further and blend the real world by allowing people to go hands-on with watches," said Gabe Reilly, co-founder of Collective Horology, a Silicon Valley-based group that collaborates with brands to codesign watches exclusively for its members. "We know we need to move beyond just a Zoom call."

While no one denies there are limitations to hanging out online, plenty of watch enthusiasts said they would like to continue the video chats even when the threat of the coronavirus starts to recede, if only for hygiene reasons.

"There's nothing more Covid-spreading than our hobby," Mr. Shteyngart said. "We could all be a gigantic vector."