

STORY *Suzanne Wong*
ILLUSTRATIONS *Pierre Mornet*

Style and substance

Throughout their history, women's watches have complemented clothes, setting off a dress with intriguing shapes, delicate designs, and masterful decoration, but it's the pioneering ingenuity required to fit complex feats of horological engineering into a dainty space that truly defines these pieces

Chatelaine watches were designed to hang at the hip from a belt under the hem of a bodice. The enamel miniature scenes that decorate this 53 mm watch (Inventory number S-411) held in Geneva's Patek Philippe Museum, were painted by Jean-Louis Richter. They depict the young lovers Daphnis and Chloe from the eponymous ancient Greek novel. The watch was made c.1795 and is fitted with a chatelaine and Movement No. 11 585





What do we mean by a woman's watch? What defines this category of timepieces? Observations of how brands and retailers classify their timepieces may lead us toward using case diameters as a delimiting mark between men's and women's, but there is no consensus. Is anything below 40 mm to be considered a woman's watch? No, not so. In the 1970s, a watch with a 36 mm case diameter was considered a man's timepiece. The presence of gemsetting could possibly be another criterion. A watch set with diamonds is likely designed for a woman, according to popular assumption. But there are many exceptions to this rule across the modern, vintage, and antique eras.

So here's a radical proposition: if these definitions are not useful, perhaps we should discard the category altogether. Watches are feminine or masculine to varying degrees, but mostly they can be worn by any gender. We can judge for ourselves which watches are for us and which ones are not, according to our personal preferences and style. We do not need our timepiece options decided for us in advance according to our chromosomal makeup.

A wander through the Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva will confirm rather



Top (left and right): a secret message is hidden in this 52 mm medallion watch (Inv. 5-1048) made by Bazile-Charles Le Roy in 1800. Clockwise from twelve o'clock, the initial letters of the names of the gem stones used spell out "heures d'amour." Fashions at the time were following the Empire-style silhouette, but neoclassical influences were being diluted as more surface decoration and colors other than white were coming back into vogue. Above and inset: this register, held in Patek

Philippe's archive, records the sale of watch No. 4719 (Inv. P-27) to Queen Victoria on November 30, 1851. The open-face, key winding and setting, 30.5 mm pendant watch, with a caseback that features a flower bouquet set with rose-cut diamonds on a sky-blue enamel background, was shown at the Great Exhibition in London earlier that year. It would have appeared alongside some of the world's first keyless watches, including the 1850-1851 example that is illustrated opposite

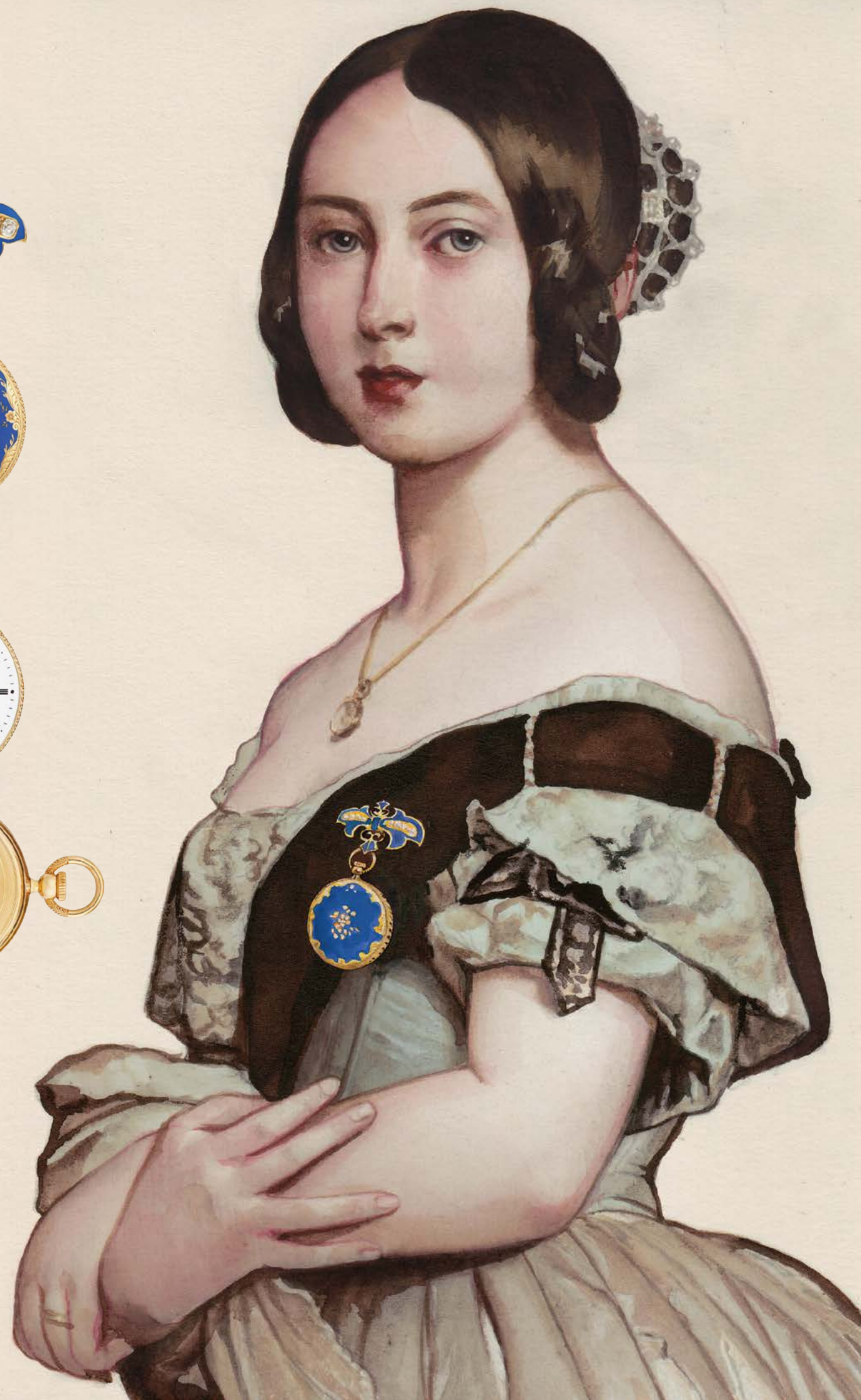
than contradict this. The antique collection includes some of the very first personal timepieces that could be worn (rather than stationary or portable clocks), built in the early sixteenth century. There is also an extensive range of Patek Philippe timepieces on display, dated from 1839 to the present day, spanning the entirety of the company's existence. Apart from specific pieces with historically verified ownership by a woman or those that are intended to be worn as items of jewelry that are indisputably feminine in their design, you might find it difficult to categorize the watches as men's or women's pieces.

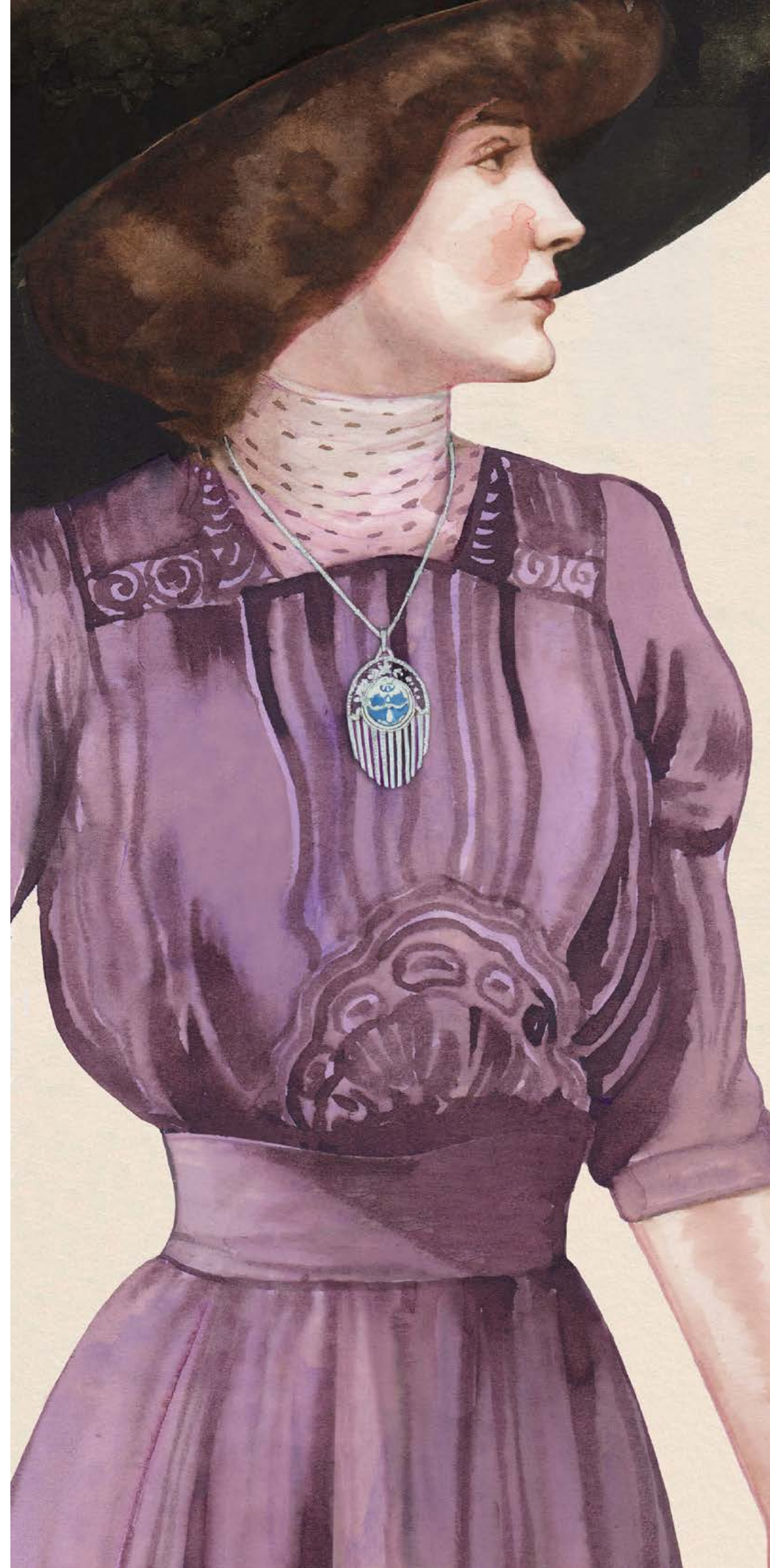
Before the twentieth century, perhaps the most reliable means of determining which side of the gender divide a watch had been made for would be to ascertain how it was worn. The wristwatch became the predominant mode of personal timepiece only in the early to mid-twentieth century as a result of evolving fashions and technical advancements in chronometry that made smaller, wrist-worn timepieces more widely available. Also, external factors such as the rise of aviation and the advent of modern trench warfare meant that the wristwatch rapidly became the personal timekeeping

PHOTOGRAPHS: JONAS MARGUET



The illustration to the right shows how the 33.2 mm open-face pendant watch above, Movement No. 4536 (Inv. P-24), with a matching detachable brooch, might have been worn by Queen Victoria. The watch, which employs Jean Adrien Philippe's innovative stem-winding system patented in 1845, was presented to the queen at London's Great Exhibition of 1851. The timepiece's yellow gold caseback is decorated with engraved scrolling, lapis-blue enamel, and diamonds





Opposite: Patek Philippe created the first true Swiss wristwatch in 1868, for Countess Koscowicz of Hungary (not illustrated here), a noted intellectual. The bracelet watch, Movement No. 27 368 (Inv. P-49), in yellow gold has a hinged cover over the dial and is set with rose-cut diamonds. This page: the designs of Paris-based Paul

Poiret dominated women's fashion in the early 1910s with the exotic influence of orientalism and the arrival of art deco, before the sobriety of the war years. Ladies' watches were usually worn as pendants, like this open-face keyless winding 40 mm "Guirlande" watch on a matching chain, made by Patek Philippe in 1911 (Inv. P-1064)



instrument of choice due to its manifest superiority in functional wear.

Before that, "wristlet" watches, as wrist-worn timepieces were called, were seen as feminine objects. The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal was said to wear his watch by tying it onto his wrist, but, by all accounts, this was seen as noteworthy and anomalous; men of the genteel classes wore their watches on chains and carried them in their pockets. Women had greater latitude in the way of personal adornment, wearing timepieces of moderate size, such as the one seen on page 5, draped around a ribbon tied at the belt or fastened to the waist via an accessory known as an *equipage* or *chatelaine* (which could also carry keys, comfit boxes, and sundries). Smaller timepieces could be pinned to the breast as brooches, hung on long chains around the

neck, or worn on the wrist. Occasionally they would even be mounted into rings, although in this case the timekeeping performance of such miniaturized watches was often secondary to their utility as jewelry objects.

Despite the wide variety of ways in which women wore their timepieces, which might be interpreted as prioritizing the decorative aspect of a watch above its functional value, there is no indication that the watches worn by women were of lesser quality compared to those worn by men. After all, they used the same movements. In fact, some of the most celebrated watches in history were made for women, such as the legendary complicated pocket watch of the queen consort of Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, and the high-complication wristwatch of Caroline Murat (née Bonaparte), both of which were made by Abraham-Louis Breguet.

The *montre à tact* or tactile watch became popular around the end of the eighteenth century. An outstanding medallion-watch example on display at the Patek Philippe Museum, and seen here on page 6, is identical to any other watch of this type apart from a few romantic touches that suggest it was made for and worn by a woman. The prominent gems that mark the hours, allowing the wearer to discreetly feel the time instead of being obliged to look at the dial mid-conversation and risk being thought rude, are boldly multicolored. Also, the initial letters of the names of the gems spell out an acrostic message, *heures d'amour*. Acrostic jewelry was all the rage in European courts at the time, and the *heures d'amour* watch is the perfect illustration of how feminine timepieces, by virtue of their greater capacity for aesthetic expression,



Left and right: the first Patek Philippe chiming wristwatch was this 1916 platinum ladies' timepiece (Inv. P-594) with an integral link bracelet. The watch chimes on the hour, the quarter hour, and then the closest five-minute interval, all from a dainty 27.1 mm case. It would be another hundred years before a minute-repeating wristwatch joined Patek Philippe's contemporary ladies' collection



decorated with diamonds, enamel, and gold filigree, and features a concealed dial. In 1916, a while before wristwatches became the prevailing form of personal timepiece, Patek Philippe made its first chiming wristwatch, a five-minute repeater cased in platinum with a delicate chain-link bracelet (see above), commissioned by a Mrs. D.O. Wickham from America (not illustrated).

In moving watches from the pocket to the wrist, the first obstacle to overcome was movement size, and undoubtedly the ability to miniaturize watch movements was key to the emergence of wristwatches. While we should not presume that feminine watches were directly driving the development of mechanical horology in this direction, we can safely conclude that feminine timepieces were often among the first to give these high-performance small movements any kind of commercial visibility.

Modern assessments of women's watch collections often include the phrase "shrink and pink," implying, dismissively, that the design of a feminine watch in the twenty-first century is, by and large, an exercise in reducing the dimensions of an existing male-targeted timepiece and dressing it in colors and materials that appeal to the stereotypical female watch buyer. This may be true in the collections of some present-day watch companies, but it's nevertheless illuminating to recall that miniaturizing a watch movement while still maintaining

ILLUSTRATION (PAGE 11): FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY ERWIN BLUMENFELD

Feminine timepieces were often among the first to give high-performance small movements commercial visibility

are able to take on additional dimensions of creative symbolism and significance.

Aesthetic creativity aside, historic watches favored by women were also at the forefront of mechanical innovation. London's Great Exhibition of 1851 was a showcase for the latest developments in contemporary technology, and the Swiss contingent naturally included watches. Queen Victoria opened the exhibition and was presented with a Patek Philippe pendant watch that could be worn as a brooch (see page 7). It was built with the

latest in horological innovation, featuring the keyless winding and setting system that was patented by Patek Philippe in 1845.

One thing is clear: women were the first to don wristwatches as a mode of carrying one's personal timepiece. The first known wristwatch made in Switzerland (which is to say it was built to be worn on the wrist, not converted from a pocket watch) was made by Patek Philippe in 1868 and is of distinctly feminine design (see page 8). It is mounted on a slim gold bracelet with an oblong case,



Just before Christian Dior launched his New Look, women's fashions were becoming more feminine again after wartime, and jewelry was to be enjoyed once more. This 1945 REF. 2126 ladies' wristwatch (Inv. P-1428) looks like a bracelet, but it has a hidden dial that slides discreetly in and out of a rectangular section on the top. The timepiece is pavé set with diamonds and Burmese sapphires, showing the revived demand for jewelry



Above, left: with the Ladies First Chronograph REF. 7071 of 2009, Patek Philippe launched the CH 29-535 PS movement with six patented innovations to optimize functionality and reliability within its 269 components. The dial is set with 136 diamonds. Above, right: in 2011 the Ladies First Minute

Repeater REF. 7000 was added to the collection. Housed in an elegant 33.7 mm rose gold case, the caliber R 27 PS is composed of 342 parts. The delicate sonorous chime that it emits is widely acclaimed for its sound quality, which is an impressive feat for such a small case diameter

a high level of aesthetics and chronometric performance has never been an easy task.

Acknowledging this truth, which I might venture to describe as axiomatic, Patek Philippe debuted its Ladies First collection in 2009. The Ladies First Chronograph REF. 7071 was the launch timepiece for the company's new chronograph caliber CH 29-535 PS. This was followed in 2011 by the Ladies First Minute Repeater REF. 7000 and the Ladies First Split-Seconds Chronograph REF. 7059, and then in 2012 by the Ladies First Perpetual Calendar REF. 7140. This collection makes Patek Philippe the only modern watch company to produce all these complications in watches that are specifically designed and made for the feminine wrist. But in the ongoing story of the evolution of feminine timepieces, there still remains one chapter tantalizingly yet to be written: the triumvirate of the minute repeater, split-seconds chronograph, and perpetual calendar all housed together in one, the prestigious Grand Complication, dimensioned for the feminine wrist. Rather poetically, it appears as though the way to seize the ultimate prize of this horological epic is to go small. ♠