



No. 97 975 (left) was Patek Philippe's – and the world's – first perpetual calendar wristwatch; the company created another first with the Ref. 96 (right), by fitting a retrograde perpetual calendar within the confines of a strap watch. These innovations established the company as master of the complicated wristwatch

FORECASTING THE FUTURE

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 is, after all, what the perpetual calendar does, informing its wearer of the day, date, and state of the moon, taking into account the untidiness 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





The ultra-thin REF. 3940 (left), launched in 1985 during the quartz crisis, was fitted with the legendary self-winding caliber 240 Q movement.

Its notably slim profile was achievable thanks to the 240's integrated microrotor made from 22k gold, an innovation patented by Patek Philippe in 1977

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. 97 975 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, with a third needle-like indicator pointing to the date beyond the minute track.

What made No. 97 975 so remarkable was that its case featured beautifully engraved 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 1925, 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. 97 975 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 can 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 unassailable 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 wristworn timepiece. With such individual chefs d'oeuvre, the house was seen to be consolidating its reputation as a maker of complicated wristwatches and was capitalizing on its early lead in the field.

The REF. 1526, which appeared at the beginning of the 1940s, was the first series-produced perpetual calendar wristwatch at Patek Philippe. Powered by the hand-wound caliber 12-120 Q, this watch remained in production for a decade, between 1941 and 1951, and established the signature dial configuration of two rectangular windows displaying the day and month in the upper half of the dial with the moon phase and date on one centrally positioned sub-dial below.

Over the course of the ensuing four decades, this dial design became a horological axiom. The REF. 1526 was succeeded by such legendary hand-wound watches as the REF. 2497 and REF. 2438/1 in the 1950s; then in 1962, the perpetual calendar became available as a



1925
No. 97 975

Patek Philippe created the world's first perpetual calendar wristwatch when it cased a manually wound movement – originally made for a ladies' pendant watch in 1898 – in a wristwatch, No. 97 975. The ornate design for this timepiece, which measured 34.4 mm in diameter, included elegant hand-engraved lugs



1951
REF. 2497

Succeeding the 34 mm REF. 1526, the REF. 2497, diameter 36.7 mm, newly fitted a center-seconds hand, a first for perpetual calendars. This manually wound model, with caliber 27 sc Q movement, was a contemporary of the REF. 2499, diameter 37.7 mm, the famous perpetual calendar with chronograph function



1962
REF. 3448

The 37.5 mm REF. 3448 was the first-ever self-winding perpetual calendar wristwatch and was fitted with the celebrated caliber 27-460 Q



1937
No. 860 182

The first ever Patek Philippe retrograde perpetual calendar wristwatch, the REF. 96 is now a legendary design. It took inspiration from elements of Bauhaus, late art deco, and modernism. The 30 mm diameter case is fitted with a manually wound 11''' movement



1955
REF. 2438/1

Featuring applied faceted baton hour markers and prominent claw-shaped lugs – also seen on the 36.7 mm REF. 2497 – the design of the manually wound REF. 2438/1, diameter 37 mm, reflected the bolder tastes of the 1950s. This model was fitted with the 27 sc Q movement



1981
REF. 3450

The self-winding 37.5 mm REF. 3450 was instantly recognizable thanks to the "dot" leap-year indicator. Its 27-460 Q movement was phased out with this model in the mid-'80s



1941
REF. 1526

Patek Philippe's first series-produced perpetual calendar wristwatch, the REF. 1526, also established the company's signature dial layout of two apertures and a central sub-dial. This model was 34 mm in diameter and fitted with the hand-wound caliber 12-120 Q movement



1961
REF. 3449

An extremely rare model, only three examples of the REF. 3449 were ever made. This manually wound wristwatch with a diameter of 37.5 mm was the only Patek Philippe perpetual calendar fitted with the caliber 23-300 Q movement



1985
REF. 3940

Replacing the REF. 3450, with a diameter of 37.5 mm, the 36 mm self-winding REF. 3940 was equipped with the caliber 240 Q, which enabled an ultra-thin case. In dial layout, the rectangular apertures were replaced by sub-dials at 3 and 9 o'clock



1993
REF. 5050

With its distinctive retrograde date indicator, the 36 mm self-winding REF. 5050 took inspiration from the considerably smaller 1937 REF. 96, with a diameter of 30 mm. It was the first retrograde date perpetual calendar watch produced in a series and was fitted with the caliber 315 s QR movement



2008
REF. 5139

With a dial configuration that harks back to the 36 mm REF. 3940, the REF. 5139, just 2 mm larger, is distinguished by its *clous de Paris* (hobnail) pattern on the bezel, and Officer's-style straight lugs. Like its predecessor, it is fitted with the self-winding caliber 240 Q movement



2012
REF. 5940

The REF. 5940, with self-winding 240 Q movement, reimagined the signature complication in a yellow gold cushion-shaped case with a diameter of 37 x 44.6 mm. (The white gold model shown here was launched in 2015.) This shape also characterizes the perpetual calendar chronograph, the 37 x 45 mm REF. 5020, launched in the 1990s



2006
REF. 5140

The 37.2 mm, self-winding REF. 5140 returned to the original dial layout seen on the slightly smaller 36 mm REF. 3940, replacing that model and enlarging the diameter of the date sub-dial at 6 o'clock. Fitted with the 240 Q movement, it has an ultra-thin silhouette



2011
REF. 5496

The self-winding REF. 5496 shows the enduring popularity of the retrograde date indicator established in 1937 and further refined in 1993. Here the layout remains mostly unchanged except for a larger 39.5 mm case size. The platinum REF. 5496, powered by the 324 s QR, was launched in 2011. The 2015 model in rose gold is shown here



2013
REF. 5160

The self-winding REF. 5160, powered by the 324 s QR movement, features a hand-guilloché center to its dial and an intricately hand-engraved 38 mm case – a tribute to Patek Philippe's love of rare handcrafts and a subtle nod to the smaller 34.4 mm 97 975 of 1925 and its hand-engraved lugs



2007
REF. 5159

Fitted with the self-winding caliber 315 s QR, with a 38 mm diameter case, the REF. 5159 totally reworked the dial, displaying the day, month, and leap year in apertures, and featuring a retrograde date indicator arcing over a hand-guilloché sunburst pattern in the center



2012
REF. 7140

The 35.1 mm Ladies First Perpetual Calendar REF. 7140 fitted with the self-winding caliber 240 Q movement is introduced. While featuring the classic perpetual calendar dial layout, the addition of an opalescent face and bezel set with 68 flawless diamonds gives it a distinctly feminine elegance



2014
REF. 5140

The ultra-thin REF. 5140, a 37.2 mm self-winding wristwatch equipped with the caliber 240 Q movement, was originally launched in 2006. An elegant evening model in platinum, shown here, was launched in 2014, featuring diamond hour markers on an ebony-black sunburst dial

self-winding wristwatch, the REF. 3448. Its celebrated caliber, the 27 460 Q, would remain in use until the mid-1980s, 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, Japanese-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 97 975.

The REF. 3940, which debuted in 1985, was a harbinger of the revival of complicated mechanical watches. It was equipped with the caliber 240 Q, a refinement of the legendary caliber 240 that first appeared in 1977 and was characterized by a 22k gold planetary microrotor 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. 3940 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. 5139 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. 5050. 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 1937. Both also show the day and month in apertures on the three to nine o'clock axis, with the REF. 5050 having the additional benefit of a subtle leap-year indicator just below twelve o'clock. This same display can be seen in the REF. 5496, a rose gold version of which was premiered this year.

These two 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. 7140. While clearly in the Patek perpetual bloodline, employing the classic layout of three sub-dials, it features a lighter face, and its svelte 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 90 years ago, when Patek dared to put the perpetual calendar on the wrist. ♦

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WHILE CLEARLY IN THE PATEK PERPETUAL BLOODLINE, THE LADIES' MODEL FEATURES A LIGHTER FACE, AND ITS SVELTE PROPORTIONS ARE ACCENTED BY A DIAMOND-SET BEZEL