

The Genius behind the Omega Constellation Manhattan

The Omega Constellation Manhattan is a bona fide technical and aesthetic icon of the nineteen-eighties. It is one of a handful of early nineteen-eighties watches that have so far stood the test of time. It stands alongside the Piaget Polo, the revived Cartier Tank Watch, the Movado Museum Watch collection, the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak and the Swatch as true emblems of nineteen-eighties watch design.

In creating the Manhattan, Omega achieved what few watch companies ever achieve – a timepiece that not only pushed the technical and aesthetic boundaries of design, but also a stand-alone classic that has increased in appeal over the decades.

The original Manhattans graced the wrists of many luminaries and politicians, perhaps the most notable being Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who wore his solid gold quartz Constellation Manhattan to many of his history-making meetings with Ronald Reagan and other Western leaders.

The Manhattan was positioned in the luxury sector of the market, as befitted one of Switzerland's premier series watch producers. The eighteen carat gold quartz version retailed in the U.S. in 1983 at around five and a half thousand dollars, which, in today's money, would amount to approximately fourteen thousand six hundred dollars.



One of the earliest Manhattan brand ambassadors was nineteen-eighties king of suave, Robert Wagner, seen opposite. Manhattans were also on the wish list of many lesser mortals whose support made the first Manhattan models best sellers. The current Manhattan derived Constellation series continues to be one of the most popular of the entire Omega collection, attesting to the durability and appeal of the original concept.

So, who was responsible for this enduring symbol of horological innovation? Mainstream Swiss watch companies rarely publicise or celebrate their designers, largely for fear of brand dilution or the risks of tying the fortunes of the brand to specific designers. However, in Omega promotional material and publications there are fleeting references to Carol Didisheim as originator of the Omega Constellation Manhattan, but exhaustive internet inquiries reveal little else.

United States Patent [19]
Didisheim

[11] **Patent Number: Des. 278,605**
[45] **Date of Patent: ** Apr. 30, 1985**

[54] **WATCH CASE**

[75] **Inventor:** Carol Didisheim, Bienne, Switzerland

[73] **Assignee:** Omega Louis Brandt & Frere S.A., Bienne, Switzerland

[**] **Term:** 14 Years

[21] **Appl. No.:** 382,444

[22] **Filed:** May 26, 1982

[30] **Foreign Application Priority Data**

Dec. 23, 1981 [CH] Switzerland 72 034
[52] **U.S. Cl.** D10/30; D10/32
[58] **Field of Search** D10/33, 35-36, D10/38-39, 122-126; 368/228, 232, 285

[56] **References Cited**

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[57] **CLAIM**

The ornamental design for a watch case, as shown.

DESCRIPTION

FIG. 1 is a top plan view of the watch case, a portion of a bracelet being shown in phantom outline;
FIG. 2 is a bottom plan view of the watch case, also showing a portion of a bracelet in phantom outline; and,
FIG. 3 is a perspective view of the watch case.



FIG. 1

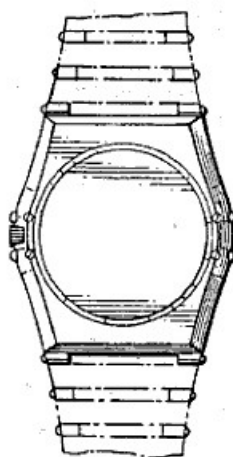


FIG. 2

An international search of patents shows that Omega finally received a patent for the Manhattan design in 1985, three years after it first appeared on the market. The patent records show Carol Didisheim as the inventor, but surveys of the body of work she produced, accounts of her professional life, or even the story about how the Manhattan came to be designed are nowhere to be found. It seems incredible that the creator of such an important piece of nineteen-eighties horological iconology could vanish into thin air.

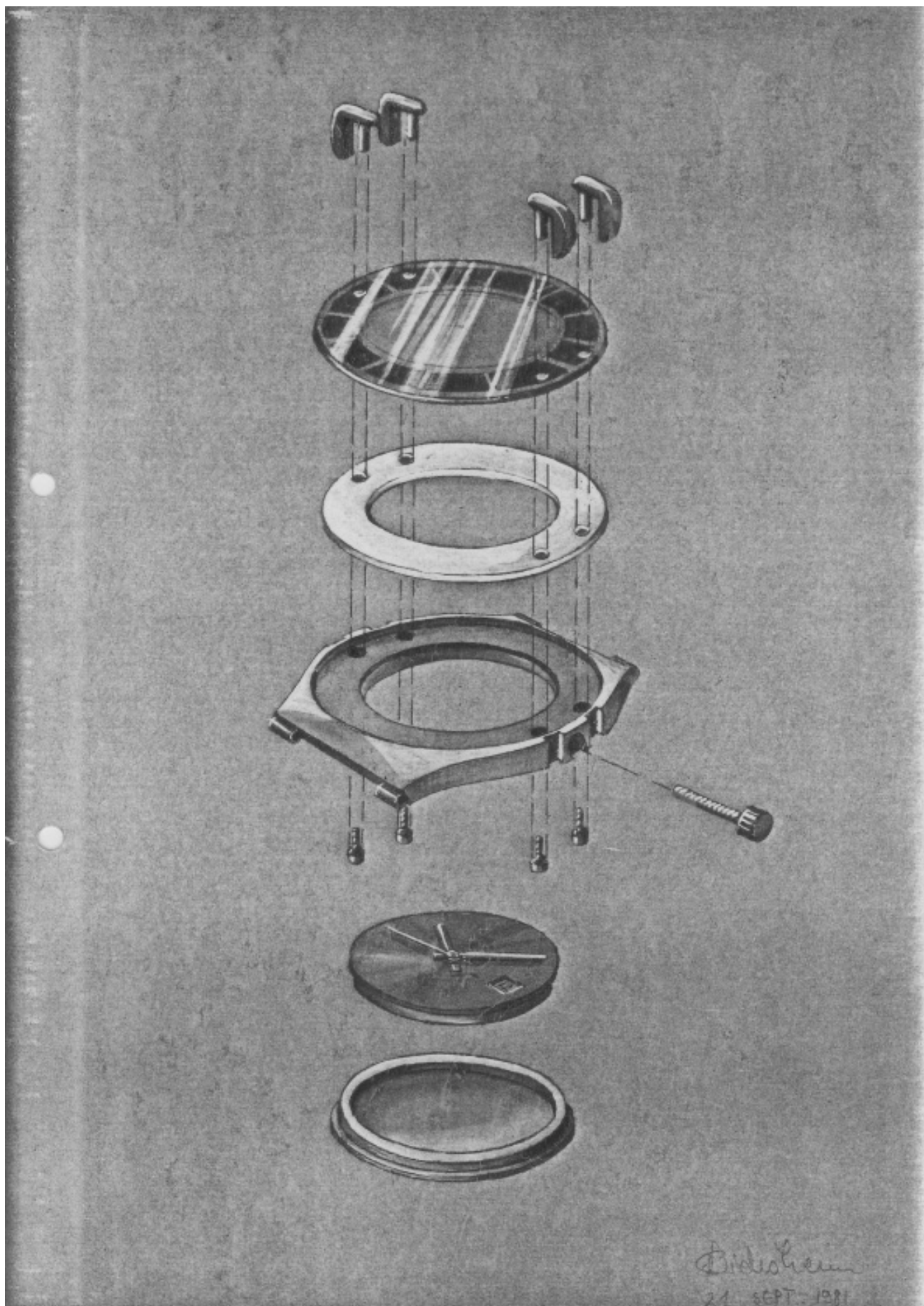
Future collectors and watch design enthusiasts, I believed, would be very curious about the designer of one of the most recognisable Constellation watches ever produced. So, I embarked on a personal mission to discover Carol Didisheim's story.

Who better to tell the Manhattan story than the person herself? After more than twelve months of inquiry I finally discovered a lead which led to the famous Swiss watch-making centre of La Chaux-de-Fonds, and through the intermediary efforts of the Musée International d'Horlogerie at La Chaux-de-Fonds I was finally able to make the acquaintance of Madame Carol Gygax-Didisheim. Having given up a very solid career as a free-lance jewellery and watch designer some ten years ago to train and practice as an art therapist, she confirmed, *"I am indeed the designer of the constellation for Omega almost 30 years ago, in 1981!"*

The Manhattan Design Story

Carol joined Omega in 1980 immediately after having completed her studies in jewellery design at the School of Decorative Arts in Geneva. She was just 26 years of age when she was given the brief to work on the next generation of Omega Constellations. *"During my last year and just before getting my diploma at the jewellery school, Omega asked if a finishing student would be interested for a job as a designer. The school director called on me and asked if I was willing to take this job and I accepted"*, she explained modestly.

In recommending a graduate of the class of 1980 to a prestigious house such as Omega, the school director would undoubtedly consider the reputation of the school and make his selection from the most talented and promising graduates. In hindsight, his faith in the young Carol Didisheim was thoroughly vindicated, when, in a matter of months, she came up with one of the definitive watch designs of the nineteen-eighties.



Original drawing by Carol Didisheim in 1981 illustrating the construction of the Constellation Manhattan case system

While the original design of the Manhattan has been refreshed over the near-thirty years of its existence, contemporary models remain true to the original design concept. *"At the time I never thought that this watch would have such a long lifetime", she marvelled. "Over all those years the look of the constellation changed a few times to keep pace and stay adapted to each new era."*

I was curious to learn about the brief or instructions she was given when working on the design of the Manhattan, and what emerged was a confluence of serendipity and design brilliance. *"I did a lot of sketches of different models and ideas, and Manhattan was one amongst many others", she said.* This is a normal practice in the design departments of watch companies where designers work up a variety of ideas to be viewed by senior decision-makers who are involved in the production of a new model.

At the same time as Carol was creating various design options for the next generation of Omega Constellations, Omega product director, Pierre-Andre Aellen, was involved in evaluating materials for the yet uncommissioned watch. *"Samples arrived from a glass factory that had developed a new technique of plating under glass", Carol recalled.* This opened up design opportunities that were hitherto constrained by the technical aspects of watch case making. *"In those years watches were very flat and often very graphic and we quickly recognised that this technology could help us find a way to hide the links and to eliminate the bezel which held the watch crystal (glass) in place and, therefore, to achieve a flatter, thinner profile", she said.*



Carol Didisheim at work in Omega's Design department - 1981

It was the timely arrival of a new glass printing technology that allowed Carol to incorporate the hour markers into the crystal, a design first in watch production. But, how does one do away with the bezel and still retain a stable and waterproof crystal? Carol explained, *"One morning Mr Aellen arrived at the office saying the English equivalent of "I've discovered the solution!" "While shaving in front of his bathroom mirror he realised the unframed mirror was held on the wall with eight claws, and that this system could be adapted to the watch", she*

said. *"So, it was his stroke of genius that led to the Manhattan design becoming a technical possibility."* *"I then proceeded to draw the shapes and proportions of the claws and designed a hinged bracelet in keeping with the rhythm of the claws",* she revealed. Aellen, who went on to create his own agency and employ such modern luminaries in watch design as Xavier Perrenoud, has not lived to see how enduring the fruits of his "aha!" moment in front of a bathroom mirror would become. Tragically he was one of four senior watch executives to perish on the New York to Geneva Swissair flight that claimed the lives of 229 people when it crashed near Nova Scotia in 1998.

Carol Didisheim left Omega shortly after the Manhattan was launched in 1982. *"From then on I had different commissions from the watch industry, and I mostly kept my energy for creating and producing jewels for exhibitions in galleries". "My career was on hold while I had my children in 1985 and 1987, and later I designed the Delance range of ladies watches, of which I'm particularly proud."*

Some years ago Carol decided on a complete career change. *"From 1990, I taught and conducted workshops in jewellery and design in different contexts, private as well as in schools",* she said. *"And then, while taking care of teen-agers coping with growing up and having difficult family situations and relationships, I realised how important it was to connect artistic creation with one's personal life. Four years ago at the age of 51, I returned to post-graduate studies in the field of Art Therapy, about which I am very passionate"*



Delance skeletonised ladies watch designed by Carol Gygax-Didisheim

Deep within Omega's DNA is a passion for, and commitment to, design excellence. In fact, Omega has won as many design competitions over the decades as it has precision and observatory contests. In designing the Omega Constellation Manhattan, Carol Gygax-Didisheim not only upheld the best traditions of creativity and innovation of the Omega company, but also produced one of the most acclaimed and recognisable watches produced in the nineteen-eighties.