

From Rush Hour to X-Men: The Last Stand, Brett Ratner has directed some of Hollywood's most successful films. He's also rewarded himself with some very coveted watches.

Lights,
Camera,
Collection

BY
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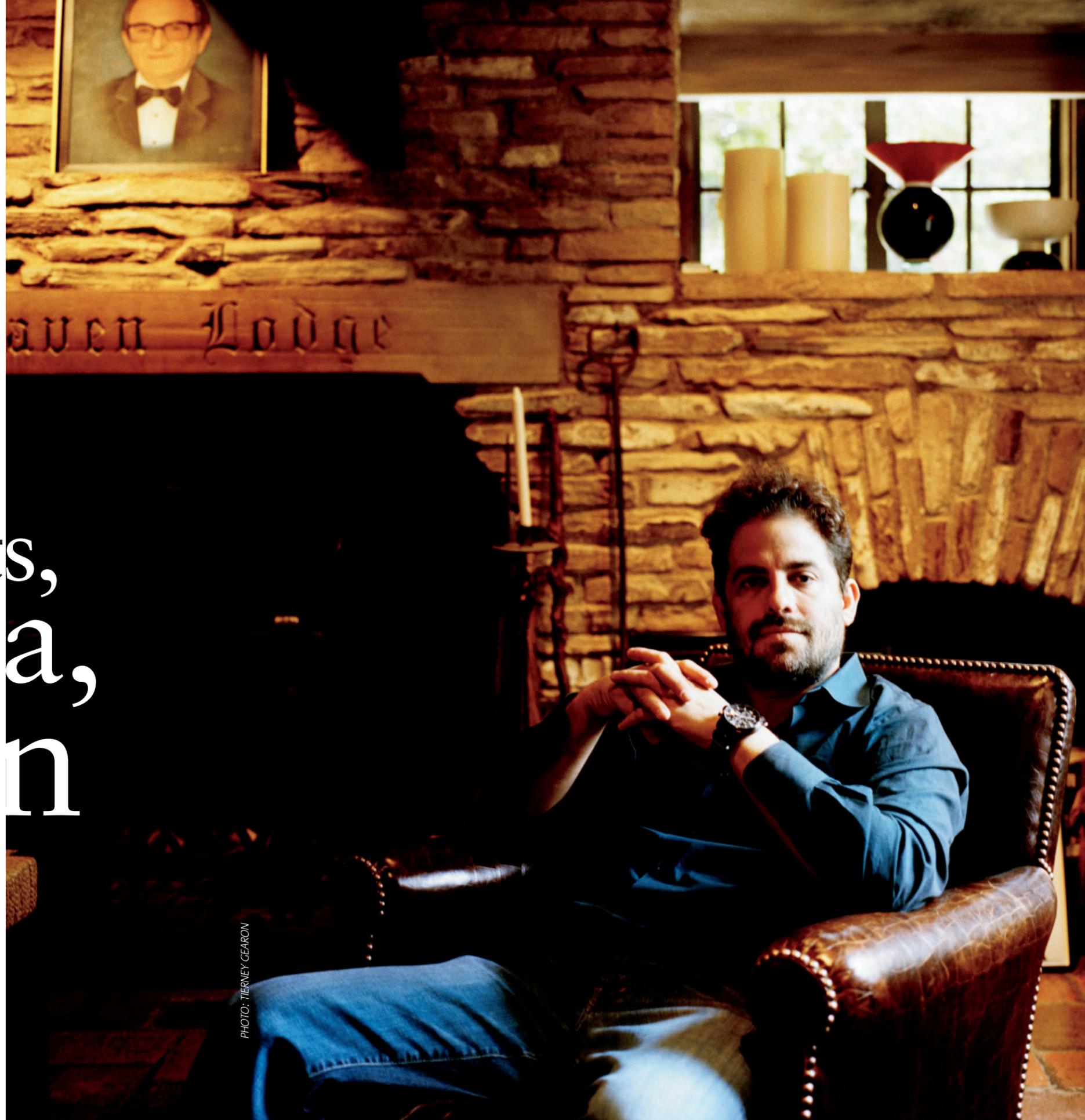


PHOTO: TIERNEY GEARON

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“I’VE BOUGHT CARS AND GIVEN THEM BACK. WITH WATCHES, I NEVER WANT TO DO THAT. THERE’S JUST TOO MUCH HISTORY THERE.”

In the sumptuous living room, which doubles as a screening room, of his historic home in the upscale Hollywood Hills enclave of Benedict Canyon, Brett Ratner is putting the finishing touches on his latest project, one near and dear to his heart. With the meticulous, critical eye of a seasoned Hollywood director and producer, he scrutinizes the latest draft submitted for his approval, nods his head in appreciation, and then stops to ask for a final change.

“Do you see here where it’s black on the outside of the case and also black inside, on the dial?” he says, pointing to a vintage watch and holding it up next to the new prototype on his wrist. “That’s what I was going for... more black instead of the gray.”

“It’s gray because you’re looking through the ‘lens,’” responds one of Ratner’s guests, referring to the shaded, circular area in the center of the prototype’s sapphire crystal. “The ‘lens’ is gray; the calendar is white. It has to be white to be legible. See, when you move the hand, it’s white. You’re just seeing the visible parts.” This observation comes from Leonid Khankin, managing director of Ernst Benz, producer of aviator-inspired mechanical Swiss watches. He is the man primarily responsible for translating Ratner’s vision into concrete reality.

Ratner strokes his famously stubbled chin and stares intently at the watch, with its black PVD-coated case and vintage-style nylon strap. “I’m happy with it; I just thought you could do black on black.”

“The gray gives it contrast, though. It looks nice,” another guest chimes in. This is Matthew Bain, watch expert, founder of the Senzatempo vintage-watch store in Miami Beach, and Ratner’s timepiece guru — the man most responsible for the 40-year-old director’s accumulation of a watch collection that would be the envy of many older connoisseurs.

The project at the center of this discussion, as should be evident by now, is not one of Ratner’s films, not the latest addition to an impressive résumé that includes the *Rush Hour* trilogy, *Red Dragon*, *Family Man*, *X-Men: The Last Stand* and the upcoming biopic of *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner. It is Ernst Benz’s Brett Ratner Limited Edition Chronoscope — the project that has enabled Ratner, for the first time, to project his now well-honed watch-collector sensibilities onto a limited-edition timepiece that will bear his own name. And if the detailed discussion between him, Khankin and Bain is any indication, getting it just right is as important to Ratner as the final cut of his next box-office blockbuster.

PHOTO: JOHN RUSSO

The watch itself came about through Ratner’s involvement in Chrysalis, a charitable organization that helps place poor and homeless people into jobs. Chrysalis had contacted Khankin about creating four celebrity-branded timepieces, a portion of whose proceeds would go toward the organization’s cause. Actor Eric Dane, singer Mary J. Blige and music mogul Russell Simmons also contributed their names to watches in the “Time for Change” collection, but while each of those stars offered input, Ratner was the only one who took a personal hand in the concept and design of his watch. As an introduction to the unveiling of his collection, he is showing me — and the impromptu entourage that has gathered here for his interview and photo shoot — the vintage watches that inspired different aspects of that watch’s design: its 47-mm size is taken from a Panerai, its military-style canvas strap from a Breitling, its tri-compax subdial design from a Heuer. “In film school I used this old, German camera with a three-lens turret in front, and the lenses were in this formation,” Ratner recalls, pointing at the subdials of the 1960s-vintage Heuer. “I’m also a fan of this military-style strap, like the ones made for NATO in the 1940s and 1950s.” Bain points out that this particular Heuer was, indeed, made for the German military.

What makes the Ratner Chronoscope distinctive is its partly skeletonized dial, designed to evoke both the viewfinder of a director’s camera and the shutter and lens of an old-fashioned photographer’s camera. The Valjoux movement is partially visible through the translucent crystal (the “gray” area that sparked the previous discussion). The black matte finish on the case is evocative of old-school military watches. When the watch finally becomes a finished project, meeting the approval of both Ratner and Khankin, it will be manufactured in a series of only 24 pieces, making it an instant collectible, and thus a worthy addition to the cache of horological treasures that Ratner has, quite carefully and specifically, assembled over the course of his career.

Ratner’s many Rolex include a rare Paul Newman model (third from bottom).



WHILE BRETT RATNER'S love of watches developed over time, his love of filmmaking emerged almost from day one. Born and raised in Miami Beach, he made regular pilgrimages to the matinees — mostly action movies — with his Cuban grandfather. “As a Cuban, his English wasn’t perfect,” Ratner recalls, “so it was easier for him to understand what was going on in those types of films.” He knew around age eight that he wanted to make movies, and in 1983, he got his first taste of a Hollywood career — snagging an uncredited cameo in the Al Pacino classic *Scarface* while hanging around the set. He enrolled at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts at 16, becoming the youngest film major in the department, and attended NYU Film School. His first big break came when he screened his award-winning short-film project, *Whatever Happened to Mason Reese*, for his now fellow Chrysalis supporter and big-time watch freak, Russell Simmons.

Simmons hired Ratner to direct music videos, launching the young filmmaker’s highly successful career in that field, wherein he collaborated with a range of artists that included Madonna (Ratner won an MTV Video Music Award for “Beautiful Stranger”), Mariah Carey, Jay-Z and Wu-Tang Clan. In 1997, he graduated to his first feature-length film, *Money Talks*, a sleeper hit starring Charlie Sheen and a then-little-known comedian named Chris Tucker. A year later, Ratner struck box-office gold with *Rush Hour*, which teamed Tucker with Hong Kong martial-arts-film icon Jackie Chan. The culture-clash buddy comedy grossed \$250 million worldwide and spawned two blockbuster sequels. Having put his stamp on the action genre, Ratner branched out into romantic comedy (with 2000’s *The Family Man*), suspense thriller (2002’s *Red Dragon*, a *Silence of the Lambs* prequel) and crime caper (2004’s *After the Sunset*) before tackling his biggest budget and most ambitious project, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the third film in the mega-popular Marvel Comics mutant superhero franchise, which in 2006 shattered the record for the biggest Memorial Day weekend release ever, taking in \$123 million in four



Ratner wears a prototype of the limited-edition Ernst Benz Chronoscope that bears his name

days. Currently in development are *Playboy*, his Hefner movie, and the latest installment of another mega-successful action franchise, *Beverly Hills Cop IV*.

Ratner has expanded his brand into other areas, as well, namely television, for which he produced the successful Fox-TV program “Prison Break,” and the upcoming comedy pilot, “Cop House.” He has established his own book-publishing imprint, Rat Press, which releases projects that speak to his love of film history and vintage photography, with subjects ranging from Marlon Brando to Robert Evans to Jim Brown. He has even dabbled in photography himself, shooting covers for *Vanity Fair* and *Interview*, and ad campaigns for baby Phat, Jimmy Choo and Jordache. His book *Hilhaven Lodge: The Photo Booth Pictures* is a compilation of photos taken of celebrity visitors to his home.

AN INFORMAL TOUR of that home offers glimpses into Ratner’s psyche. Hilhaven Lodge, built in 1923, has been home to film royalty: both Kim Novak and Ingrid Bergman lived here, and the English-style architecture, wood accents, rustic stone fireplace and cathedral-like ceilings have played host to parties for several generations of Hollywood glitterati. The 1970s-style disco in the basement was the work of the home’s most recent owner, Allan Carr, the late, flamboyant producer of *Grease* and *Can’t Stop the Music*. It was the disco — with its DJ booth, Egyptian statues and mirrored ceilings — that sold Ratner on the house, and he has, according to the celebrity press, done his part to continue Hilhaven’s festive tradition. While he obviously approaches his work with tireless zeal, Ratner has also found time to provide the gossip rags with plenty of material: past dating companions have included model Rebecca Gayheart, actress Zhang Ziyi and tennis star Serena Williams, and he has also been linked to notorious party girls Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton.

He also has devoted a significant amount of time indulging a serious mania for collecting — and not only watches. Down the hall from the disco is a pool



Vintage models from Rolex, Patek Philippe and other classic brands make up much of Ratner’s collection.

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PHOTO: JOHN RUSSO

The director's vintage Panerai Radiomir is a rare treasure, made even more valuable by its original leather strap.

room with walls full of glass cases holding a cavalcade of eclectic memorabilia from his career: Ratner's NYU student ID, a ticket to the Oscars, numerous movie posters and signed photos, a mint-condition copy of *Giant-Size X-Men #1*, undoubtedly used for research on the film, invitations from Hollywood players and Washington power brokers. The living room is bedecked with art, mostly vintage photography as well as modernist sculpture. It also holds numerous books, mostly photography volumes and biographies; old magazines; and antique and decorative ashtrays.

As with many celebrity watch enthusiasts, Ratner caught the collecting bug right around the time when he could afford to indulge it. "I was, like, 26 when I got my first big check, and that was when I could afford a good watch," he reveals. After being blown away by the vintage Rolex on the wrist of one of his watch-fan friends, and finding out that it came from Bain, Ratner tracked the latter down, and his watch education began in earnest. "I would hang out in Matt's store for hours just looking at every watch," he says. In a process that Bain calls a "slow graduation," Ratner worked his way up from moderately expensive, simple models to some of the rare holy grails of watch collecting.

One of Ratner's favorites, the so-called "Paul Newman" Rolex, is one of those grails. At first glance simply a Rolex Cosmograph Daytona of 1960s vintage, what makes this timepiece special is its dial, which features a number of subtle differences from the typical Daytona dial. The subdials have block indices; each subdial has crosshairs meeting in the center; and, most tellingly, the minutes subdial at 9 o'clock is marked at 15, 30, 45 and 60 rather than at 20, 40 and 60. Only watches in References 6239, 6241, 6262, 6263, 6264 and 6265 are considered authentic Paul Newmans; as the dials have been out of production since the early 1970s, these

Rolexes are quite rare and astonishingly valuable. The model received its unofficial moniker when Newman's wife, actress Joanne Woodward, presented one to the blue-eyed Hollywood icon as a gift when he took up auto racing in 1972. Ratner owns two — a steel one that he likes to wear and a gold one that mainly stays in storage.

In keeping with his love of both film and old books, Ratner has sought out examples of another classic, collectible Rolex, this one associated with a classic character that has thrived in both: Ian Fleming's James Bond. He owns several vintage models of the Rolex Submariner, Ref. 6200, one of the first divers' watches issued by Rolex in 1954, and similar to the one Sean Connery wore in the very first Bond movie, 1962's *Dr. No*. (Connery actually wears a Ref. 6538 in the film.) The watch features an oversized winding crown (differentiating it from similar, subsequent models such as the 6204 and 6205) and was the first Submariner to incorporate the so-called "Mercedes" hands. The other telling feature is the "Explorer" dial layout, with the large numerals 3, 6 and 9.

AS COVETED HOROLOGICAL rarities go, however, even the James Bond and Paul Newman Rolexes might pale in comparison to the watch he's currently wearing, one of the direct inspirations for the Ernst Benz Ratner Edition Chronoscope: an original Panerai Radiomir, made for the Italian navy in the 1930s and '40s — one of only around 300 believed to still exist. As all the Paneristi out there are aware, Florence-based Panerai was a company that started making precision instruments such as compasses and calculators for the Italian Navy around the time of World War I. When Navy commandos needed timepieces they could use in underwater missions, they approached the company, which used its Swiss-watch industry connections to de-



Triple-date calendar watches, some of them with moon-phases, are among Ratner's favorite timepieces, especially models from Rolex and Patek Philippe.

velop the quintessential Italian diving watch. The very first ones used movements and other parts provided by Rolex. Ratner's bulky, 47-mm Panerai is the genuine article, with a Rolex bezel and a Rolex "crown" logo on the oversized winding crown. It is also still on its original, weather-beaten leather strap, an added value for a collector that many otherwise-intact original Radiomirs cannot claim. "You could sell this strap," says Khankin, "and buy two new Panerai watches."

Another particular style of watch that Ratner seeks out is the triple-date moon-phase, most notably represented by another very coveted collectible in his lineup, Patek Philippe's Reference 1518, produced from 1941 through 1954 (only 281 pieces total), which was the first serially produced mechanical watch that combined a perpetual calendar with a chronograph. Ratner describes the Patek as one of his most cherished watches, and it's easy to believe him: Bain admits that he sold it to him seven years ago but "I haven't seen it in five years; it's been in the safe deposit box." Another Rolex, one of the most complicated in Ratner's collection, is a triple-date chronograph from 1950. It is another valuable watch that Ratner wears only occasionally, as wristwatches often tend to get abused a bit in his line of work. The sets of one of his films — known for car chases, explosions and martial arts throwdowns — can be hazardous places for a watch. "I'm very active and hyper, always handling the camera, bumping into people; I really bang them around. That's why I don't have a lot of gaudy watches. I prefer to wear ones that only a few people in the world notice what makes them special."

While he's acknowledged as an auteur of the genre, he mildly bristles at the notion that he's primarily a director of high-octane action flicks, pointing out "I've done films in at least four different genres. I'd love to do a musical, crime drama, political drama. Fifty years ago, directors would go from genre to genre because their job was to be storytellers. It was like an assembly line. Now we tend to put directors in a box. It's like, 'Okay, you're the comedy guy, you're the

action guy...'. Directors like Spielberg and Zemeckis are able to mix it up, but few others do."

That striving for versatility — the desire not to be pigeonholed — also extends to his watch tastes. The director prides himself on not limiting his scope to one style of watch or one brand. In fact, he hasn't even limited it to wristwatches. His collection includes vintage dress pocket watches, including a platinum Cartier, an ultra-thin Vacheron Constantin in a platinum hunter's case and a Patek Philippe made, according to Bain, exclusively for Cartier. "What can I say? I have eclectic tastes," says Ratner. "There are collectors who only collect sports watches, or only collect Rolex Paul Newmans. I haven't really found my niche yet. I do know I've never really bought them for investment purposes. They're for me to enjoy. They're what I buy to reward myself. I've bought cars

and given them back; two years later I'm tired of them. With the watches, I never want to do that; there's just too much history there."

When asked which of his many beloved timepieces he would choose if forced to choose only one, the inveterate film buff cannot help but illustrate his answer with a movie moment, one familiar to fans of classic, silver-screen comedy. "If I had to hold on to just one, it would definitely be my gold Paul Newman," he says. "It's the most beautiful, it's incredibly rare, and it's probably tripled in value since I bought it. It would be like the scene with Steve Martin in *The Jerk*, where they told him he has to get out of his house and he's like, 'I don't need anything but this! This chair, I'm taking with me!' That's what I'd be like. Take everything, but you're not getting this watch. This watch is coming with me." ○