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 elites’ attitude toward collecting, finds Stacy Perman.

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 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 hall 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.

As the two men walked down the corridors of Timepiece Hall at the 1924 Chicago World’s Fair, one of the city’s organizers named the event “The Century of Progress.” Packard and Graves, however, had a more personal agenda. By the late twenties, the American industrial barons had come 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 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.

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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 brío, 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. As the president of Packard Motor later remarked of Packard's and Graves's lives intersected over time – the marriage of money and pedigree because Mrs. Graves's daughter of a wealthy commodities broker. It was a marriage of money and pedigree because Mrs. Graves's daughter of a wealthy commodities broker. 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working at the electric light company Sawyer-Man in New York City during the late 1880s. An engineer, Packard was a revered finder 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 1903, 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. 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 gentleman’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, Packard revealed 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 watches (No. 812 473), in which a secret latch on the side of a 1904 20-dollar gold coin sprung 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 encaixed in platinum).

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 contemporaneous grand complications from the Calibre 89, which celebrated the watchmaker’s 150th anniversary in 1989, to the Sky Moon Tourbillon, introduced in 2004, and its most recent iteration, the Grandmaster Chime, in 2014. They are living proof of a history, encaixed in gold, that tells the tale of an earlier time. For more on this subject see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at patek.com/owners