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Wide blue yonder

When Thierry Stern decided to surprise the watch world, he chose to mix innovation and tradition. So far, so Patek Philippe. But the Calatrava Pilot Travel Time, reminiscent of the pioneering days of aviation, was truly unexpected. Here, he explains how the spirit of adventure took flight

It was not just the most talked-about Patek Philippe of Baselworld 2015, it was the most talked-about watch of the entire fair. The watch in question was the REF. 5524, better known as the Pilot – or, to give it its full name, the Patek Philippe Calatrava Pilot Travel Time.

Opinion was divided at the fair, not so much as to whether the watch was liked or disliked, but rather along the lines of whether such a watch was really a Patek Philippe. And while Thierry Stern might have been expecting the former division of opinion, the idea that this piece could not be called a true Patek Philippe had simply never occurred to him. After all, why should it? As a long-established owner-operated company rather than a brand that has passed out of family hands and into shareholder ownership or the management of a group, Patek Philippe enjoys an increasingly rare luxury: of never needing to consult a board or marketing group to find what it “should” be doing. Instead, the company and its president act instinctively. Rather like the muscle memory of an Olympic sportsman, all decisions are second nature, the result of intuitive knowledge built over a lifetime of experience.

There is simply no substitute for being born into a watchmaking dynasty.

I remember Thierry Stern telling me of his earliest memories of going to the old headquarters on the rue du Rhône and marveling at the miniature enamel painted pocket watches collected by his grandfather, Henri Stern. Those watches formed the nucleus of what is now the world-famous Patek Philippe Museum, located in the building that used to house the workshops where Thierry started work in the family firm. And it is among this collection of hundreds of vintage and antique timepieces that the inspiration for the “Patek Pilot” is to be found. Next time you are in the museum, head for display case number 47 on the first floor – on the right when you step out of the elevator – where you will see a pair of sober-looking, black-dialed, nickel-cased wristwatches from 1936.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the world was being shaped by technological advances, chief among which was the development of aviation. It was the transportation of the future, and just 24 years separate the first powered flight by the Wright brothers and the Atlantic crossing of Charles Lindbergh’s *Spirit of St. Louis*. It was a period of accelerated technical development, and just as the great longitude question of the eighteenth century had altered the face of timekeeping, so aviation changed watchmaking. Among the many innovations inspired by air travel was the hour angle watch, first conceived by the U.S. navy

officer Philip Van Horn Weems together with Charles Lindbergh himself. Produced during the early days of flight, hour angle watches were navigational as well as horological instruments and, according to the horological historian Dominique Fléchon, they gave “the hour angle between the Greenwich meridian and the sun, taking into account the equation of time,” so helping the pilot determine his position easily, accurately, and very rapidly.

It’s this unique functionality that accounts for the idiosyncratic dial of the watches in display case number 47. The “hour” hand takes a day to make one circuit of a central sub-dial divided not into 24 hours but 360 degrees. The “minute” hand makes one revolution of the dial every four hours, while the long “second” hand circumscribes the dial in four minutes. The result is a watch that looks as though it is giving the time of day as, for example, 10:08 when in fact the time is 8:36 P.M. This is a highly specialized navigational instrument, which Patek Philippe’s outstanding record in the Geneva Observatory Competitions of the time uniquely qualifies it to make.

Avionics have moved on since the 1930s, rendering these dials incomprehensible to all but historians of early aviation. Nevertheless, the exaggerated case diameters of 55.3 and 56 mm can be understood and appreciated by everyone, and over the years Thierry Stern has been bombarded with requests to remake these watches.

“A lot of clients who went to the museum saw those watches,” he explains, “and they would nearly always say, ‘Wow. That’s so cool. You should redo something like that.’ So, after maybe a thousand people had told me the same thing, I started to think that perhaps we actually should do something.” Thierry smiles. “But I was not prepared just to remake that watch, because I thought it would be way too big – I really didn’t want to redo a large watch. Still, the design was incredibly

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Even the reverse of the watch (opposite) has a strength and power that sets it apart, from the heft of the two pushers to the easy width of the strap. In terms of modernity, the self-winding caliber 324 S C F US movement is beyond reproach. The Travel Time function incorporates a dual-time-zone display showing home and local times and local date by hand, with night and day indicators in apertures for both the home and local time





The Calatrava-style 42 mm white gold case is the perfect frame for a dial that's a deep, dark sea-blue and the large gold numerals that float on it like clouds or icebergs far below, seen from the pilot's cockpit. The art deco face of the oversize numerals with luminous coating was common in early pilots' watches, designed to be easy to read at a glance, whatever the conditions

interesting, so I decided to try to do something that was in the same spirit but smaller." And when it came to the dial design, he already had something in mind, something from an even earlier period in the company's history than the hour angle watch.

In 1922, Patek Philippe had sold a wristwatch with a black lacquered dial. It is a little-known timepiece, but were you to see it, you would recognize it at once. With its large seriffed numerals thick with luminous compound, the luminous baton-style hands, the circumferential *chemin de fer* minute track, and the sub-dial at six o'clock, the resemblance is uncanny. More than 90 years separate this watch (which was a unique commission) from the REF. 5524, but the family likeness is unmistakable; the chief difference is that the modern watch has a dial of inky dark blue, while the old watch is black.

"It struck me as a good idea to adapt this dial from an almost unknown watch from nearly a century ago. The design was sleek, muscular, and perfectly of its

time, and it's exactly the one I have used for the new pilot watch. But all those pilot watches have the same design: black dial, big round case." Thierry gives a slight shrug. "I thought it would be too commonplace to do another pilot's watch with a black dial, so I didn't really listen to the market in terms of aesthetic. I just decided to do something that I thought would have real style."

But he was not finished. Inspired by a pair of watches from 1936 and a dial design from the 1920s, he wanted to add more. "My idea was to say, 'Let's go beyond the usual idea of the pilot watch and do something more in line with people who are traveling today.' Really," he goes on, "this should not be considered as the pilot's watch but the co-pilot's watch, or even the watch of the passenger sitting in the back. I actually visualized myself sitting in my plane. I may not be flying it but I'd like to have something in common with the machine, in a way, that links me to it, as well as something I can use when I'm traveling. That's exactly why I decided to



Left: Patek Philippe's first two – and, until 2015, its only – prototype pilot's watches, both from 1936 and now together in display case number 47 at the company's museum. These unusually large "hour angle" watches measure 56 mm (far left) and 55.3 mm (left) in diameter. They pay tribute to timepieces developed in the early 1930s; their dials were designed to help a navigator read off the hour angle of a celestial object in Greenwich, London, and so get a fix on his (or her) position

create a watch with a Travel Time mechanism." And in another subtle touch to give the wearer a link with the plane, Thierry Stern decided to redesign the clasp of the watch strap to recall a parachute buckle.

But what is truly remarkable is that all this was accomplished within six months. But then, it's something Thierry was particularly excited about. "Normally we have every year planned in advance, so we're fully booked, but there was some time left over, and that's when I decided to begin on the design," he says. "What I wanted was actually quite clear in my mind, I could visualize everything precisely, which is why we could move so fast. As it was not a watch we'd scheduled, there was no specific launch. We just said, 'Let's try, and if it works we'll include it in the collection.' I think we were all so surprised by the design that we had a lot of pleasure working on it. It went so smoothly; it was just amazing. In fact, it's been one of the quickest projects, from start to completion, we've ever had."

And also one of the most provocative.

"A little bit of the idea was to shock and to see how people will react," Thierry admits with a mischievous grin. "I strongly believe that sometimes I need to bring something new into the collection that nobody would expect from Patek Philippe but which is also a Patek. The pilot watch was exactly that."

Thierry goes on to promise temptingly, "There will be other watches like this. I can't tell you that every year

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I will do something new in terms of design for Patek Philippe – but if I have a good idea, I think it's nice to do it. If you are passionate about Patek Philippe, you may already have a good idea about what we are launching next year, in terms of color or in terms of dials. But I feel that part of my job is not only to give people what they're expecting from me, but from time to time, to come up with a watch about which they just don't know what to say. It is great for me and it's really important for Patek, to show that we are still young and that we can still come up with something that's totally unexpected."

Or as the pilot of Thierry's plane might say, "Buckle up! There's some thrilling turbulence to come."♦

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