

It's in the Box! 1950s and 60s Constellation Boxes



The first matter to consider when attempting to source a genuine period Constellation box is the existence of both Swiss produced boxes and 'national production' boxes commissioned by official distributors who used local manufacturers to produce boxes to Omega specifications. These vary from country to country, and the general rule is that in large markets like the U.S., a combination of locally produced and imported boxes were used during the two decades - 1950s and 1960s - under survey.

The second consideration is that jewellers and agents were not particularly fastidious about ensuring the right boxes matched specific models in their inventory. Sometimes they were sloppy and used generic boxes instead of boxes earmarked for particular collections. While, generally, a Constellation watch usually found its way into a Constellation box, there was no guarantee that 'designated' watches were boxed in the correct boxes. A common practice amongst jewellers and retail outlets in the nineteen-fifties and sixties was to protect, label and store watch stock in a safe. Certificates were commonly placed in a box file, ready to be re-united with a particular stock number, and boxes were frequently stored in under-counter cabinets. When a purchase was made from stock not displayed in a window, an inexact process of matching safe stock with correct certificates and boxes then ensued.

There are, however, some general rules of thumb we can apply by using Swiss cases as the standard and noting some known variations. First design phase boxes will always be red, except when they're not! The two examples below of a 1953 Swiss Constellation box (left) and a 1953 U.S. manufactured Globemaster (No-Name Constellation) box (right) demonstrate an example of extreme difference between the Swiss produced box and the American Globemaster packaging.

So, this short essay on Omega boxes will use Swiss manufactured boxes as the standard in a survey of the major styles used for Constellation boxes from calibres 352/354 to the day-date calibre 751. We will focus on 'non-deluxe' and 'non grand luxe' boxes, as I will review the silver Jezler and Grand Luxe boxes at a later time.



Early Design Phase



The standard Constellation box from the inception of the collection in 1952 until the early 1960s is the red, rectangular leather box embossed with gold. The box lid is chamfered, and, as seen opposite in a box housing a calibre 354 model 2652 Constellation, the embossing usually continues along three of the four rims of the box.

A suede envelope is raised on supports, allowing papers and a chamois to be stored under the envelope. A channel has been pressed into the envelope to allow the watch band to be inserted smoothly between layers. The chamois can either be stored under the envelope or on top of the watch to give it extra protection.



The box style for all first design phase Constellations remained fairly constant, with some exceptions in 'national production boxes' made in host countries. The calibre 504 calendar model 2943 (seen opposite) has an identical box to its earlier 354 brethren, and calibre 505 boxes supplied by Switzerland were the also of this design.

To sum up, the standard for Swiss produced boxes (and to a large degree boxes produced under licence) is static for all models until the end of production of the calibre 505. Further, early versions of the calibre 551 and 561 in 14xxx models were often housed in these boxes. Until 1963, well after a new box was decreed and released, we still see genuine Constellation box and paper sets in the original 1950s design.

But, we must remember the storage practices by jewellers and watchmakers of the period and allow some latitude during the changeover. It is entirely possible that post-calibre 505 Constellations found their way into boxes earmarked for earlier model.



An example of a mid-500 series calibre watch finding a home in a box designed for earlier calibres appears opposite.

This previously one owner calibre 551 model 14381 from 1962 has its original papers and chronometer certificate, and, when off the wrist, sat in the box opposite for all of its life.

Market prices for first design phase boxes, complete with suede envelope and cloth start at 140.00 USD (2011)

Second Design Phase



An updated box (left) was ordered in the early 1960s to mark the release of the new design series of 551 and 561 calibres in models. This new design was phased in over time. I have seen both 14381 and 14393 models housed in this box, however, on other occasions I have encountered early calibre 551 and 561 models (with papers) sitting in first design phase boxes, as shown above. It's important not to be too arbitrary during this changeover period for all of the reasons mentioned. A fair cut-off is late 1962, when the last calibre 505 model ceased being assembled.

The new box mirrored changes in design trends at the dawning of the nineteen-sixties. It was of a simpler, rounded design and eliminated the gold filigree work. The envelope configuration of the early boxes was replaced with an inner box upon featuring a sturdy display covered in faux suede. Watch papers were stored underneath



Generally, models 167.005, and calibre 561 versions of 168.005 and the C-Shaped model 168.009/17 were packaged in this the most common box style of the period.



A variation also appeared in some markets (shown opposite), including the U.S., in around 1965 - 1966. This design manifested in a number of differed box shapes until the advent of the 'plastic' Constellation boxes of the late 1960s.

One thing to note about nineteen-fifties and sixties Constellation boxes is that they will always have Constellation printed on the inner lining. Other wording, such as 'officially certified', 'automatic', or 'chronometer' may or may not appear.

Market prices for boxes of either style complete with inner box or display stand start at around USD 120.00

Third Design Phase



As 1960s closed, another box change occurred just before the advent of the integrated bracelet models in 1969. Known to collectors as the 'plastic' box, although sporting a faux metal finish, it housed later calibre 564 and 751 models. Seen opposite is an original example displaying a 751 calibre model 168.0016 assembled in 1968.

Several styles of this box carried Constellations well into the nineteen seventies. For example a 1968, calibre 564 model 168.005 is shown below with a mounted display, in contrast to the configuration shown opposite.





Boxes also differed in size and I cannot find a particulate logic to explain. For example the solid 18K gold calibre 751 model 168.0019 assembled in 1969 shown opposite sits in a smaller box with a removable display. This box however has a gold faux brushed metal finish, as does the example below that housed a calibre 1011 gold cap model.

I can only speculate that gold brushed finish boxes were designated for solid gold and gold capped models and silver brushed metal were reserved for stainless models. While that may be so, we cannot discount the actions of gormless sales assistants who may have either chosen to ignore this distinction or were unaware of it.

Prices for these later design phase boxes start at around 50 USD

Summary



In gathering information about, and attempting to understand the logic behind, the presentation of Omega Constellations in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, one is frustrated by human foible and ineptitude. My conclusion is that while there are three separate design trends over a period of twenty years, storage practices and human error at the point of sale has muddied the waters.

What can be said is that three separate designs for Constellation boxes were introduced in 1952, 1962 and 1968. What can't be said about the latter two designs is that there was a specific cut-off point. Old models invariably found their way into new design boxes and vice versa. And thus, it makes the task of sourcing the 'correct' box a little more challenging. My rule of thumb is to use the dates above as a guide when sourcing a box to match a specific model and to make a choice based on the approximation of date offered by the serial number on the movement. Certitude is not an option!

This exploration of Constellation boxes is a living essay, able to be corrected and amended as new information comes to light.