

An artistic Austrian princess known for her elegance and taste owned this fabulously extravagant watch, designed by the legendary Genevan jeweler Gilbert Albert. But did one inspire the other? John Reardon speculates



The society beauty Princess Marta of Austria (above right) owned this elegant bracelet watch (above) fitted with the caliber 8''85, a movement usually reserved for men's watches. Designed by the renowned jeweler Gilbert Albert, this piece won the 1960 Prix de la ville de Genève jewelry watch award at the *Montres et Bijoux* show in Geneva

**The woman who would become** Princess Marta zu Windisch-Graetz of Austria was astonishing and astonishingly beautiful. Born in 1908 in the Ukrainian city of Nagyszöllös, she had blue eyes, tumbling hair, and the high cheekbones, sophisticated smile, and intelligent gaze of Grace Kelly, perhaps, or Audrey Hepburn.

Her romantic life attests to her charm and her passionate, exuberant character: she was married five times – twice, like Elizabeth Taylor, to the same man. The last marriage proved the right one, when Marta met the love of her life, the dashing Prince Vincenz Alfred zu Windisch-Graetz. It was 1945, the year the war ended. Marta was 37 to Vincenz's 32, and utterly striking. At last she was home – part of one of Europe's most ancient noble families.

Based in Rome, the couple traveled widely, living for a time in Cairo, Vienna, Singapore, and New Delhi. Cultured and elegant, Marta spoke six languages, and at the age of 40 she enrolled in art school in Paris to continue a youthful interest she had neglected. She showed immediate promise, developing her style through realism and abstract to bold figurative work, and by the age of 50 had become a respected painter.

If a watch were to encircle the wrist of such a stylish Renaissance woman, it would have to be unique. This brings us to Gilbert Albert. Born in Geneva in 1930, Albert was a visionary jeweler who started training at just 15. Ten years later, he was spotted by Patek Philippe and began working at the company as a designer and head of creation. His work is breathtaking, notable for its use of unconventional naturalistic materials, from leather to scarabs and even fossils. At



Patek Philippe, he took inspiration from modern art, particularly Brancusi and Mondrian, and from sculpture – he was drawn to unusual triangular or rhomboid shapes.

Albert, now aged 85, created designs during his 1955-1962 tenure at Patek Philippe that remain coveted, still avant-garde. He would win many prizes, but in 1960 he made one particular piece that won an award from the city of Geneva. We don't know if he had the princess in mind; he may simply have been driven to create something that was groundbreaking, hoping it would meet its match.

It's an extremely fine 18k gold bracelet watch, with a concealed dial. Tiny multisized and varicolored gold elements have been meticulously positioned, like a mosaic, to form the bracelet; the immaculate finish suggests Albert made it with his own hands. Twelve pearls of different sizes and colors, from creamy white to near black, cling to the gold as if to exquisite seaweed. Truly elemental, it's something a mermaid princess might wear. It feels like a miniature universe, making order out of chaos, exactly what Marta's life, from World War II to her turbulent romances, had been. She bought it in 1961 and kept it for the rest of her life.

After the princess's death in 1998, the watch remained in her family until 2004. It now resides in the Patek Philippe Museum – a testament to a woman ahead of her time and a man with a unique creative vision: an artist princess and an artist designer. ♦

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