Perpetual calendar watches have long delighted collectors with their ability to anticipate the days to come. And, looking back, it’s only fitting that these of all Patek Philippe complications should have such a traceable lineage. Nick Foulkes reports

The number 97 975 appears neatly on the dial just below the moon-phase indicator at three o’clock, and is cupped by the legend Patek Philippe & Cie Geneve. A name. A number. A piece of horological history.

Of all the complications with which Patek Philippe is associated, it is arguably the perpetual calendar that is the most evocative and mysterious. There is something magical about the idea of a small mechanical machine that can foretell the future, which, after all, what the perpetual calendar does, informing its wearer of the day, date, and state of the moon, taking into account the unwieldiness of the Gregorian calendar with its months of varying length and its clumsy quadrennial adjustment of the addition of a day to the month of February.

Perpetual calendars have been associated with Patek Philippe since the early days of the firm, and in 1889 Jean-Adrien Philippe’s flair for mechanical invention in this, as in so many other fields, was recognized with a patent, Swiss patent No. 1018, protecting the design of Patek Philippe’s perpetual calendar mechanism.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the perpetual calendar became the plaything of the plutocrats of America’s Gilded Age. Much in the way that the mercantile elite of the late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlands commissioned still-life paintings that, with their depiction of food, drink, and flowers, provided a variant on the memento mori and its reminder that all life ends in decay, so the tycoons of another mercantile culture were fascinated by the idea that they could keep eternity in their vest pockets. Even the most swaggering of men could not

FORECASTING THE FUTURE

No. 97 975 (left) was Patek Philippe’s – and the world’s – first perpetual calendar wristwatch, the company coupled another first with the Ref. 96 (right), by fitting a retrograde perpetual calendar inside the confines of a strap watch. These innovations established the company as master of the complicated wristwatch.
fail to be humbled by the thought that the timepiece in his pocket could predict a future so distant that he and his descendants would have long turned to dust.

Patek Philippe No. 57 375 is the perfect example of such a watch, the quartet of sub-dials symmetrically placed like points of the compass, the blue-steel “spade” hands tracing the time around an elegant dial, and a third needle-like indicator pointing to the date beyond the minute track.

What made No. 57 375 so remarkable was that its case featured beautifully pierced lugs securing it on a strap. This was the first Patek Philippe perpetual calendar wristwatch. More than that, it was the first perpetual calendar wristwatch made by any company.

As such, the timepiece, which was released in 1935, marks a moment when watchmaking changed. Before this the wristwatch was a fashionable neologism, a trend worn by those who took exercise; the place for a serious watch was still the pocket. When No. 57 375 made its debut, transferring the hallowed perpetual calendar mechanism from the dignified environment of the gold-cased pocket watch to the end of the arm, the wristwatch could be said to have come of age.

And it was with the invention of the perpetual calendar wristwatch that Patek Philippe began laying the foundation upon which it built its unsurpassed position as the master of the complicated wristwatch. In 1937 the marque fitted a strap watch, a Ref. 96, with a retrograde perpetual calendar, the first time this feat had been accomplished within the confines of a wristwatch timepiece. With such individual chefs had been accomplished within the confines of a camera and the bolder tastes of the market could predict a future so distant that he and his descendants would have long turned to dust.

The ultra-thin Ref. 3350 (left), launched in 1985, during the quartz crisis, was fitted with the legendary self-winding caliber 240 q movement.

Patek Philippe created the world’s first perpetual calendar wristwatch when it used a manually wound movement—the first time this could be done when this was first done, the first such watch was still the pocket. When No. 57 375 made its debut, transferring the hallowed perpetual calendar mechanism from the dignified environment of the gold-cased pocket watch to the end of the arm, the wristwatch could be said to have come of age.

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The ultra-thin Ref. 3350 (left), launched in 1985, during the quartz crisis, was fitted with the legendary self-winding caliber 240 q movement.
self-winding wristwatch, the Ref. 3448. Its celebrated caliber, the 27-560 QM, would remain in use until the mid-1990s, when the last in this illustrious line, the Ref. 3450 – instantly recognizable thanks to the “dot” leap-year indicator between three and four o’clock – was finally phased out.

However, the 1980s were troubled times for traditional mechanical watchmaking due to the quartz crisis, when the introduction of high-tech, japonese-made quartz movements in the 1970s and early ’80s threatened to render mechanical watches obsolete. And it is against this turbulent backdrop that a watch appeared that was almost as significant as the 387.

The Ref. 56, which debuted in 1985, was a harbinger of the revival of complicated mechanical watches. It was equipped with the caliber 240 QM, a refinement of the legendary caliber 240 that first appeared in 1977 and was characterized by a 22k gold planetary micro rotor countersunk into the movement. The architecture of this caliber enabled Patek Philippe to make thin watches of an unsurpassed elegance, and, what’s more, when the movement was transformed into a perpetual calendar with 275 components, it was still only 3.75 millimeters thick. Even today, this would be a feat to celebrate; in the dark days of the 1980s it was little short of miraculous.

Not only was the Ref. 3450 technically audacious but it gave a new face to the perpetual calendar at Patek Philippe. The rectangular apertures, which had for so long shown day and month, were replaced by dials at three and nine o’clock. It’s a combination of movement and dial design that can still be appreciated today.

In such models as the Ref. 5119 and the beautiful cushion-cased Ref. 5940, which, while making use of the same dial layout, presents an entirely different way of appreciating this signature complication.

In 1993, Patek paid homage to its history of innovation in perpetual calendars with the launch of the Ref. 5930. With its distinctive retrograde date indicator – the hand taking a month to trace the arc between eight and four o’clock – this watch was immediately recognizable as the descendant of the landmark Ref. 96 and its retrograde perpetual calendar of 1957. Both also show the day and month in apertures on the three to nine o’clock axis, with the Ref. 5930 having the additional benefit of a subtle leap-year indicator just below twelve o’clock. This latter display can be seen in the Ref. 5940’s rose gold version of which only 25 were commissioned this year.

Two of these very different ways of interpreting one of the classic grand complications – the use of either apertures or sub-dials to display day and month – were joined in 2012 by the ladies’ Ref. 7440. While clearly in the Patek perpetual bloodstream, employing the classic layout of three sub-dials, it features a lighter face, and its ovale proportions are accented by a diamond-set bezel in line with the increasing demand for classic complications for women.

Part of the attraction of wearing a Patek Philippe perpetual calendar resides in the continuity of design of movement, case, and dial. This is appropriate in a watch that is about as close as mechanical timekeeping comes to calibrating eternity. There is no sudden lurch in design, rather the continuation of a journey that began 320 years ago, when Pathe zedar to put the perpetual calendar on the wrist.

For more on this subject, see the exclusive content on Patek Philippe Magazine Extra at patek.com/owners