

A Conservation Story with a Fairytale Ending



Omega Seamaster, calibre 503 Pie Pan Deluxe Dial, reference OJ 2849,

Omega calibre 503 Pie Pan dial Seamasters are rarely ever seen. And when encountered, they're often mistakenly discredited by some experienced collectors as the product of devious machinations of the Doctor Frankenwatch brigade. But, despite not being listed currently in the Omega Vintage Database, calibre 503s with deluxe gold Pie Pan dials encased in solid gold cases with the reference number OJ 2849 do exist. Not only do they exist, but the even rarer stepped/guilloche Pie Pan dials, more often seen in Omega Constellation Grand Luxe models, exist too.

Calibre 503 was Omega's first rapid set calendar movement. The date could be changed by advancing the hands past twelve o'clock, then winding back to eleven o'clock and advancing past twelve, and so on. It is not what we would term today a 'quick-set' calendar where the date can be set by pulling the crown to its most extreme position and rotating it until the correct date arrives. However, in the 1950s, it was regarded as a major advance in date setting design, and to herald its arrival Omega borrowed from the Constellation livery and released a collection of stunning solid gold models under the Seamaster brand.



Movement and dial removed from case: showing authentic Seamaster script and considerable dial deardation

Recently, I was approached by a collector who is building up a collection of rarer early Seamasters. He had been offered the opportunity to purchase an 18k calibre 503, reference OJ 2849, with the rare stepped Pie Pan dial. He was uncertain as to the originality of the watch, after being advised by some subscribers to on-line watch forums that the watch was probably a 'concoction'. Having encountered examples of Pie Pan dial Seamasters, I cautioned him to not be hasty in declaring the watch a Frankenwatch and suggested there was a strong probability that he had stumbled upon something special.

The script on the dial appeared authentic and I informed him that the most reliable test of dial authenticity was to remove the dial from the watch and examine it for signs of refinishing. The presence of undisturbed original riveted markers and applied Omega symbol, together with the tell-tale brushing of the rivet ends (that was done to ensure that no metal fragments from the dial entered the watch case) are strong indicators of originality.

A Calculated Risk

The collector took the risk and purchased the watch, a risk that delivered the rare and gratifying experience of a confirmed major find! The promise of experiences like this is often the trigger for the intrinsic motivation that drives serious collecting. He sent the watch to a vintage watch specialist who removed the dial and confirmed that it had not been tampered with or refinished.

After it had been established that the dial was original, the next step was to seek assistance in confirming that this stepped Pie Pan dial Seamaster was genuine and left the factory in the same form as it now appeared. A check of Omega's paper records in Bienne revealed that the watch was factory authentic and delivered to Mexico in 1958 as the extract from archives (opposite) shows. This substantiated the claims of the vendor who stated that the watch came from a Mexican source.

Omega's records are often not complete and mention of luminous gold hour markers relates to another dial style, quite similar to that which appeared in calibre 504 Constellations, but broad arrowhead markers of the period did not have a recess for radium-based material as both examples in this essay (and countless Constellation examples) demonstrate.



Dial back showing 18K solid gold markings, brushed, hand-applied rivets: proving the dial was original and that the rivets had not been removed prior to a refinishing job.



CERTIFICATE

DESCRIPTION OF THE WATCH

Type:	OMEGA - Seamaster "Calendar"
Calibre:	503 (automatic, calendar)
Metal:	14K solid gold
Bracelet:	Leather strap

CHARACTERISTICS

Movement no:	16'216'360
Case no:	336800
Reference:	OJ 2849
Dial:	18K solid gold "pie-pan" dial with luminous hand-riveted gold hour markers and dauphine hands
Production date:	August 5 th , 1958
Remarks:	Delivered to our Agents in Mexico.

Bienne, October 26th, 2007

Omega SA

H. Moswonder

Conserve or Restore?

With a watch as important and uncommon as a stepped/guilloche pie pan Seamaster, the next question to be resolved was whether to attempt to salvage the dial and conserve it (and hence maximise its collectibility and value) or opt for restoration. Apart from issues of what some collectors would term vandalism, another consideration was that a restored, as opposed to a conserved, dial would always raise suspicions of a Constellation dial having been doctored to look like a rare Seamaster dial.

In examining photographs of the solid 18k dial, it seemed that most of the water damage was located within layers of the dial lacquer and the original dial paint appeared to have generally escaped harm. The conditions for conservation of the dial couldn't have been better, but who possessed the necessary expertise to carry out such a delicate operation?

I had previously used the services of a ceramics restorer at my local museum and, on one occasion, a professional restorer of oil paintings to conserve Constellation dials that had sustained sun and water damage, and so I suggested to the collector that he make inquiries in the fields of art restoration to see if anyone would take on the job.



Close-up of dial indicating water damage and some sun-caused degradation of the dial lacquer

The collector called Sotheby's in New York and spoke to Aaron Rich, the head of their vintage watch department. He sent Rich a picture of the dial and sought recommendations of specialists who may be able to conserve rather than refinish the dial. Aaron Rich provided two names, Sonny Dewan of Miami Beach Watch Repair Inc. and another New York based specialist. In recommending Sonny, Rich avowed that

"Sonny finds solutions for things like this"! It appears that Rich believed that if anyone could save the dial it was Sonny.

Our collector called both of the recommended specialists. The New Yorker said that nothing could be done to save the dial and suggested that the only viable option was to refinish the dial. He offered the name of a European refinishing house. In a conversation that ensued after Sonny Dewan was provided pictures of the dial, Sonny said that he believed that the stain was in the lacquer layer and that the watch dial could indeed be conserved and enhanced. He explained his approach and the techniques that he would use to conserve the dial and the collector sent it to Sonny's Miami workshop.

The Conservation

Sonny Dewan has spent his adult life building up expertise in watchmaking and restoration, having been in the profession for twenty seven years. His reputation was such that for the last decade many collectors and watch dealers, including Sothebys, have come to him for his know-how and astute approach to the restoration and conservation of vintage watches. He has had the pleasure of restoring some incredible watches over the last decade, but how did he build up expertise in the field of rescuing dials that other specialists had declared basket cases?

"I noticed a lot of important watches had some kind of dial issues like stains, turning brownish, spider webs etc., etc., which I could not help my customers with at the time", Sonny said. "So, whenever I had some spare time I would take old dials from my junk box and experiment on them." "All dials are different, so to take the clear coat off I had to experiment with different solvents over time". While Sonny makes the process sound easy, it is clear that through the investment of both time and painstaking effort he began to perfect his methods for rescuing dials that had a variety of problems and finishes.



Markers and symbol removed. Original dial lacquer removed. Note the semi-embossed script, another sign of dial originality

With the dial that is the subject of this essay, Sonny carefully studied the printing on the dial before starting the cleaning process. "I did not see any part of the printing that was flaking or raised and it was still nicely printed," he said. "So then, I used a cleaning solvent, a water-based diluted acid, on a tiny part of the dial to see if it had any effect." He then left the dial for a couple of days to make sure that the solvent did not cause any damage to the small area he had treated. "When the results were good, I then went to step two: removing of the markers."

As mentioned earlier, dial markers provide an important clue to authenticity. In the vast majority of redials, the refinishing house usually doesn't have the patience, inclination or expertise to remove carefully the markers and other applied dial accessories and then re-apply them after painting without having to resort to the use of glue or cold-soldering. In order to facilitate the complete elimination of the old lacquer it was necessary to remove the markers and the applied Omega symbol, but equally necessary for them to be returned without being glued or soldered. Removing markers doesn't in any way compromise the originality of a dial, but what does undermine both the collectibility and genuineness of a dial is when the markers are not put back in the same way as applied by the original dial maker.

Sonny's technique for removing the markers is simple but requires a very steady hand. "By using a sharp wooden pick to avoid scratches, I push the markers out carefully by applying pressure on each rivet at the back of the dial", he said. "When I have a naked dial, it becomes easy to take the old clear coat off, and at the point when I am satisfied that the dial cleaning process has done its job to the fullest extent possible, I use a very fine clear coat, which I spray on." The addition of the clear coat assists in the re-fitting of the markers, however if any marker legs fit loosely in their original holes Sonny painstakingly works on the problem, tapping the edges of the holes until hole and marker leg fit snug and tight.



The finished product. The pictures do not do justice to the final appearance of the watch, as the owner avowed overleaf.

The work of Sonny Dewan demonstrates that conservation can be a viable alternative to consigning a dial to a refinishing house. While watchmakers with the passion and patience required to peel away the effects of neglect or damage over time may be few and far between, they are out there. They're no doubt a rare breed because of the unique combination of talents, mindset and ingenuity required to tackle what many would declare impossible. If you ever encounter a clone of Sonny Dewan, treat him with great veneration and indeed let me know, because these men are true friends of the collecting community and should be supported enthusiastically in their work.

The Fairytale Ending

It's hard to put into words the feelings of elation, wonder and gratitude that collectors experience when they first set eyes upon a watch that has been given its full life back. It makes the waiting and expense seem trivial in comparison to what has been achieved. I received this email from our collector, which completely sums up how a beautiful conservation job can almost stir one into poetry!

"I received the watch today -- it is more than stunning first hand. Firstly, Sonny was able to achieve a 'mirror-like' patina re the dial making it look like a poor man's Grand Luxe -- which I think it was meant to mimic. The dial, which is gold as you know, looks absolutely museum quality -- it looks like a perfectly conserved 16th century gold coin with its brilliance, glow and energy and still there is complimentary patina. The piepan edge is also brilliantly executed providing just the right amount of detail -- the appearance of the gold dial is wonderfully elegant and denotes a context of sumptuousness and splendor. The appearance is so mesmerizing that it is hard to take one's eyes off the watch or not want to look at it over and over -- honest to god!!"



Sonny Dewan from Miami Beach Watch Repairs, the man who worked 'miracles' on this piece.