

Story **Christopher Stocks**

INDUSTRY OF NATIONS

Great exhibitions of the nineteenth century – held in the world’s major cities – brought together innovators and industrialists at a time of unprecedented growth

Among the great changes that have swept across the world as part of the tide of history, the Industrial Revolution must rank as one of the strongest currents. From its beginning in the late eighteenth century, it spread swiftly across Europe and the United States, drawing millions of workers to the ever-expanding cities, making rapid improvements in transport, productivity, and communications, and laying the foundations for the modern world. In France, industrialization had gathered pace in the wake of the 1789 revolution, and among its most enduring legacies were the government-sponsored fairs that brought manufacturers together from all around the country.

The highly successful French Industrial Exposition was held in Paris in 1844, in a vast temporary structure on the Champs-Élysées, and it was here that Antoine Norbert de Patek came across Jean Adrien Philippe’s brilliantly innovative keyless winding mechanism. Although the two men didn’t actually meet at the exhibition, this event was to mark the start of Patek & Cie. Even in those early years, Patek was thinking about foreign markets and how to promote the company abroad. As a Polish émigré who had wandered Europe before finding a safe haven in Switzerland, he was keenly aware of the dangers of relying on a single market. Though the young Patek was an ardent supporter of independence for his own country, the businessman in him must have felt his worst fears had been justified by the uprisings that swept across Europe in 1848, toppling monarchies and disrupting the international trade in luxury goods.

Fortunately there was one country whose wealth and social stability seemed to offer continued opportunity: Britain. As Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, wrote to his cousin, the King of Prussia, “We have no fear here either of an uprising or an assassination.” Britain had the biggest economy in the world and its largest city, London, seemed the obvious place to go. So when



– perhaps inspired by the success of the 1844 Paris show – Prince Albert announced that the capital would host a Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in 1851, Patek was ready to spring into action.

The Great Exhibition was a defining moment of the nineteenth century, and it launched a whole series of what became known as world’s fairs. A vast pre-fabricated structure of iron and glass, 1,848 feet long and high enough to enclose full-grown trees, was erected along the southern edge of London’s Hyde Park and soon named the Crystal Palace. Half of its interior was devoted to British products, from giant steam engines and early bicycles to Nottingham lace and a pink glass fountain nearly 30 feet high.

The remainder was divided up into exhibits from other countries, arranged around the central transept, according to the official guidebook, “in a manner corresponding to their distances from the equator; the

products of tropical climates being brought nearest to the transept, and those of colder regions being placed at the extremities of the building.” Hundreds of visitors waited in line daily to view one of the exhibition’s crown jewels, the Koh-i-Noor diamond, displayed in a golden cage, only to be largely disappointed by the dull appearance of the giant gem.

In the south transept, though, the Swiss watch display proved a brilliant showcase for Patek’s wares. Between May 1 and October 11, 1851, over six million people – one-third of Britain’s population at the time – visited the Crystal Palace. According to Philippe, “Our display was undeniably the most important and the most superb of the whole exhibition in terms of its pocket watches. Moreover, Mr. Patek received a very flattering compliment from one of the principal watchmakers of London, Mr. Dent, who remarked to him, after examining our display: ‘Mr. Patek, you are the



Queen Victoria acquired this Patek Philippe watch (above) at London’s Great Exhibition in 1851; the Swiss stand is pictured (previous spread) in a colored lithograph. A photograph c. 1895 (right) shows the interior of the Crystal Palace, which is depicted in an earlier color engraving from 1860 (pages 38 and 39). Messrs. Patek and Philippe both attended the Paris fair (below) but didn’t meet





