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Fingers That Turn Back the Clock

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Dimitrie Vicovanu uses diamond-dusted files and screwdrivers with infinitesimally small heads at his booth in Manhattan's diamond district. "The stem of a watch has 12 dimensions," he said, "and if you get one wrong it won't fit."

The wristwatch may now be an anachronism. Need the time? Check your cellphone.

But there are still plenty of people who cling to the comfort of slender hands pointing to numbers spaced around a dial under which an astonishingly intricate mechanism beats as delicately as a hummingbird's heart.

For them, particularly those who need repairs on the vintage Cadillacs of the trade, like a Rolex or a Patek Philippe, there is Dimitrie Vicovanu's meticulously arranged booth in Manhattan's diamond district.



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Mr. Vicovanu, 73, was born in Romania and learned about antique watch restoration in Switzerland.

Mr. Vicovanu, 73, a courtly Old World gentleman who came to his craft late in life, not only repairs watches, but also restores them. He makes sure the dial face, the crystal, the case and the interior wheels, springs, screws, axles, pinions and rubies are replaced by original parts or, if they can no longer be obtained, are made by hand, replated or soldered to look virtually identical to the originals while keeping accurate time. A fine watch can have 400 parts, and repairing the innards is exacting.

“The stem of a watch has 12 dimensions, and if you get one wrong it won’t fit,” Mr. Vicovanu said in a Romanian-flavored English.

Itzhak Perlman and Bill Cosby have taken antique watches to Mr. Vicovanu, a specialized surgeon, in a manner of speaking. When the widow of one of the 27 people killed in a 1992 plane crash in Flushing Bay at La Guardia Airport gave him her husband’s waterlogged but beloved 50-year-old gold Omega, Mr. Vicovanu was able to get it ticking again.

Even other watch repairers, some from as far away as California, consult him, seeking either a hard-to-find part or simple advice. And when Sotheby’s New York wants to revive a 1930s gold Patek Philippe that has not run for decades, it calls Mr. Vicovanu.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

An antique watch brought back to accurate timekeeping.

“Some watchmakers are butchers,” said John Reardon, head of watches for Sotheby’s, “and make the watch worth less money.”

Sotheby’s auctions off over 600 watches a year, with some specimens valued at millions of dollars. “If we have a particularly challenging piece,” Mr. Reardon said, “Dimitrie is the person we consider. There’s a small but very enthusiastic subculture of collectors and clients who buy and sell watches for their enjoyment and who appreciate micromechanical artistry and genius. They require equally talented watchmakers to preserve their collections.”

The city, of course, has countless repairers, but only a few can actually bring an antique watch back to the way it looked and worked when it was new. Among Mr. Vicovanu’s trade secrets is a cache of 14,000 movements that he bought a decade ago from a jeweler whose Depression-era customers had traded in their watches to harvest the gold for cash. Another asset: he has an eagle’s eye for speck-size objects, which serves him even when a jeweler’s magnifying eyepiece does not.

“Nobody can work a full day using a lens,” he said. “You get a headache.”

Repairing watches became a hobby for Mr. Vicovanu in his teenage years in Romania, where his parents were both teachers. He was curious about how his grandfather’s inexpensive table clock worked and wondered if he could take it apart. While many youngsters have such impulses, this one was also able to put the clock back together. Later he repaired watches for his university classmates and professors, a skill that helped pay tuition.

But his early career was spent in archaeology as a restorer of artifacts — everything from 2,000-year-old clay pots to mother-of-pearl inlays — for a museum complex in Iasi, Romania. He learned the craft of antique-watch repair at the behest of the autocratic Communist government of Nicolae Ceausescu, which sent him to Lausanne, Switzerland, to learn it. He never returned to Romania, defecting in 1977 and eventually getting his daughter, Daniela, out. They immigrated to the United States in 1979, and his wife, Agurita, followed two years later. She died a year ago.

Mr. Vicovanu is not above changing a battery for a standard Longines. But most people search him out because repairs by a manufacturer are expensive and can take months. He charges \$175 for a simple cleaning, while very complicated repairs that require dismantling a mechanism can cost as much as \$2,000.

His street-floor booth on West 47th Street, amid others dealing in glittering diamond necklaces, bracelets and rings, also has vintage watches for sale, an end of the business, called Master of Time, that Daniela handles. Mr. Vicovanu does most of the actual repairs in a workshop in Queens. There, 20,000 parts are organized and labeled in special file cabinets with scores of small drawers.

In both places he keeps a set of tools for microscopic work — tiny files coated with diamond powder, screwdrivers with infinitesimally small heads, a miniature diamond saw — and palettes of oils of varying viscosities that he applies with a needle. To confirm that a watch is keeping good time, a machine performs the equivalent of an electrocardiogram, spitting out a paper line drawing.

“Any watch needs to be cleaned and oiled after four years because it won’t keep good time,” he said, adding that the oil becomes like a glue.

It is a treat for Mr. Vicovanu when he is asked to drop in at Sotheby’s to examine, say, an 1885 gold Cartier clock that no one can open (he discovered the key — a screw under some ornamental gold). But he also has his peeves. Watches, he lamented, are increasingly magnetized and sometimes ruined by airport X-ray machines. He himself wears a \$400 Bulova Accutron from 1969 that is precise because it is not affected by gravity.

“I need to put the right time when I give back a watch,” he explained.

The display case in his booth has a few intriguing vintage specimens, like a Patek Philippe from 1917: it was designed for drivers, with the 12 o’clock position at what is usually the 3 o’clock position, easier to spot on a wrist turning a steering wheel. There is also an 18-karat 1934 Tiffany

pocket watch that can be used in pitch dark because it rings out the hours and minutes with a gong. His most expensive piece is a platinum 1966 Patek Philippe worth \$19,000.

“It’s an investment,” he said. “It will gain in value in time.”

And in his business, of course, time is of the essence.