

LIFE DRAWINGS

There are many treasures within the collected books and papers that make up the Patek Philippe archives but perhaps none so enchanting and immediate as Henri Stern's album, which he compiled for his family and friends. Nicholas Foulkes reveals the artist behind the man and selects some examples of Henri's art that show how vital sketching and painting were to him



This page: Henri Stern often enlivened letters with sketches, such as these birds (above) who speak the words of the letter to his daughter, Florence. The album (below), compiled by

Henri Stern in 1991, includes illustrated letters, drawings, and watercolor paintings. Opposite: Henri made many sketches of places he traveled to, such as Mykonos, Greece in 1982

A young man bestrides the world like a twentieth-century Colossus of Rhodes, one foot in the old world of Europe, one foot planted on the other side of the Atlantic in New York. It is an ink drawing (see page 10, top left) with a composition that recalls Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. This drawing graced what is in my eyes likely the best ever cover of *Patek Philippe* magazine.

Arm extended, the figure's left hand holds in its upturned palm a vision of life in Switzerland: the lake, mountains, skiing, and a picnic table with bottles of wine. This side of his body is wearing a pair of swimming trunks. The other side is clad in the uniform of a 1930s American businessman: a hat, striped tie, sack suit, and a briefcase in his right hand. This side also has drawings of an aircraft and a Patek Philippe order book. Rather like the concealed meanings to be teased out of a painting by Hans Holbein, this image is rich with references to the choices facing a young man at a crossroads

in life. The good life of Switzerland beckons him with its siren song of tranquility and the outdoors while the life of a businessman in the New World tugs at his suit sleeve.

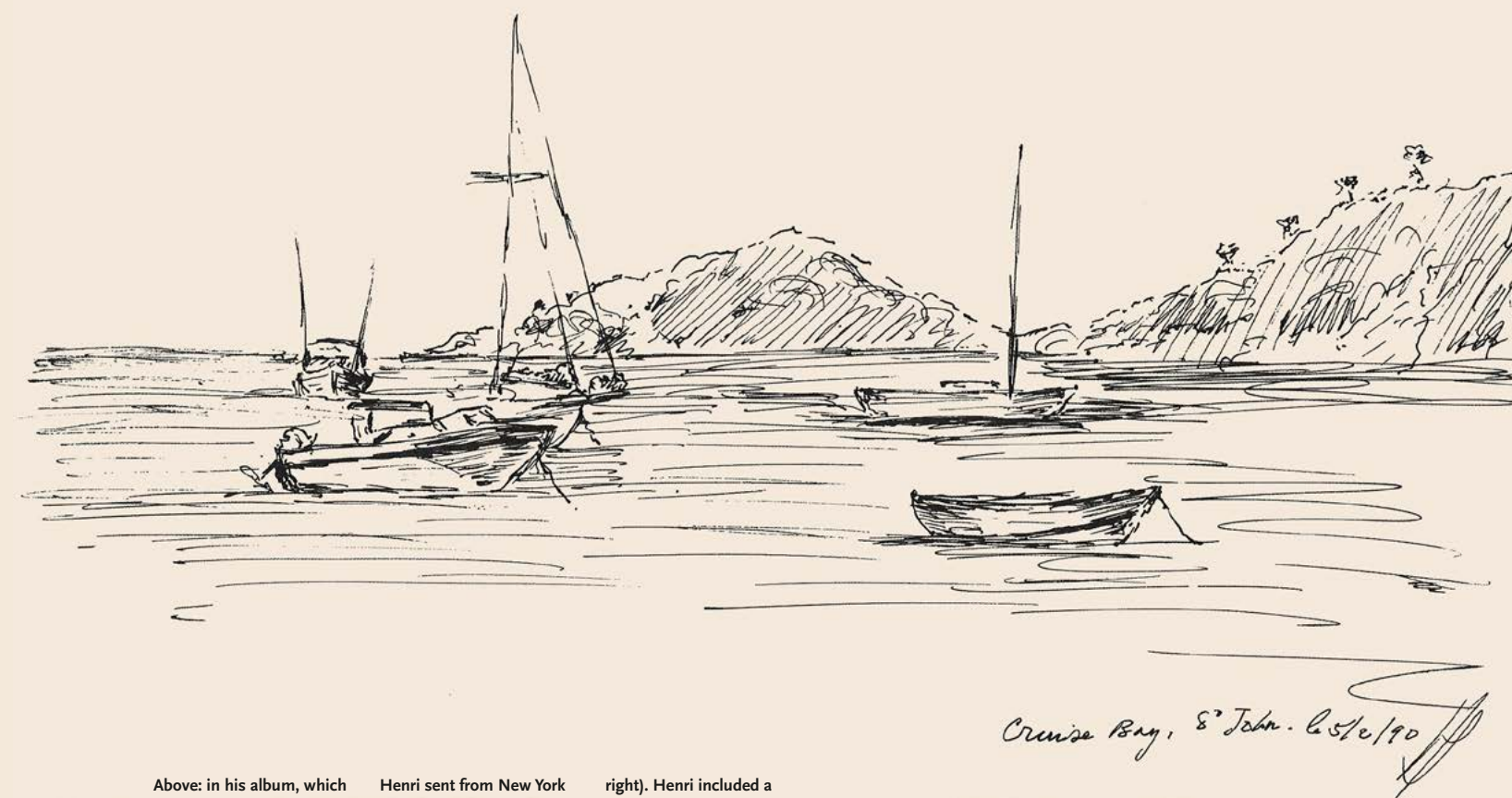
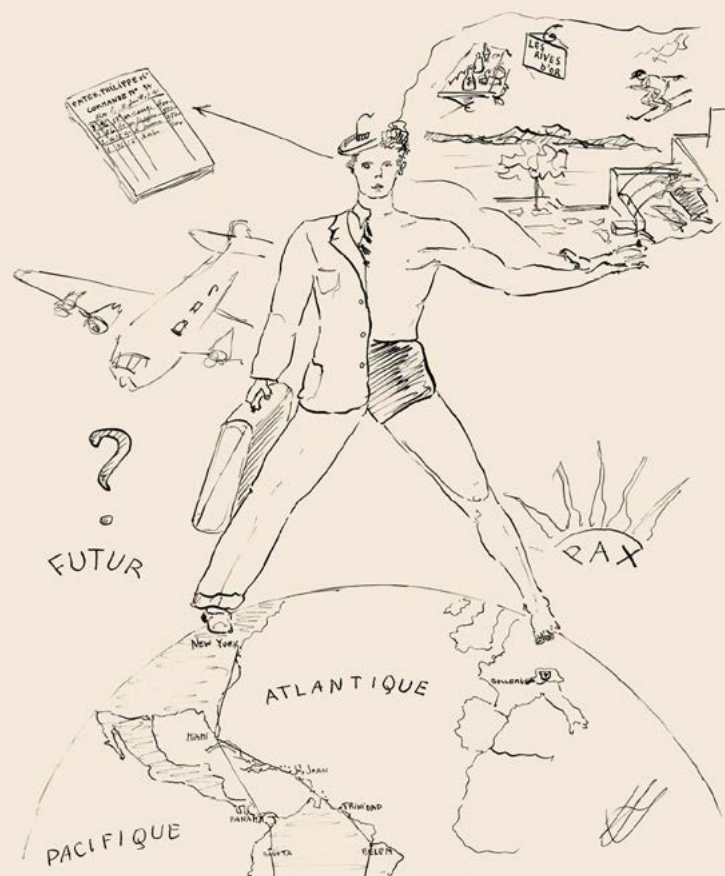
The man poised between two worlds is Henri Stern, and, as the cursive letters "H" and "S" in the lower right-hand corner reveal, the drawing is a self-portrait of a young man, a less melancholy horological Hamlet if you like, weighing up his options for the future.



We already know what happens, of course. Henri Stern spends the following 20 years building a hugely successful business for Patek Philippe in the crucial US market. He had intended to work as an engraver in the family's dial-making business. But while Henri was still in his early twenties, his uncle Jean and father, Charles Henri, took control of the storied watchmaker Patek Philippe to save it from going out of business, and young Henri's life changed irrevocably.

But even though he pursued his career in the watch industry, he never stopped being the artist that he trained as. "I had always been passionate about drawing," he once said, "so after I had completed a traditional school education, my father enrolled me at the École des Arts et Métiers, where, over three years, I learned about perspective, the detailing of subjects, and techniques for engraving and sculpting."

Those were lessons that would stay with him for a lifetime as the trove of drawings



Above: in his album, which includes this sketch of Cruz Bay, St. John, dated 1990, Henri wrote, "In the Virgin Islands...I continue to draw and paint and try to improve my techniques." Opposite: a drawing that

Henri sent from New York to his uncle in 1941 (top left) tells, as Henri says, "better than my words how much my heart is still in Geneva." A 1985 sketch of Sapphire Bay is entitled "Elin's Palm Tree" for Henri's wife (top

right). Henri included a drawing of himself on his travels in a letter to the US importer of Swiss watches, Jean Graef (bottom left, one of eight pages). And he sketched horses to practice his technique (bottom right)

*Et me voilà parti, la marmotte
à la main, à travers la grande
Amérique, pour conquérir la liberté
et, qui'sant, la Fortune!!
Le premier voyage fut un succès...*

*Pour terminer cette petite histoire,
mon cher Jean, je vous remercie
encore une fois du fond
du coeur pour
l'amitié sincère
que vous m'avez
si souvent prouvée
par vos précieux
et avisés conseils*

*Bonne Année,
que vos desirs se
réalisent et que
Dieu vous protégé.*

*Henri.
décembre 1942.*



"I HAD ALWAYS BEEN PASSIONATE ABOUT DRAWING," HENRI STERN ONCE SAID



and watercolors in the Patek Philippe archive attests. It is a remarkable body of work that is, in effect, a visual autobiography, revealing a man with a sensitive and rich inner life.

Henri would often include drawings in his letters home, adding little scenes akin to those found in a latter-day illuminated manuscript based on life in New York. Letters to Florence, his youngest daughter from his first marriage, that purport to be from two birds (see page 9) are particularly touching.

His illustrated missives are not confined to family members; esteemed colleagues and partners, too, received them. Writing a particularly warm and personal letter to the importer of Swiss watches in the US, Jean Graef, wishing him well for the impending new year of 1943, Henri signs off with, "May your dreams come true and may God protect you," along with an illustration of himself carrying luggage and trudging by the side of a mile-long US train in search of new adventures and, of course, new markets.

After he returned to Geneva in 1959, his aesthetic and artistic sensibilities were shown through the highly creative designs of the time, most memorably in those of Gilbert Albert and the Golden Ellipse in its multiplicity of guises. It must not be forgotten that Henri did much to protect the creative heritage of the industry he loved, not least by asking the miniature-enamel painter Suzanne Rohr to work for Patek Philippe.

Henri Stern drew and painted all his life, and on his 80th birthday he published a collection of his drawings and paintings for his family and friends. He wrote, "Elin [his wife] and I thought [it] would be a nice souvenir for all of you." The works inside are from various periods: drawings of horses (which could have been inspired by those late-nineteenth-century masters of equine art, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Edgar Degas) from his military service in the cavalry in the early 1930s; illustrated letters; life drawings; sketches made while on sailing

trips; and, from the later years of his life, landscapes from the Virgin Islands.

During the 20 years he lived in the US, Henri Stern frequently sailed to the Caribbean, and the islands of St. Thomas and St. John were regular stops on trips between North and South America. It was to St. Thomas that he would return in later life to enjoy the sunlight and to paint, leaving his son, Philippe, to run the business day-to-day.

But even on this palm-fringed island paradise Henri remained strongly linked to Patek Philippe and would regularly report back to Geneva on the growth of Nautilus sales in St. Thomas. A lifetime in the watch industry may have passed, but true to the image of his youthful self that he portrayed in his own "Vitruvian Man," he remained a man with one metaphorical foot on either side of the Atlantic Ocean. ♦



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