

## In Watches, a Purple Craze

TAG Heuer, Hublot and Seiko are just a few of the brands that are now using a color once reserved for royalty.



By Anders Modig

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According to the color company [Pantone](#), the 2022 color of the year is [Very Peri](#), an intense purple with an otherworldly glow. That selection, in turn, has coincided with a growing number of watch brands flaunting similar traditionally royal hues on the dials, bracelets, cases and other detailing on their timepieces.

“I happen to love watches. I treat them as an art form, and I find it interesting that purple is now appearing on all levels, from Swatch to high-end timepieces,” said Leatrice Eiseman, the executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, which issues the annual color of the year trend forecast.

(Although, in her capacity as a color consultant, Ms. Eiseman noted: “But I can’t say that Very Peri is purple, as it is officially in the family of blue-periwinkle — it is on the cusp of blue and purple with a strong red-violet and complex purple undertones.”)

Pantone named Very Peri the 2022 color of the year. Now, the intense purple is everywhere, from the watch counter to the N.B.A. Finals. Left, the TAG Heuer Monaco Purple Dial limited edition, right, Hublot Big Bang Unico Summer Purple. From left, Nina Westervelt for The New York Times, TAG Heuer, Hublot and Elsa/Getty Images



Purple on the runway, as in this Alaïa style, spring 2023. Filippo Fior

A couple of early indicators that the watch world was ready for purple included the appearance of the 2016 H. Moser & Cie. Endeavour Centre Seconds Concept Purple Haze (\$24,647) and the introduction of the 2020 Rolex Datejust 36 Ref. 52608 (\$18,050). Add to those models a decade of color consciousness, as brands and watch buyers have continued their [love affair with green](#), and embraced [blue as a principal color](#), and it becomes clear we're witnessing a serious trend.

The Harry Winston Opus 1 by F.P. Journe, from 2001, was the earliest purple dial that [Aurel Bacs](#), who regularly wields the hammer at Phillips's watch auctions, could recollect among recent timepieces.

"If you go back to the 1960s and 1970s, Piaget made a range of purple dials with root ruby, a member of the zoisite family," he said in a phone interview. "And I know of early purple dials on Rolexes and Pateks from the 1970s. But then it is the case of medium to dark-blue dials that, through natural chemical influence like fading or oxidation, have *turned* purple." For example, a Rolex Submariner Ref. 1680 from 1974, whose face had turned purple over time, was sold off by Phillips in Hong Kong last summer for 478,800 Hong Kong dollars (\$60,993).

"Purple is an interesting color, more wearable than people think," said Stephen Pulvirent, an artist and founder of the Los Angeles-based creative agency Rime & Reason, which has several clients in the watch industry. "It is perhaps not an everyday watch if you just buy one watch — for me, a purple dial gets interesting for your third watch. It is striking, it is eye-catching — and it feels really new."

Laura Perryman, a color and materials designer based in London and the author of the 2021 book "The Color Bible," echoed that assessment, noting the color is popular for all sorts of digital purposes, for instance, in the metaverse and in the realms of virtual reality and augmented reality. And, she added, purple is no longer considered masculine or feminine, as, for the past decade, the hue has been considered "a transitory gender color and an expression of polygender." She also said she believed that the general consumer trend of young, trendsetting customers looking for vibrant and expressive colors was influencing watchmakers.

Also, she noted, the color purple provides a contrast to overarching stresses like inflation, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. “In such times,” she said, “happy colors often come along. We need a counter to the gloom.”

## In History

People first began buying and selling purple dye commercially in the Phoenician city of Tyre, in what is now Lebanon, as early as 1600 B.C. This dye, known as Tyrian purple, was produced by boiling and grinding the odorous glands of a particular kind of sea snail. Historians and scientists say that it took about 12,000 snails to produce 1.4 grams (or .05 ounces) of the dye — enough to color a small swatch of fabric — so the shade was prohibitively expensive.

Some 1,500 years later, Julius Caesar adopted purple as the Roman emperor’s color, which elevated the hue even further in popularity and status. Some of Caesar’s successors even threatened death to mere citizens who dared to wear it.

These days, purple has been democratized, and you’ll find it everywhere, from the red carpet to the fashion runway, from the home décor section to the watch counter. And while making the dye no longer involves collecting sea snails, achieving a rich purple hue can still be an incredibly complex task.

Today, one of the most technically advanced methods watchmakers use to create purple is atomic layer deposition, a technology borrowed from the semiconductor industry. Using this technique, Positive Coating, a company based in the Swiss watchmaking center of [La Chaux-de-Fonds](#), has produced a full palette of decorative colors on dials, cases and movement parts for major brands as well as independents; when it comes to purple specifically, Zenith and MB&F have been among its clients.

Lucien Steinmann, co-chief executive of Positive Coating, said A.L.D., as the process is commonly called, involved applying a transparent coating of oxidized metals onto a surface, atomic layer by atomic layer, in a vacuum chamber. “Due to the thickness of the coating used for decoration on dials, cases and movement parts, the human eye will experience different colors,” Mr. Steinmann said. “It is the same visual phenomenon as when you see different colors in an oil stain in a water puddle.”

Most recently, Positive Coating used this process to create the purple hues in the Faubourg de Cracovie Purple Panda (\$32,800), presented in March by the Geneva-based watchmaker Czapek & Cie. Mr. Steinmann said the handmade guilloché dial on the 41.5-millimeter chronograph was coated with 50 nanometers, or 0.00005 millimeters, of the transparent material for a purple effect.

“I always keep an eye out in trendy cities around the world — what do people wear, how do they behave and act in cities like New York and Tokyo?” said Xavier de Roquemaurel, chief executive of the brand, which was introduced in 2012. “So, when one of our collectors and shareholders suggested purple, it made perfect sense.

“But it is not a huge thing,” he added. “Out of our total production, which in 2022 will be around 600 pieces, we have made 18 Purple Pandas, which are all sold out.”

The latest iteration of the 39-millimeter TAG Heuer Monaco chronograph — released this month and called the Purple Dial limited edition (\$7,150) of 500 pieces — also featured the color. But the brand, owned by LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton, used a spray-painted gradient dial that ranged from a light purple in the center to a dark eggplant at the perimeter, as well as a purple column wheel, purple details on the oscillating weight and a purple lining for the alligator strap.

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Colors have different meanings in different cultures, and in Seiko's home country of Japan, purple has a global symbolism. "The average Japanese person seems to perceive purple as mystical and spiritual, as well as noble," Keiko Naruse, a senior manager in Seiko's marketing communications office, wrote in an email. "Light purple is considered as elegant and graceful, while dark purple as luxurious."



Czapek & Cie  
Faubourg de Cracovie Purple Panda



Nomos  
Club Campus 38



Seiko  
SPB291, from the King Seiko Collection



Roger Dubuis  
Knights of the Round Table  
Monotourbillion

Hublot, a materials-inspired brand out of Nyon, Switzerland, went all in for the summer of 2022 with two all-purple models: a 50-piece limited edition batch of Big Bang Tourbillon Automatic Purple Sapphires (\$200,000) and the 200-piece Big Bang Unico Summer Purple (\$22,000). "Achieving purple sapphire was a challenge we just had to undertake!" Ricardo Guadalupe, the brand's chief executive, wrote in an email. "Purple is an entirely new color in industrialized sapphire cases; it's a world first."

The case of the Big Bang Unico Summer Purple is in a similar hue as the Purple Sapphire model, but it is achieved via another industrialized process — here, the material is purple anodized aluminum which has been given a satin brush finish.

While Hublot uses industrial methods and new materials to create its purple watches, Van Cleef & Arpels focuses on careful enameling done by hand. In 2013, the French luxury jeweler released the Lady Arpels Ballerine Enchantée, featuring an all-purple enamel dial. This year, two new models with purple details were presented.

Nicolas Bos, the house's president and chief executive, explained that the house works hard to perfect the purple hues in its timepieces: "Purple is quite difficult to achieve with enamel. It requires very precise measuring of the pigment and careful application to obtain the right shade. This difficulty is further enhanced by the heating process, as it changes the color of the enamel.

"We aim for hues that are not too close to blue, nor too close to pink," he added. "Our approach is the same as with the colored sapphires that we choose for their soft mauve hues with an intense brightness."

Chopard has also used gemstones to bring purple to the wrist. The bezel on its Happy Sport Dragon Fruit (\$142,000) was adorned with trapezoid-cut purple sapphires. Moreover, in what comes across as a "if you know, you know" gesture, the underside of its black alligator strap was lined with purple calfskin — unlike the alligator bracelet of the 35-millimeter diamond-studded Pasha de Cartier (\$29,700), which was a deep purple complemented by a lavender stitching.

Purple can also be used to foreground the story a watch is telling, as Roger Dubuis does, with its eighth edition of the Knights of the Round Table Monotourbillion. Artists on the [Venetian island of Murano](#) created and carved the translucent purple blocks of glass — the most complex example being the single, double-surfaced flange — to accent the central tourbillon. This entire tableau is "guarded" by indexes in the shape of 12 miniature knights, each six millimeters tall, carved out of pink gold. The price of the eight-piece limited edition is available on application.

The German brand Nomos offers another type of storytelling: non-nonsense and Bauhaus-inspired. The dial of the Nomos Club Campus 38 (\$1,650) has its blue-purple color spray-lacquered on a galvanized surface, which, the brand said, gives it a slight texture.

To Ms. Eiseman of the Pantone Color Institute, the longevity of watches is a good reason for the industry to use purple in its creations.

"Very Peri and colors in the purple family will maintain interest; they will not feel yesterday — especially if compared with other recent trend colors like bright yellows and burnt oranges," she said, adding that purple allows a form of self-expression that consumers are seeking.

"Purple is an excellent choice in the luxury realm. It still has the historical connection to its royal history, which gives it an aspirational aspect. You choose it because it does elevate you in the pantheon of luxury."

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