

Story **Christopher Stocks**

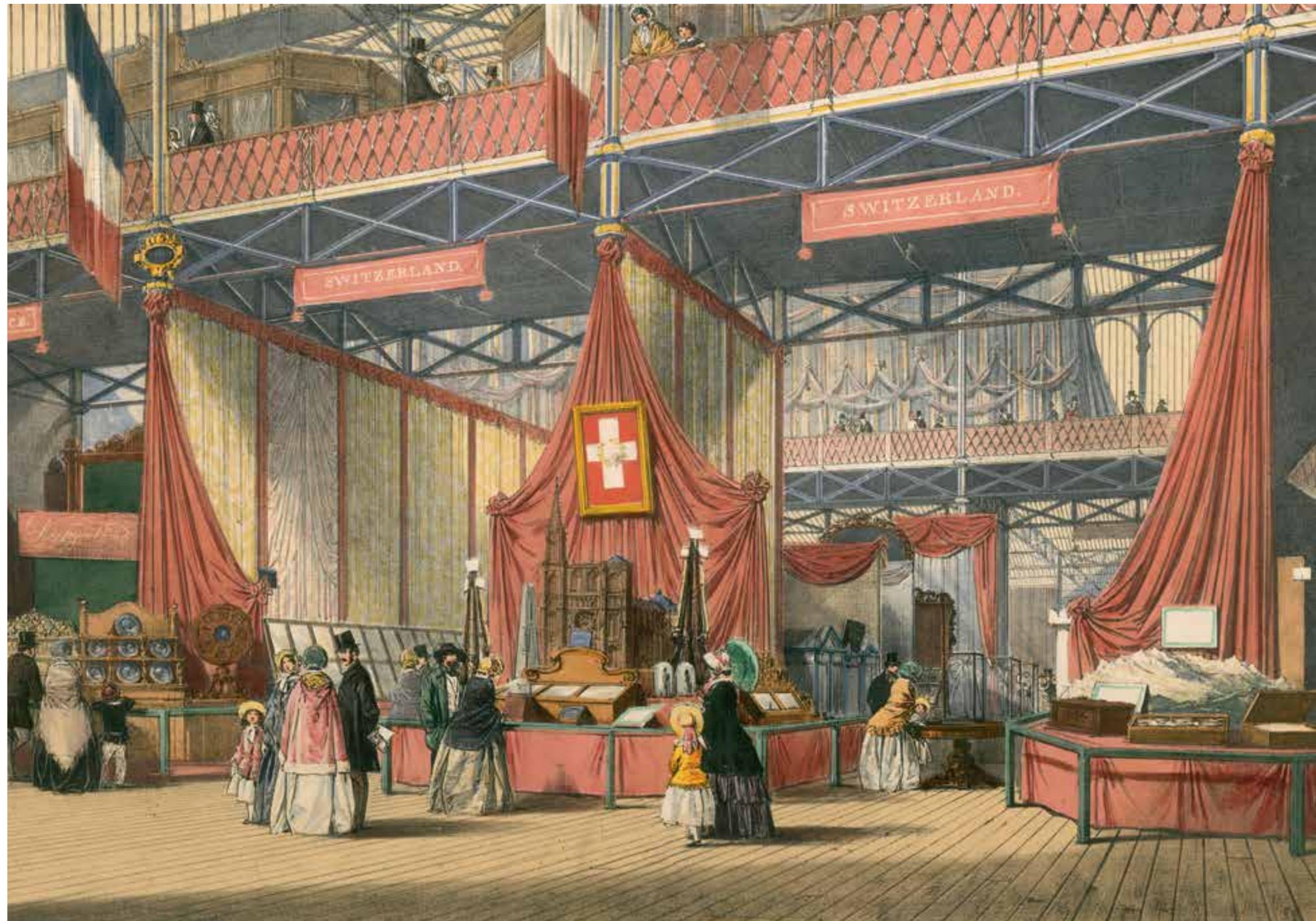
# INDUSTRY OF NATIONS

Great exhibitions of the nineteenth century – held in the world’s major cities – brought together innovators and industrialists at a time of unprecedented growth

Among the great changes that have swept across the world as part of the tide of history, the Industrial Revolution must rank as one of the strongest currents. From its beginning in the late eighteenth century, it spread swiftly across Europe and the United States, drawing millions of workers to the ever-expanding cities, making rapid improvements in transport, productivity, and communications, and laying the foundations for the modern world. In France, industrialization had gathered pace in the wake of the 1789 revolution, and among its most enduring legacies were the government-sponsored fairs that brought manufacturers together from all around the country.

The highly successful French Industrial Exposition was held in Paris in 1844, in a vast temporary structure on the Champs-Élysées, and it was here that Antoine Norbert de Patek came across Jean Adrien Philippe’s brilliantly innovative keyless winding mechanism. Although the two men didn’t actually meet at the exhibition, this event was to mark the start of Patek & Cie. Even in those early years, Patek was thinking about foreign markets and how to promote the company abroad. As a Polish émigré who had wandered Europe before finding a safe haven in Switzerland, he was keenly aware of the dangers of relying on a single market. Though the young Patek was an ardent supporter of independence for his own country, the businessman in him must have felt his worst fears had been justified by the uprisings that swept across Europe in 1848, toppling monarchies and disrupting the international trade in luxury goods.

Fortunately there was one country whose wealth and social stability seemed to offer continued opportunity: Britain. As Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, wrote to his cousin, the King of Prussia, “We have no fear here either of an uprising or an assassination.” Britain had the biggest economy in the world and its largest city, London, seemed the obvious place to go. So when



– perhaps inspired by the success of the 1844 Paris show – Prince Albert announced that the capital would host a Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in 1851, Patek was ready to spring into action.

The Great Exhibition was a defining moment of the nineteenth century, and it launched a whole series of what became known as world’s fairs. A vast pre-fabricated structure of iron and glass, 1,848 feet long and high enough to enclose full-grown trees, was erected along the southern edge of London’s Hyde Park and soon named the Crystal Palace. Half of its interior was devoted to British products, from giant steam engines and early bicycles to Nottingham lace and a pink glass fountain nearly 30 feet high.

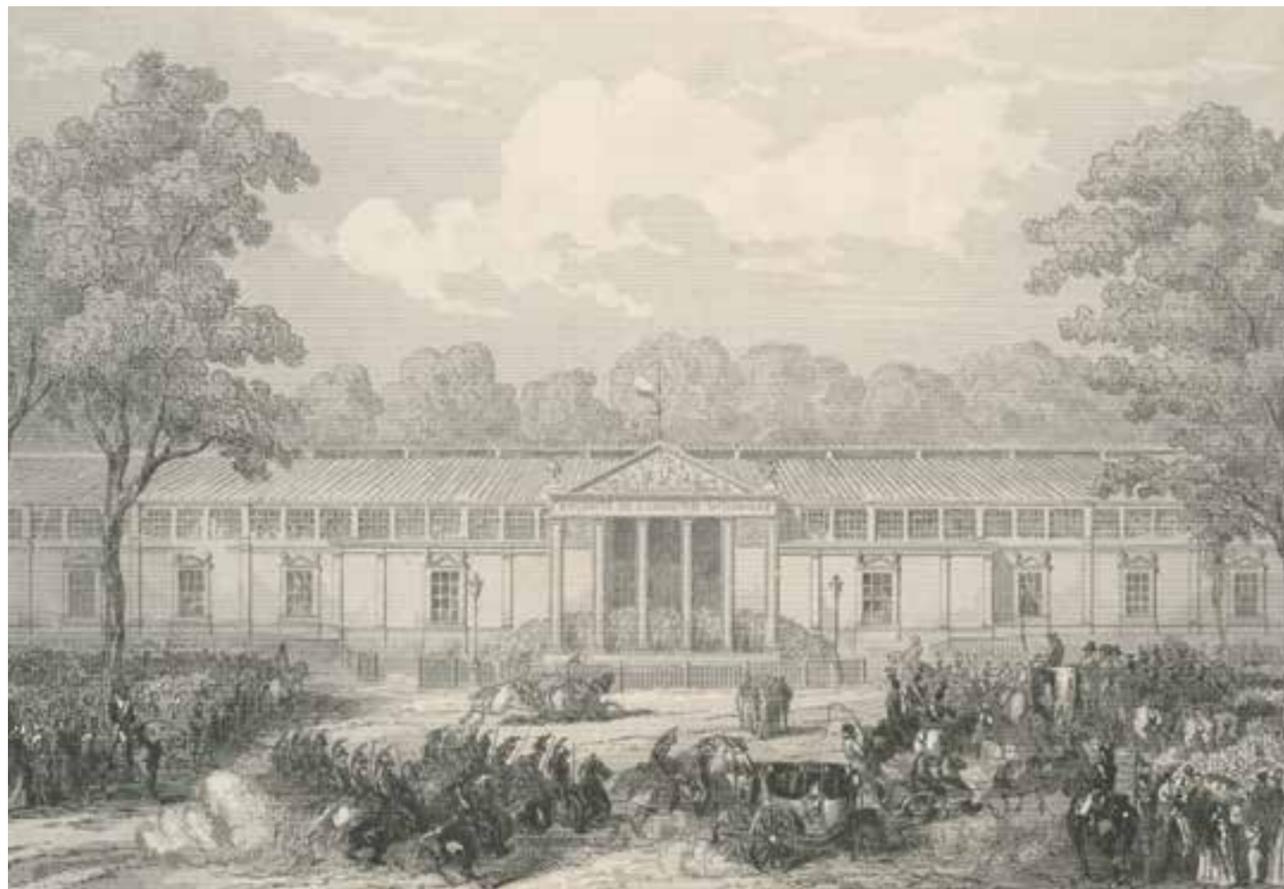
The remainder was divided up into exhibits from other countries, arranged around the central transept, according to the official guidebook, “in a manner corresponding to their distances from the equator; the

products of tropical climates being brought nearest to the transept, and those of colder regions being placed at the extremities of the building.” Hundreds of visitors waited in line daily to view one of the exhibition’s crown jewels, the Koh-i-Noor diamond, displayed in a golden cage, only to be largely disappointed by the dull appearance of the giant gem.

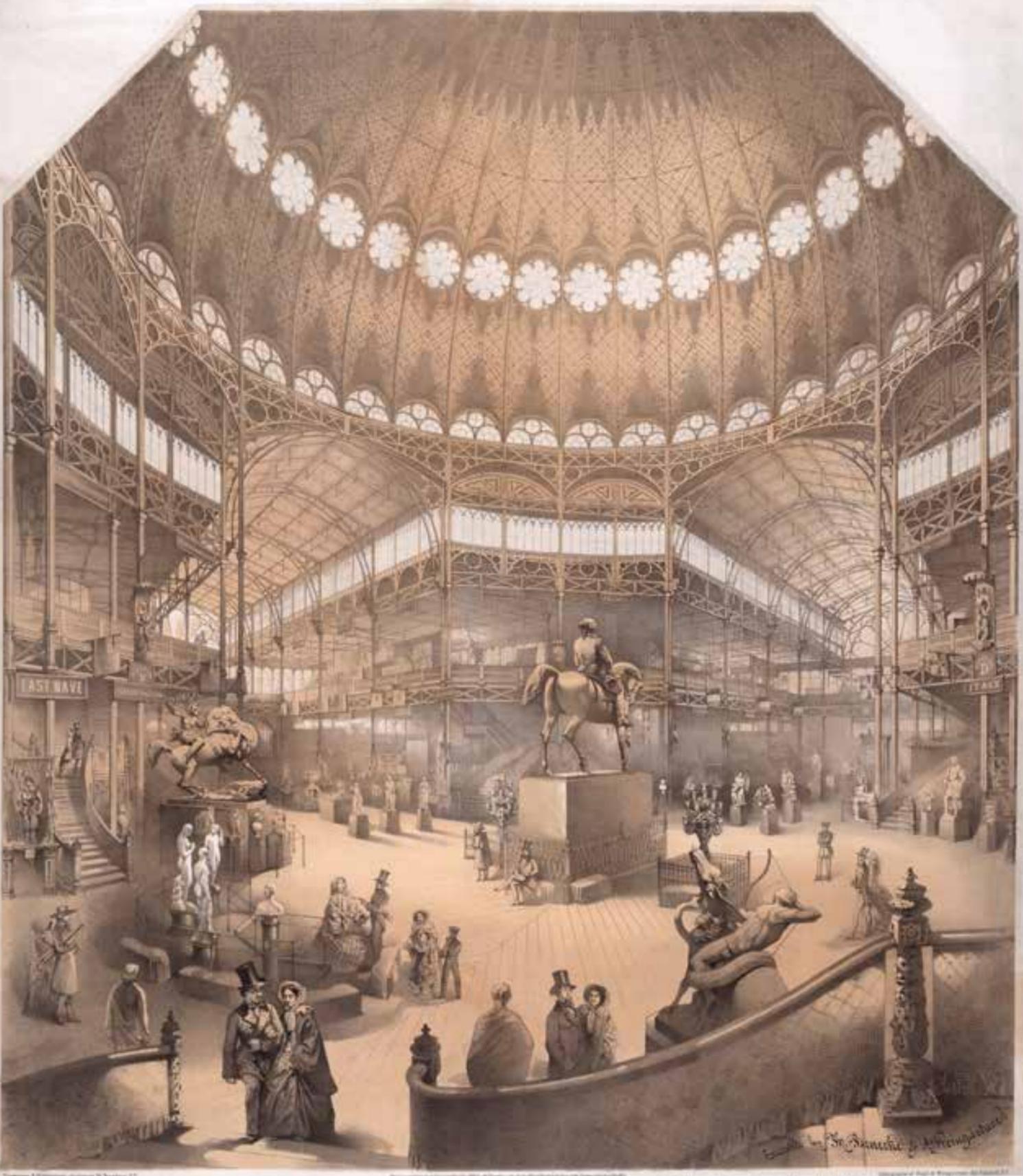
In the south transept, though, the Swiss watch display proved a brilliant showcase for Patek’s wares. Between May 1 and October 11, 1851, over six million people – one-third of Britain’s population at the time – visited the Crystal Palace. According to Philippe, “Our display was undeniably the most important and the most superb of the whole exhibition in terms of its pocket watches. Moreover, Mr. Patek received a very flattering compliment from one of the principal watchmakers of London, Mr. Dent, who remarked to him, after examining our display: ‘Mr. Patek, you are the



Queen Victoria acquired this Patek Philippe watch (above) at London’s Great Exhibition in 1851; the Swiss stand is pictured (previous spread) in a colored lithograph. A photograph c. 1895 (right) shows the interior of the Crystal Palace, which is depicted in an earlier color engraving from 1860 (pages 38 and 39). Messrs. Patek and Philippe both attended the Paris fair (below) but didn’t meet







Interior View of the New York Crystal Palace for the Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations.

TAKEN ON THE FIRST OF DECEMBER 1853.

The building, designed by Paxton and Shrewsbury, was erected at Rensselaer Square in the City of New York, to be the Repository for the Manufactures of the American people, and to be dedicated to the use of the Legislature of the State of New York, on the 25th day of March 1853. It is situated in a beautiful location, bounded by the Government of the United States, the City of New York, and the City of New York, and is the largest building ever erected in America. The building is 100 feet high, and 100 feet wide, and is the largest building ever erected in America. The building is 100 feet high, and 100 feet wide, and is the largest building ever erected in America.

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The Crystal Palace on the site of the 1853 New York world's fair (left and below), in midtown Manhattan, burned down in 1858. The fair was the first of many held in America during the

"golden age" of exhibitions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In Chicago in 1893, Patek Philippe was represented on the jury as well as being among the exhibitors (right)



King of watchmakers!" But the truly royal seal of approval came in August, when Queen Victoria visited the Swiss display and bought a powder-blue enamel Patek (now in the Patek Philippe Museum), later ordering a gold, hunter-cased chronometer for Prince Albert. It was the start of a royal connection that continues to this day.

Behind the scenes, though, the Swiss exhibit was slightly less than perfect. Hundreds of watches from different manufacturers were crammed into a single huge case, each piece identified by a numbered card – which no one had thought to secure. "Countless times did I see Professor Colladon rearrange and fix the number cards with such persistent yet futile care," Patek recalls, "as, a quarter of an hour afterwards, the vibrations of the floor and the impact of people passing by would simply reproduce the same disarray."

The Great Exhibition was a resounding success – financially, in terms of visitor numbers, and as a way of demonstrating Britain's wealth and power to the world – so other countries scrambled to hold world's fairs of their own. First off the mark was the United States, which already saw itself as an emerging superpower, and whose large-scale manufacturing was, if anything, more advanced than Britain's own. On July 14, 1853, the Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations opened in Reservoir Square (now Bryant Park) in New York, complete with its own Crystal Palace and an observation tower over 300 feet tall.

Though it wasn't as spectacularly successful as the Great Exhibition (the New York fair received only a million visitors and lost US\$300,000), it was the first of five American world's fairs that Patek Philippe participated in between 1853 and 1915, firmly establishing the company's reputation in the U.S. (It also provided the impetus for Patek's first visit to the States just a few weeks later – though this trip did not go without incident. The Atlantic crossing took 14 days instead of 10 due to the appalling winter storms. And Patek's room was then burgled on his first night in New York, with everything of value stolen from his trunk.)

Still, Patek, Philippe & Cie – Fabricants à Genève (as the firm had become in 1851), won a silver medal at the New York fair and cemented its relationship with Tiffany, which was to become the company's most important and longest-standing representative in the U.S. In all, the firm won 20 gold medals at international exhibitions between 1844 and 1923; all were proudly displayed at the entrance to its Geneva boutique.

Yet even as the world's fairs grew ever larger and more well established, Patek realized that, as a means of reaching new markets, their promise had already peaked. By the time of his death in 1877, the mass media was already disseminating information and advertising to a far wider market than even the largest exhibition could hope to reach. As for gold medals, they looked very pretty in the boutique, but

after 1873 their prestige was increasingly supplanted in Patek's eyes by the Geneva Observatory timekeeping precision trials – not least, one imagines, because Patek Philippe watches won the top five Geneva Observatory awards the year after they were begun.

By the late nineteenth century, the tide of history had moved on. Though the company was to participate in further world's fairs well into the twentieth century, it was these early exhibitions that really helped establish its renown. Antoine Norbert de Patek may have begun life as a victim of his times, but he showed that, with will and imagination, history's great currents could, at least to a certain extent, be harnessed to his own ends.

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



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