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Savvy Swiss Railways watch by Mondaine

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Somewhere over the Pacific Ocean last month, as I twisted the tiny knob on the side of my watch, physically subtracting the 17 hours between Seoul and San Francisco, I started to think about what men want from a watch.

Function, for one, a shade of individuality for two and finally, and I distinguish this from owning, say, a tony Rolex or posh Patek Philippe, some subtle display of sophistication. I perused Esquire magazine's November issue hoping to come across what I was after, and instead discovered that though it was rife with fancy timepieces, they often cost upward of \$20,000. Now, there are many watches that fit my three criteria and still cost far less than the wife's engagement ring, and there is one that I've admired for a while that fits the bill on all counts. Yet it was conspicuously absent from Esquire's pages.

I first noticed the Swiss Railways watch by Mondaine on the wrist of an architect I met outside Whistler, British Columbia. Like many architects, he wore mostly black, save for the dashing flash of red at the wrist. Neither brick, nor crimson, nor cherry, nor rust, the band of his slim but intriguing watch was a true red, the color a nod to what set designer Hans Hilfiker's 1944 Swiss Railway Clock apart in the first place. The clock, now on view in train stations all over Europe, boasts a red second hand ticking regularly around a white face with black hour marks and black hour and minute hands.

Indebted to the Bauhaus call for clarity and precision, Hilfiker's clock was an instant classic and grew to be a symbol of his country. The watch that followed is that modernist icon writ small - those growing bored with watches the size of dinner plates will be especially interested.

Though the red band is a playful touch - gents sartorially confined to business suits or other uniforms might relish a sleek swath of color darting about at the cuff - it's the watch's aesthetic provenance that lends the wearer that extra tick of sophistication. That design mavens like Philippe Stark and Frank Gehry have tried their hands at watches (thanks, Fossil) is no surprise, and the allure of sporting a small piece of architecture on one's wrist is manifest.

That said, the kinds of watches sold at art museum gift shops decidedly run toward the bulbous, the plastic, the indecipherable and the gauche. That the Swiss Railways watch is none of these things - that it is elegant, a touch daring and well made all pale, just briefly, in the face of the fact that it also costs less than \$200.

Plaid flannels: Over the past several months, I've seen increasing numbers of well-fitting plaid flannel shirts on young men all over the city. At this point, the flannel shirt, skinny jeans, a

pair of Vans and a scruffy hairdo are de rigueur for the city's skater population. Gone is the skate style that held sway in my youth - baggy T's, baggier shorts, fat-tongued sneakers that looked more like baked potatoes than sporty shoes - in favor of this trimmer, though not exactly tailored, aesthetic.

The flannel shirts, in a departure from their grungy '90s heyday, have also tightened up. Skate shops from the Mission to the Lower Haight offer flannels from the red and black checks favored by the Paul Bunyan set to colors more outlandish than any serious woodsman would dare.

Jen Welch, proprietor of Virginia Howells, a chic little vintage shop on 24th Street in the Mission, told me recently that her plaid flannels are scooped up as soon as they come in.

"The far more unique the color scheme, the faster they go. And I've seen a big uptick in demand in the past couple months." Welch attributes the surging street style to a markedly more up-market source: British fashion designer Alexander McQueen's fall 2008 collection. Plaids played a part in McQueen's historically inclined line, and in a sly nod to the feted fabric, he used a string arrangement of Nirvana's "Come as You Are" as soundtrack to the strutting of his pouting models.

I won't discount Welch's take on the trend's provenance, but I see it, at least in part, as an extension of the rage for Western-style pearl-button shirts just a few years past - yet another symbol of honest labor co-opted by those most slothful of breeds: indie rockers and grad students.

For those more inclined toward kick-flips than couture, though, a couple of San Francisco boutiques have claimed the middle ground, at least in terms of price. Though some will call it an unneeded expense - considering that a perfectly nice Pendleton can be had in a secondhand shop for little more than \$30 - shops like MAC in Hayes Valley and Carrots in Jackson Square offer a fashion-forward take on the flannel shirt that looks as though it would stand up to, if not exactly a day at the saw-mill, maybe one or two nasty spills of your favorite Shiraz.

MAC offers Daiki Suzuki's new line for that venerable, if heretofore square, brand of work clothes Woolrich. Suzuki's day job is heading the rather hip Brooklyn outfit Engineered Garments - a label that bridges the gap between hipster formal and everyday duds (I have a pair of Engineered Garments corduroy pants I got at American Rag that I like very much). His Woolen Mills line for Woolrich does little to update the palette of your dad's 30-year-old collection of work shirts, but the formal face-lift does invite the group of vests, shirts, jackets and hats out of the wood shop and into the coffee shop.

Carrots carries the work of Portland, Maine, label Rogue's Gallery, which offers a pricey and design-savvy take on gear inspired by what might be worn by a hardworking lobsterman or park ranger. The flannel here comes in more traditional patterns, as does the Woolrich, so the additional \$100 you're spending is for the label, fancy buttons and the occasional dash of asymmetry. Fashionably rugged, yes, but will it earn you any extra cred at the half pipe?

Perhaps best to leave that to the fading, if saggy, Soundgarden T-shirt peeking out from beneath the checks.

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