

Story **Nick Foulkes** Photographs **Lee Mawdsley**

# HOMAGE TO HOROLOGY

Patek Philippe's salons – in Geneva, Paris, and London – are much more than places to buy a watch. The three premises have been beautifully designed and restored to reflect the company's ethos of tradition and innovation while retaining the individuality of each iconic location

**Not many things have stayed the same** since the middle of the nineteenth century. However, if you happened to be visiting Geneva in 1853 and had asked for the address of Patek Philippe, and then through some miracle of longevity or time travel returned to the lakeside city and asked that question today, the answer would have led you to the same handsome building on the rue du Rhône.

The 1850s had begun well for Patek Philippe. So much so that by 1853 the firm needed larger premises and moved into two stories of a building on the rue du Rhône. Here the company entered into a 15-year agreement that has so far lasted 162 years, during which time the site became an enduring part of the city landscape.

Today the historic manufacturing headquarters of Patek Philippe have been put at the disposal of its customers, for whom the hallowed house on the rue du Rhône is a sort of spiritual second home, known simply as "the salon." Unlike many other watch companies, Patek Philippe does not believe in populating the world with own-brand stores for the sake of it. Instead, as a traditional company that believes in the traditional value of making a complete range of watches – from the elegantly simple to the stupefyingly complicated – it values its relationships with its retailers, some of which are even older than the company itself.

However, in three world cities Patek Philippe has chosen to open premises that are expressions in stone and glass of the company and the watches it makes. Each reflects the character of the city where it is located and brings a further dimension to what it means to be a Patek Philippe customer. Precisely because there are only three salons, they remain special, unique and different... not unlike the customers of the Geneva marque.

The director of the Paris Salon, for instance, recounts the story of how a customer from Hong Kong ordered a minute repeater and



The newly renovated London Salon opened its doors on Bond Street last December, having expanded from 915ft<sup>2</sup> to 4,300ft<sup>2</sup>. The Paris architects AW<sup>2</sup> used materials such as leather, alabaster, sycamore, and brass in coffee and cream tones to create a sense of subdued luxury. The aesthetic is a modern interpretation of art deco, seen, for example, in the cube chandelier (above), and sweeping staircase (far left)



then flew to Paris where, on his first morning in the city, he made his way to the salon to inspect his new treasure. He pressed the slide, listened to the enchanting melody that told him the time of day, smiled seraphically, and then left the salon – without the watch. He returned the following day to listen to the watch again, and the day after that, and the day after that. He could think of no better place in which to experience his new watch than in the salon, and he sought to prolong the pleasurable sensation of taking ownership for as long as he could, only collecting the watch on the morning of the day on which he returned home.

These are special places for special people, and first among equals, of course, is the Geneva Salon. For years, united under this single roof were not just all the skills and professions necessary to transform the raw materials and unfinished components entering the watchmakers' workshops on the top floor into tiny ticking marvels but also the savoir faire and elegance to create the

perfect environment in which to sell them. That environment, in all its belle époque splendor – with its walls covered in leather from Córdoba, its famous huge safe, and its original shimmering crystal chandeliers – can still be experienced today. But now, the historic showroom has acquired a soaring double-height collection room, the walls of which comprise showcases of watches.

Impressive though the space is, lit by a chandelier even more spectacular than its nineteenth-century siblings, it is nevertheless welcoming, a place to look and linger, because, more than a place to buy watches, it is a place to experience them.

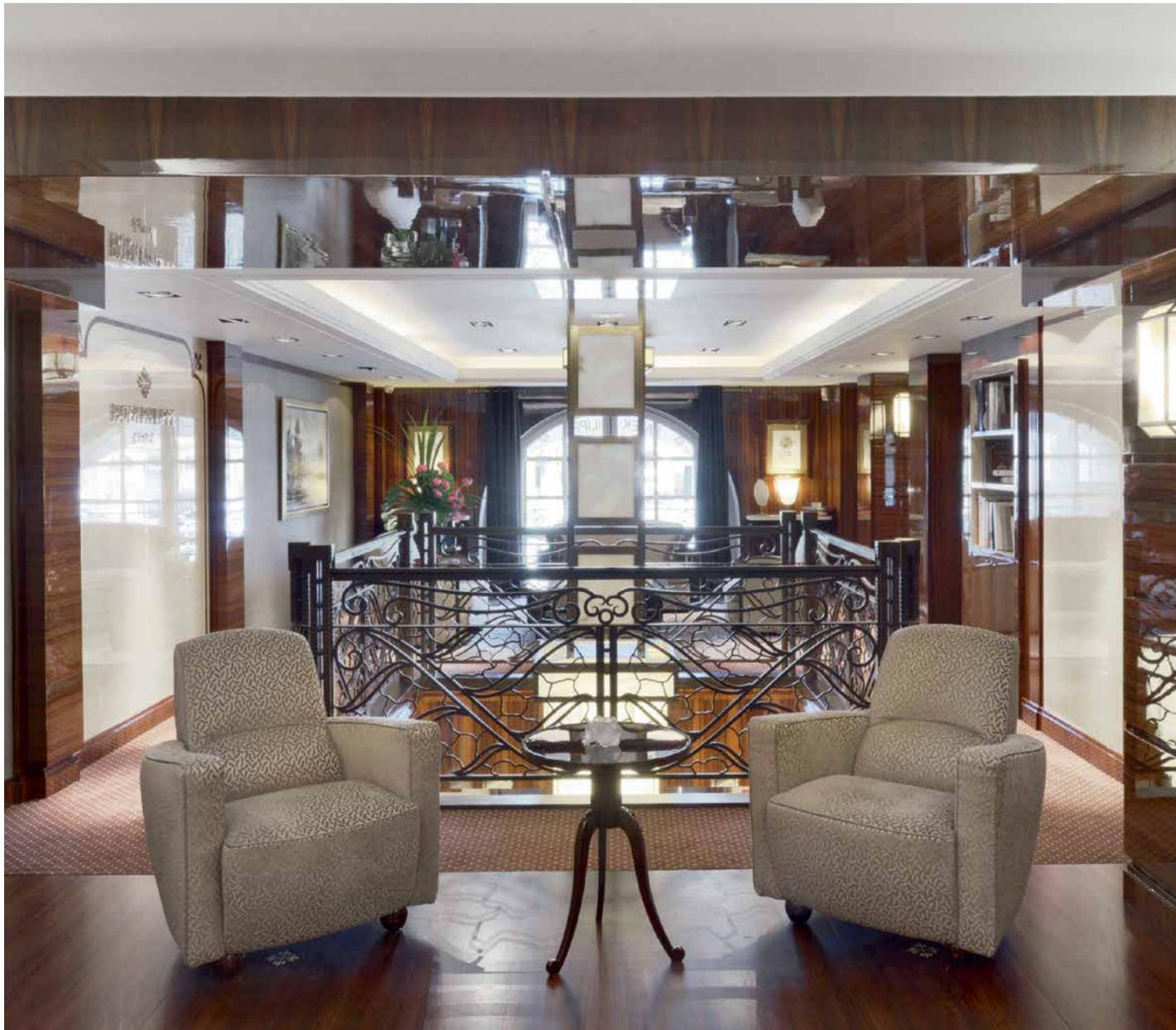
As mentioned earlier, Patek continues to believe that the role of a watch company is to make timepieces to accompany its customers wherever their lives lead them. When the historic headquarters was transformed into the salon, the brief to the architects and designers was to create an environment where the entire range of Patek Philippe's current production would be on permanent display.

But crucially since its reopening in 2006, the salon on the rue du Rhône has not just shown the watches that Patek Philippe makes; it has also explained the culture that shapes the company. The oil paintings of life on Lake Geneva are from Philippe Stern's personal collection. The watchmakers behind the glass on the first floor work in the same conditions as their colleagues at the manufacture in Plan-les-Ouates. And in the light-flooded upper floor, where the company's top watchmakers and champion *regleurs* once worked with the city at their feet, intimate dinners and lunches are hosted for collectors who come here from all over the world.

Some of the same feel is to be experienced on the Place Vendôme, where the ambience of the rue du Rhône is brought to the French capital. With windows in one of the angled corners of the world-famous square, the frontage is discreet: if the salon in Geneva is some sort of metaphorical seat of government, then its Parisian equivalent is more in the character of an embassy.

Here on the Place Vendôme, the world of Patek is faithfully reproduced: the famous window displays are inspired by those of the rue du Rhône; behind glass, a watchmaker works in the same precise ordered calm; and the richly detailed woodwork and furniture with its touch of Ruhlmann will be immediately familiar to habitués of the Geneva Salon where the same spirit of sober elegance can be found.

And while the Geneva Salon has something of the openness that one experiences looking out over the lake, the feel in Paris is more like that of entering a precious jewel box or beautifully inlaid casket. Here the dimensions concentrate the effect of the exquisite furniture and paneling until they bring to mind a railway carriage on the Orient Express in its art deco prime. One half expects to see a character from an Agatha Christie novel emerge from one of the private rooms. It is hard to imagine that this was once a bank, of which the only remaining feature is the vault



in the basement below. Yet the Paris Salon achieves intimacy without sacrificing the sense of occasion, and there is something classically French about the ambience, just as there is an ineffably English spirit about the newly reopened London Salon.

In the current century, London has reinvented itself as the crossroad of the world, a lively, vibrant city where tradition jostles with contemporaneity, two qualities that are united in the coolly elegant London Salon on Bond Street. For years it was a Lilliputian space covering just over 900 square feet on Bond Street, but in 2014 it almost quintupled in size.

However, it is not the size that strikes one on entering: it is the light. The London Salon wraps itself around a street corner and is fortunate enough to benefit from double aspect windows. And it is this airy space that welcomes the world. Some customers may fly in for a dozen hours or more to discuss the acquisition of a minute repeater. Or a lunching lady, Hermès bag in the crook of her arm, may sashay in from an afternoon's shopping to have the clasp on her much loved Twenty-4® retensioned.

Here, as in Paris and Geneva, one and all are welcomed with quiet dignity, and, if they arrive at the right time of day, a splendid cup of Earl Grey. And yet, even here, in a space that is characterized by a pale palette and pared-down elegance, clever touches recalling the grande dame on the rue du Rhône can be spotted, right down to a contemporary reworking of the tactile and textured surface of the pale leather wall covering that is a thoroughly modern take on the cordovan. However, it is not just their design or their location that makes these places so special but the people who work in them...and of course the watches that they display.✦

*For more on this subject, see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at [patek.com/owners](http://patek.com/owners)*

**IN A SPACE THAT IS CHARACTERIZED BY A PALE PALETTE AND PARED-DOWN ELEGANCE, CLEVER TOUCHES RECALL THE GRANDE DAME ON THE RUE DU RHÔNE**

Previous spread: the Geneva Salon reopened in November 2006 after two years' restoration by Groupement d'architectes SA, with a new collection room featuring a 16ft crystal chandelier. The double-height room leads on to the Napoleon III salon (right), with its original 19th-century chandeliers. The private 5th floor (left) offers views across Lake Geneva. This spread: Paris unveiled its newly renovated salon in September 2009. Designed by Alpha International, it has an intimate ambience, with detailed art deco-style woodwork and furniture

