



GRAND COMMISSIONERS

The tale of two men in the early twentieth century, both determined to own the most elaborately complicated timepiece ever crafted, demonstrates a sea change in the American elite's attitude toward collecting, finds Stacy Perman

In the blink of a single epoch, from the end of the American Civil War in 1865 to the stock market crash of 1929, America emerged from Europe's shadow as the global superpower. It was a time of remarkable industrial transformation, incomparable technological growth, and for some, unimaginable riches. Archly dubbed "the Gilded Age" by Mark Twain in his 1873 novel of the same name, the period witnessed the arrival of America's industrial barons, and with them the inauguration of wealth culture.

Families such as the Carnegies, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts, formed a newly minted social aristocracy. They lived in a whirl of abundance; for them, every silver cloud possessed a golden lining. Without exception, lavish spending followed immense fortunes. They built luxurious mansions that dwarfed royal castles. At the Vanderbilt ball of 1883, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II upstaged all of New York society by wearing a stunning gown made from white satin, trimmed with diamonds and – as electricity was then all the rage – hidden batteries that allowed her to light up. Certainly, few were fazed when the Chicago industrialist Cornelius Kingsley Garrison Billings celebrated the opening of his Manhattan stables, serving his 36 guests dinner as they sat astride horses inside a ballroom. While grand, such displays also served to highlight the country's growing economic and social rifts.

Yet it was precisely within this insular world that such grandiloquence spawned the notion of the industrial baron as society connoisseur. The moneyed elite set out to cloak themselves in culture and the kind of sophistication that their fortunes could bring. Moreover, the rivalry and one-upmanship that marked business was soon expressed in a rapacious appetite to outclass in society as well. It was art as quarry. With unfettered zeal, America's tycoons registered their taste for Old Master paintings, tapestries, sculptures, and all manner of European patrimony. Later, many of these private collections formed the basis of some of America's most important public art institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and New York's Frick Collection. At the same time, among wealthy Americans there was a growing interest in watch collecting.

For centuries, horology had been the exclusive domain of royalty. These magnificent instruments – connecting science and art across time – were available to but the narrowest of circles, so they became symbols of power and influence. The finest watchmakers sought the patronage of crowned heads, dazzling and honoring them with spectacular creations. During her 45-year reign, England's Queen Elizabeth I came to own numerous timekeepers including a watch fashioned into a bejeweled gold bracelet – a gift from her rumored lover, the Earl of Leicester. Today, the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul houses many clocks and watches dating back to the seventeenth century. They stand as a striking reminder of the vibrant Ottoman market, from a time when the sultans enjoyed timepieces as astronomical amusements and when Europe's best watchmakers thronged to then-Constantinople to awe them.

By the early twentieth century, among America's emerging plutocracy, an antique timepiece was viewed much like the Old Master paintings they liberally hung on their mansion walls: a sign of affluence and a worthy collectible object with an appropriate historical pedigree. Notably, the banker John Pierpont Morgan assembled more than two hundred timepieces, including a musical watch presented by Napoleon to the King of Naples in 1800.

When it comes to twentieth-century horological passions, however, as watch connoisseurs it is the names James Ward Packard and Henry Graves Jr. that tower above all others. Archetypes of American success – Packard, a self-made entrepreneur, and Graves, the scion of a Wall Street fortune – these gentlemen altered the game of watch collecting in more ways than one. Although their lives and personalities differed greatly, each came to desire the same thing: the grandest of all grand complications; and they turned to Patek Philippe to play horological wizard to their magical ambitions. Over the course

Opposite page: the New York banker Henry Graves Jr. (top left and right) was an avid collector who acquired art, rare coins, and Chinese porcelain as well as exceptional timepieces. Engineer James Ward Packard (bottom left and right) was fascinated with the intricate mechanical challenges of watchmaking. Right: Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt II wore the fancy dress costume "Electric Light" to the Vanderbilt ball of 1883. The costume celebrated the invention of the light bulb, a symbol of the new modern era



of three decades this troika accomplished astonishing things with fifteenth-century spring technology and twentieth-century yearnings.

Neither Packard nor Graves had any interest in siphoning off timepieces from history, either as glittering trophies or for scholarly pursuit. Rather both men commissioned entire collections, calibrated to their whims and fancies, for their personal use. At a time when most collectors left it to the watchmaker to showcase its proficiency and artistic brio, Packard and Graves took a hand in their commissions. The latter was known to approve design drawings in advance, specifying featured complications from tourbillons to perpetual calendars, down to the minutest detail. When the pair became serious connoisseurs and devotees of Patek Philippe, each was at a crucial juncture in life.

James Ward Packard was born into the age of machines on November 5, 1863. He was the second son of a prominent self-made businessman with interests in lumber and sawmills in Warren, Ohio. Fascinated by mechanics, he owned every model of every gadget. A tinkerer, Packard famously took everything apart, usually improving things upon putting them back together. At 21, he graduated from Lehigh University

in Pennsylvania, the youngest mechanical engineer in the school's history. In 1890 he launched the Packard Electric Company, which pioneered the incandescent light bulb. Always the inventor, he kept over a thousand inventions of his own design, including an elevator and electrical turnstile system, in the stately mansion he shared with his wife, Elizabeth.

In 1899 he founded what later became known as the Packard Motor Car Company, recognized for introducing America's first luxury automobile. The Packard featured graceful lines and advanced engineering, and Packard the engineer introduced a number of innovations that all became industry standards, starting with the steering wheel. He was animated by an acute aesthetic sense wedded to technology's bold promise. As the president of Packard Motor later remarked of him, "Crudeness and imperfections hurt his sensibilities." Much like his watches, Packard's automobiles were exquisite objects housing innovative technology.

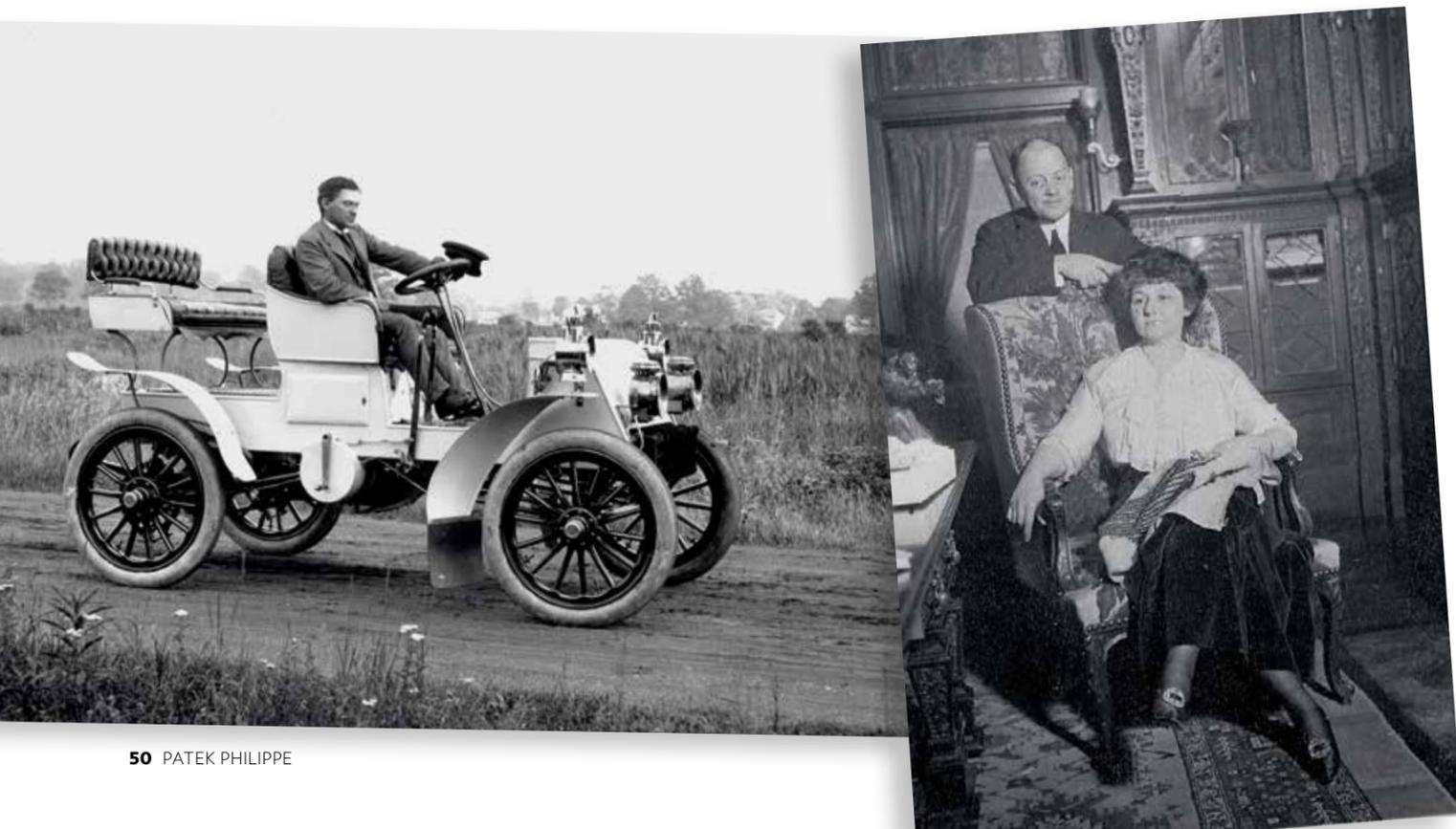
In contrast, despite his place in New York society Henry Graves Jr. was a man who was as private and taciturn in his public revelations as he was lavish in his lifestyle. If not for his watch collection, he almost certainly would have been forgotten by history.



Packard's gold ring watch (above), made in 1917, was the only timepiece of its kind known to have been produced by Patek Philippe during this period. The Packard motorcar (below left) featured the automobile magnate's new invention, the steering wheel. Henry Graves Jr. pictured with his wife, Florence (below right)



Left: the Graves supercomplication with 24 complications surpassed all previous horological records in 1933, the year of its delivery, and claimed the title of the most complicated watch ever made. The yellow gold, double-dial pocket watch, made up of 900 individual parts, took almost 5 years to complete. Below: the most famous watch Packard commissioned, No. 198 023, was delivered in 1927 and featured 10 complications. Bottom: Packard's ebony cane with a silver handle – complete with spare ivory knob – is thought to be the only walking stick watch Patek Philippe has made



Graves was born on March 11, 1868, in Orange, New Jersey, to an influential family whose fortune was buoyed on the railroads, banking, and commerce. His father, Henry Graves Sr., a New York Stock Exchange governor, co-founded the Wall Street firm Maxwell & Graves after the Civil War. Graves *filis* joined his father bankrolling and profiting handsomely from every engine driving the industrial economy.

In 1896 he married Florence Isabelle Preston, the daughter of a wealthy commodities broker. It was a marriage of money and pedigree because Mrs. Graves's family tree took root with the emperor Charlemagne. The couple and their four children lived a perfectly lacquered existence at their 10-acre Irvington-on-Hudson estate as well as at their Fifth Avenue Manhattan duplex. Traveling by private railroad car to their Great Camp in the Adirondacks, Eagle Island, the family summered alongside the Rockefellers.

If Packard was a builder of things, Graves was a buyer of them. He scrupulously educated himself in connoisseurship at the side of his father, an avowed art collector, who was one of the country's leading aficionados of rare Chinese porcelain. Uncommonly competitive, Graves Jr. excelled as an equestrian, yachtsman, and marksman. But his true passion was for collecting, and as in sport, his goal was to win.

Graves had an incredible eye and sought exquisite objects without rival: Old Master etchings, American Revolution-era naval prints, and French paperweights. At times he even surpassed his father when it came to procuring rare Chinese porcelain. His extraordinary coin collection included an 1804 silver dollar, also known as the "King of Coins." A relentless predator, for him the joy came from the hunt.

But the quality that defined Graves's collections was how zealously he kept them under wraps. It was only following a single auction sale in 1936, in which his Albrecht Dürer *Adam and Eve* engraving fetched an astonishing \$10,000, that those outside a select group became aware of the sheer quantity of valuable works with which he had long surrounded himself.

Packard's and Graves's lives intersected over timepieces. In watches both men discovered a miniature world of hidden greatness. For Packard, they tendered precision engineering on the tiniest scale; for Graves they offered perfection of an aesthetic kind.

Packard first became serious about mechanical watches, or rather complicated timepieces, while



working at the electric light company Sawyer-Man in New York City during the late 1880s. With offices near Maiden Lane – the city’s watch and jewelry district – Packard scoured the crooked lane’s many shops, absorbing the finest watchmaking specimens.

An engineer, Packard was a fevered refiner and solver of problems. Discovering innovative combinations of complications stirred his intellect. He was particularly taken with minute repeaters. In Patek Philippe he found an inspired partner. In 1905, Packard received his first known Patek Philippe grand complication (No. 125 009), an 18k gold chronograph minute repeater, with a perpetual calendar and petite and grande sonnerie. The piece signaled the start of a significant relationship.

The special connection that Packard enjoyed with Patek Philippe over time can be symbolized in a pair of unique pieces – neither a pocket watch. The first, an 18k gold ring watch (No. 174 659) delivered in 1917, is the only known such timepiece that Patek produced during this period. A year later, Packard, who enjoyed regular walks near his home recording distance, time, and climate in a leather diary, received a cane watch (No. 174 826). The singular piece was made of an ebony stick topped with a silver twist-off clock and a second knob made of ivory.

Graves’s interest in horology began like that of most men of his milieu, where the ownership of a fine gold pocket watch was a symbol of status and wealth. It was his regular patronage of Tiffany & Co. that initially brought him into Patek Philippe’s orbit. In particular, the watchmaker’s Geneva Observatory prizewinners attracted his attention – not surprising given his aptitude for excellence, speed, and rarity. Notably, Graves acquired a number of

pieces, including the only three Patek Philippe platinum tourbillon minute repeaters ever produced – all prize winners.

While Packard reveled in the technological journey, Graves appreciated the pocket watch as a symbol of excellence, one that could be tailored to his desires and held in the palm of his hand. Soon his interest evolved from simply securing the finest chronometers to owning timepieces that contained as many complications as possible. He yearned for something in every category, and then for the best in each category. Eventually he sought pieces without equal.

Working largely through Tiffany, he too commissioned several unique pieces. Among them was one of Patek’s earliest coin-form

Above: Packard the yachtsman navigates Lake Chautauqua in New York (left). Ever the explorer, he took part in many road trips during which he would test out his automobiles. He is pictured here (right) driving past Grant’s tomb in New York City, where the remains of the 18th American president lie. Opposite page, from left: Graves with Florence and

their two youngest children, Gwen and George; Henry Graves Jr. married Florence Isabelle Preston, the daughter of a wealthy commodities broker, in 1896. Their family coat of arms featured the motto *Esse Quam Videri* – “To be, rather than to seem” – which was engraved on the couple’s silver, on Graves’s cufflinks, and on many of his most prized watches

watches (No. 812 471), in which a secret latch on the side of a 1904 20-dollar gold coin sprang open to reveal a clock. Later, when fashion turned its back on pocket watches, Graves’s enthusiasm turned to wristwatches. He came to own three of only four Patek Philippe tonneau-shaped minute repeaters (two encased in platinum).

In 1916, however, Packard received a gold grand complication (No. 174 129) with 16 complications, featuring *foudroyante*, measuring time increments to a fraction of a second. A remarkable instrument, news of its arrival circulated among horophiles. It was this single pocket watch that shifted the gentlemen’s ambitions into high gear. Graves had begun his own commissioning of grand complications, including No. 174 961 that incorporated 12 complications, four fewer than Packard’s *foudroyante*.

From this point on, the men commissioned watches at a furious pace. In 1927, during an extended stay at the Cleveland Clinic, a gravely ill Packard received the “Packard” (No. 198 023), perhaps the most important of his oeuvre. The astronomical watch featured

PACKARD AND GRAVES BOTH COMMISSIONED ENTIRE COLLECTIONS CALIBRATED TO THEIR WHIMS AND FANCIES, SOLELY FOR THEIR PERSONAL USE

PHOTOGRAPHS: © STACY PERMAN, A GRAND COMPLICATION: THE RACE TO BUILD THE WORLD’S MOST LEGENDARY WATCH (ATRIA BOOKS/SIMON & SCHUSTER)

a sky chart with five hundred gold stars perfectly calculated in magnitude over Warren, Ohio – Patek Philippe’s first celestial map. When Packard died barely a year later, he believed this watch had catapulted him to the apex of grand complications.

Graves, meanwhile, had called for a reportedly secret meeting with Patek Philippe. His instructions were to produce “the most complicated watch,” one that was “impossibly elaborate” and contained “the maximum possible number of complications.” This began a five-year odyssey to build the supercomplication the “Graves” (No. 198 385), a magnificent double-dial pocket watch of nine hundred individual parts and 24 complications, that ranks as one of the most coveted timepieces to this day.

While the supercomplication provided Graves with his capstone, it also marked something of a beginning. Indeed, the transcendent instruments made a century ago for Packard and Graves comprise an exquisite tradition, a strand of horological DNA that can be found across Patek Philippe’s numerous contemporary grand complications from the Calibre 89, which celebrated the watchmaker’s 150th anniversary in 1989, to the Sky Moon Tourbillon, introduced in 2001, and its most recent iteration, the Grandmaster Chime, in 2014. They are living proof of a history, encased in gold, that tells the tale of an earlier time. ❖

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