

American Watch History in Geneva

by Bob Frishman

If you want to examine three valuable and rare watches with uniquely important historical connections to the United States, you need to travel to the Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva, Switzerland.

Many of us, not just in the top 1%, recognize Patek Philippe as the longstanding premier luxury watch brand. Its slogan echoes what we often hear in the antiques trade, "You never actually own a Patek Philippe. You merely look after it for the next generation." In the 1970s, company president Henri Stern began collecting fine early watches, and his successor and son, Philippe Stern, decided during the firm's 150th anniversary in 1989 to create a world-class museum, which opened 12 years later. In June my wife and I visited the beautifully restored Art Deco building, in the Plainpalais neighborhood of Geneva, where five centuries of watchmaking history, nearly 1100 rare timepieces, are housed and displayed.

Dr. Peter Friess, museum director and curator, kindly gave us an introductory tour. Friess is a German-born master watch- and clockmaker. Also educated as a curator of historical artifacts in Munich, he spent many years in the U.S. at the Smithsonian and Getty museums and at the Science Museum in Silicon Valley before taking charge in Geneva in 2014. He has authored several books, catalogs, and essays on automata, watches, and clocks, now culminating in a three-volume set, *The Emergence of the Portable Watch*, which he edited and which has recently been published by the Patek Philippe Museum.

The weighty hardcover set, in its elegant slipcase, is a limited edition of 500 and sells for nearly \$700. When compared to the cost of a



A gold Patek Philippe pocket watch was the costly 1909 West Point graduation gift to George S. Patton from his parents. Praising its accuracy, he carried it when battling against Pancho Villa in 1916 and during his WWI service with the U.S. Army Tank Corps.



The Henry Graves Jr. Supercomplication, weighing over one pound, tracks and indicates 24 visual and auditory functions on its two sides. So far, no watch has sold at auction for more than its \$24 million record. Finished in 1933 for an American banker and formerly in the collection of the Time Museum of Rockford, Illinois, which closed in 1999, the Patek Philippe unsurpassed masterpiece is back in the country where it first ticked.

Patek Philippe watch, when viewing the hundreds of pages of full-color full-scale photos and detailed accompanying text, and when hearing that the actual production cost of the set was double the selling price, the tag seems justifiable. I may never have a Patek on my wrist, but now at least I have an elegant Patek product on my bookshelf.

Prospective buyers should keep in mind that these pages do not include any timepieces made by Patek Philippe. The three volumes document solely the museum's collection of watches and clocks made before the firm's founding in the mid-19th century. Featured are the earliest German watches, from the 16th century, through highly ornamental and complicated European watches produced before Antoni Norbert Patek and Jean-Adrien Philippe joined forces. For another \$700, two preceding volumes also may be ordered; those 928 pages showcase the company's own history and watches.

Neither set, however, includes descriptions of the three America-connected watches. These were acquired too recently, and they reflect the museum's ongoing acquisitions of top-quality timepieces produced by the famous firm and by other past makers.

First of the three is the Henry Voigt/Francis Bailey silver calendar pocket watch, the earliest known watch actually made here in North America before 1800. It was featured on the front cover of the October 2011 issue of *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, the bimonthly magazine of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. Until this one was made, watches in Colonial America were English and French imports that were sold, serviced, and sometimes labeled on this side of the Atlantic. An outspoken polymath



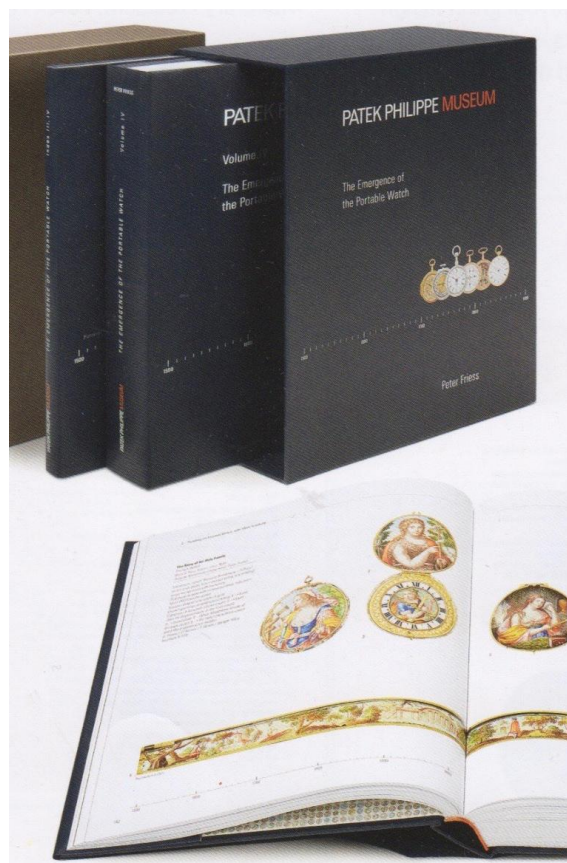
Front view of the Patek Philippe Museum, Rue des Vieux-Grenadiers 7, Geneva, Switzerland.



Henry Voigt fabricated the first Colonial American watch. He also made instruments, steam engines, and our nation's first coinage. Created in Philadelphia, the watch recently left America, probably for the first time, for its new home in Switzerland.

Dutchman, Henry Voigt (or Voight, 1738-1814) not only had a thriving watch and clockmaking business, with Thomas Jefferson recorded among his regular customers, but he also built scientific instruments and steam engines. His watch boasts several technical innovations that demonstrate mechanical genius. Also a coin maker, he was appointed by George Washington as chief coiner of the first U.S. Mint.

Equally eminent was Francis Bailey (1744-1817), for whom the watch was made and whose name is on the white enamel dial. Also a Philadelphian, Bailey was the first printer of the Articles of Confederation



The new three-volume 21-pound set from the Patek Philippe Museum has more than 1000 pages of photos, historical and technical details, essays, biographies, definitions, and summaries of the Biblical and Classical allegories that frequently are illustrated on antique hand-painted enameled watch cases.



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The museum is not only about watches. A small number of important clocks also reside there, including a 1765 marine chronometer by renowned French horologist Ferdinand Berthoud. As did John Harrison in England, Berthoud labored to create sea-going timepieces accurate enough to determine longitude on ships.



One of the world's oldest watches, now in the Patek Philippe Museum collection, is attributed to German maker Hans Koch in 1570. More than simply a one-hand timekeeper, it has an alarm, hour striking on a bell, a compass, and a built-in sundial for setting the time on cloudless days.

and the first to describe Washington as the "father of his country." In 1776 Bailey printed an early edition of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and he invented a much-needed anti-forgery printing process.

In spite of energetic outreach to American collectors and museums, the unique watch, conservatively estimated at \$200,000/300,000, was passed at Christie's sale of "exceptional" items on April 13, 2016, in New York City. Despite strong hopes of keeping the watch in America, and to the surprise of many who never thought that the Patek Philippe Museum would be interested in an American-made watch of any kind, the museum after the sale paid within the estimate and took the watch overseas.

Second is a gold pocket watch, a Swiss-made Patek Philippe 1909 five-minute repeater, given to General George Patton upon his West Point U.S. Military Academy graduation. His parents had bought it at Tiffany's, marked down from \$600 to \$350 because it was thicker than the slimmer watches then in fashion. In October 2015 it sold for \$137,000 at a Heritage Auctions sale in New York City. We now know that the anonymous buyer was the museum. The inscribed watch

traveled with Patton early in his life but stayed safe at his son's Boston-area home during World War II. Patton's grandson Robert Patton sent the watch to auction, hoping that it would be admired for both its beauty and its provenance. No doubt his hopes were realized with the watch's display at the Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva.

Third, and at the pinnacle of more than one ranking, is the Henry Graves Supercomplication. This 1933 18k gold Patek Philippe oversize pocket watch set a world auction timepiece record of \$11 million in 1999 at Sotheby's New York City sale of Time Museum watches. In November 2014 it more than doubled that figure when setting another global record of \$24 million at Sotheby's in Geneva. The second sale brought the watch out of the private collection of a Qatar sheikh, whose unpaid auction-house bills prompted the liquidation, and back on public view. The most complicated analog watch ever made, it has 24 "complications" including calendars, chimes, alarms, and celestial charts. Its story is nicely chronicled in Stacy Perman's 2013 book *A Grand Complication*. The watch, completed as part of a competitive challenge, took more than eight years to design and build. It has more than 900 tiny parts. A

marvel of mechanical engineering, it inspired advances in miniaturization in many other fields.

The Patek Philippe Museum (www.patekmuseum.com) is open Tuesday through Friday from 2 to 6 p.m. and on Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. English-language tours are offered on Saturdays. Certainly, no American visitor would seek out these three historic watches and then depart. Two floors with dozens of well-lit display cases offer beauty and mechanical marvels for watch novices and experts to view. Perhaps visitors might save one of the best objects for last—an 1808 Rochat Brothers pistol watch. Its associated video shows that when the trigger is pulled, out pops a brightly feathered mechanical bird—flapping and whistling. When stationed in Paris serving our revolutionary cause, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Ben Franklin each may have seen these kinds of costly horological novelties.

Bob Frishman has repaired, collected, and sold antique timekeepers since 1980. Owner of Bell-Time Clocks in Andover, Massachusetts, he also writes and lectures regularly about the history, science, and cultural importance of clocks and watches.



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