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The 1970s was a period of immense change. It was the decade of the oil shock, punk rock, runaway inflation, and a humiliating defeat for America in Vietnam. This was an era of disruption, but it was also a decade that marked some outstanding achievements. Take 1976. It was the year that the supersonic Concorde entered regular service; the year that Toronto's CN Tower became the world's tallest building; and the year that Patek Philippe launched its steel sports watch, the Nautilus, water resistant to a depth of 120 meters. Mankind was traveling faster and building higher than ever before; and for the first time since the company was conceived in 1839, Patek Philippe customers could take their watch diving. Concorde would remain in service until 2003, after which we had to return to subsonic crossings of the Atlantic. The CN Tower would retain its title as the world's tallest tower until 2010. But the Patek Philippe Nautilus, as readers of this magazine know well, is still very much in service and on the wrist.



Today the Nautilus is a family of watches with numerous members, and also a close relative, the Aquanaut, introduced in 1997. Back in the 1970s there was just the REF. 3700/1A, the watch known fondly as the “Jumbo,” but it was enough. Almost everything about it was different from the Patek Philippes of the past: a steel watch that was more expensive than a gold one; the depth underwater to which it could be worn; the stunning integrated case and bracelet design conceived as an aesthetic whole; the idiosyncratic porthole-shaped case; the unusually large case diameter; and even the funky period packaging of a cork box were all departures from the Patek Philippe norm.

Conceived by Gérald Genta, this watch has entered horological history as one of the outstanding and enduring designs of the second half of the twentieth century. It is interesting therefore to hear Philippe Stern say of the watch: “I was not quite convinced in the beginning.” At the time Philippe was taking on more responsibility from his father for the running of the company, and in that context his caution was understandable. “It was some time after Gérald Genta suggested we make something like this for Patek Philippe that we finally said okay,” he recalls. “We decided we were going to make a prototype. And once we had made the prototype, we decided to launch the Nautilus.”

His hesitancy was rooted in the belief that the watch was counterintuitive. “This was during a difficult time. It was difficult for us to fight against quartz watches that were very thin and very fashionable.” The Nautilus dared to be different: it was mechanical and it was big. “A fine watch used to be small and thin. This was not quite a new philosophy but a new strategy for Patek Philippe. The Nautilus was a completely new line; it was for new customers, younger customers, people who traveled and played sports.” In short, men like Philippe Stern himself.

Then in his late thirties, Stern was a vigorous man. He was an accomplished skier, who, had he not entered the watch industry,

could have competed at the highest level. He was a keen yachtsman, too, and a frequent victor in regattas on Lake Geneva – a fact of which Genta was well aware, as his widow, Evelyne Genta, explains, “The Stern family was always sailing. So Gérald thought of boats, and when he thought of boats he thought of the shape of the portholes.”

Gérald Genta had designed the Royal Oak for Audemars Piguet a few years earlier. It shares some of the characteristics of the Nautilus, but the later watch shows the development of Genta’s style. Much like the great artists whose work continues to evolve over the course of a creative lifetime, looking at the preliminary sketches and paper maquettes it is possible to follow the designer’s thinking as he worked toward a horological expression of functional elegance or elegant functionality.

In Genta’s opinion, the Nautilus represented a progression from the Royal Oak. “He wanted it to be more anatomical than the Royal Oak,” Evelyne Genta continues. “He felt the Royal Oak was really only sporty – although now people wear them with dinner jackets,” she laughs. “By contrast, he felt that the Nautilus was sporty but that it could be worn all day.” This was something that early advertising for the Nautilus made clear, stressing the versatility of the piece as much as its ruggedness and water resistance. “They work as well with a wet suit as they do with a dinner suit,” was one advertising slogan.

However, there was a downside to this new type of Patek Philippe watch. It was incredibly difficult to make. It appeared at a time when watchmaking companies were bringing more of the manufacturing process in-house and that included case and bracelet making. A few years ago I visited the polishing workshops at Patek Philippe where I marveled at the satinage, polissage, chutage, anglage, avivage, sablage, lavage, feutrage, emerisage, lapidage...all of the various polishing techniques applied to the Nautilus’s many surfaces: some rounded and smooth, some sharply defined and angular, some polished to brilliance, others



In search of inspiration for a new kind of sports watch, the celebrated Swiss-born designer Gérald Genta (pictured above) looked to the Stern family’s love of boats. Basing the case shape on the outline of a porthole – the elaborately polished surfaces redolent, perhaps, of the water of Lake Geneva – Genta designed a truly iconic watch. Early advertising (far right) made much of the versatility of the Nautilus as a watch for work or



leisure and its status as a luxury timepiece crafted from steel. Many versions now exist, but the classic Nautilus can be seen in Genta’s early sketches such as this one (above right), shown alongside the original REF. 3700 of 1976 (above left). The 30th anniversary model from 2006, REF. 5711 (page 21), shows a subtle reworking of the first Nautilus

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satinated. Creating the Nautilus and its bracelet remains demanding and exigent work, even 40 years after its launch. In the early 1970s, it was positively daunting, recalls Jean-Pierre Frattini, the veteran Patek Philippe case maker and designer who worked with Gérald Genta.

“When waterproof watches came in, they brought new problems. We made water-resistant watches that could withstand being held under a tap, but they were not waterproof for wearing while swimming,” remembers Frattini. “There were problems with production at first, relating to the joint that was visible from the side. We had many

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discussions about this. The waterproofing was farther inside the watch, not at this joint where there was a kind of lip, so if some water did get into the watch it couldn't get out again and could stagnate."

Working with specialists, the problems were gradually overcome. Nevertheless, it is ironic that, at first, such an avant-garde design had to be made in a traditional way with parts that were not interchangeable and case components that needed to be numbered to insure that they remained paired, and dials and glass that would sometimes have to be recut to fit. However, by 1975 the functioning prototype was undergoing testing, albeit of an informal kind, on the wrist of Gérald Buchs, who was in charge of watch creation at Patek Philippe at the time.

"I remember being in Zermatt in 1975 and I was wearing the first prototype," says Buchs. "I would dip it into all the fountains and streams I came across – testing it to find out if it was watertight. I would put it in the sun to see if it showed any condensation under the glass as it dried. And of course, it passed the test!" The following year the watch made its debut. It was greeted, Philippe Stern recalls, with overwhelming... incomprehension. "Maybe at the beginning, the public was not really ready to understand it or to accept it," he says, adding with typical understatement, "but little by little it became established."

There were some for whom the Nautilus was *un coup de foudre* – a case of love at first sight – among them its designer. "It was his favorite watch. He loved his Nautilus," recalls Evelyne Genta of her late husband. Among all the various models he owned, it was "the prototype that he liked best of all. Later in life, a few years before he passed away, he worked on a new dial." Far from being bored by revisiting a design he had made a generation before, "he loved it, he absolutely loved it. He felt that this watch hadn't got a wrinkle. To him the Nautilus was an amazing masterpiece; it always was." ♦

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Following on from the success of the original steel "Jumbo" (top left) of 1976, which remained in the collection until 1990, the Nautilus has been remodeled in a variety of metals, sizes, and dial designs. Milestones include the introduction of medium-sized models in 1981; in 1996, Roman numerals and the first strap model – this hybrid watch paved the way for the Aquanaut launched the following year; and the first ladies' version in 1980. In 2009 the original designer, Gérald Genta, collaborated on a new ladies' model; while 2013 saw the launch of new strap and bracelet versions with more feminine dials; in 2015, the most recent ladies' watch in the collection was launched, the first self-winding steel ladies' model without diamonds. Initially a simple time and date only watch, the Nautilus incorporated complications for the first time in 1998, introducing a winding gauge, followed in 2005 by a moon-phase model. The collection's 30th anniversary in 2006 was marked with a self-winding chronograph; while 2010 saw the introduction of an Annual Calendar model with a strap (a metal bracelet version followed in 2012) and the first strap chronograph. Two popular, practical complications, a Travel Time function and a chronograph, were combined for the first time in a Nautilus case in 2014. This year, the 40th anniversary is marked, fittingly, with a model that mirrors the aesthetic of the original Nautilus: the white gold 44 mm REF. 5976/1 chronograph, made in a limited edition of 1,300. Its sibling, of which there are only 700, is the platinum REF. 5711/1: both models sport diamond hour markers and an anniversary inscription on a blue dial