



# Making history

Patek Philippe's piece for the biennial Only Watch charity auction in 2021 was an unexpected marvel, created as a combination of historical reference and state-of-the-art horology. Nicholas Foulkes relishes the story of its making

**Disruptor is not a description** that would usually be applied to Patek Philippe. But cast your mind back to 2021 and ponder for a moment the decisions taken by Thierry Stern. He brought out the sort of watches for which Patek Philippe is famous: the REF. 5236P In-line Perpetual Calendar and the minute-repeating "Advanced Research" REF. 5750P that introduced the fortissimo "ff" amplifier module. These are the sort of surprises to be expected from the marque.

However, Patek Philippe's 2021 is more likely to be remembered for surprises that were less expected; surprises that make the brand as much of a disruptor as it is a guardian of traditional watchmaking savoir faire. There was the discontinuation of the world's most sought-after watch, the REF. 5711; the announcement of a valedictory release of a REF. 5711 version with an olive-green dial; and the final series, limited to just 170 pieces with a Tiffany Blue® dial (one for each year

of the partnership between the US jeweler and Patek Philippe). Also, do not forget the introduction of a new hand-wound Calatrava, the REF. 6119 (when orthodoxy decrees that self-winding movements are preferred).

Perhaps least anticipated of all was the Patek Philippe timepiece sold at Only Watch, the biennial charity auction in aid of research into Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Those expecting a unique Nautilus model or a one-off grand complication such as the

The design of the Only Watch desk clock (pages 60–62) was inspired by the desk clock made for James Ward Packard almost a century ago (see page 63). The case of the new clock is made of silver with veneers of American walnut wood

in reference to Packard's homeland. The silver-gilt decorative motifs include acanthus scrollwork framing the Calatrava cross, rosettes, and four griffon vultures. The hands are blued-steel, matching those on the old Packard desk clock

Grandmaster Chime that, in 2019, sold for an incredible CHF31 million (almost US\$31.1 million) were confounded when Patek Philippe presented a wooden-cased, wedge-shaped paperweight desk clock.

However, students of the history of Patek Philippe immediately recognized one of the most important creations from a seminal point in the brand's story. The 1920s was the last decade during which the firm was owned and run by descendants of its founders; it was also the decade during which the two most famous collectors of the marque were at the apogee of their activity: James Ward Packard, an inventor, engineer, and the eponym of the car company, and Henry Graves Jr., a scion of a New York financial dynasty.

Among the myriad masterpieces created for these two collectors during the brief golden age between the First World War and the Great Depression was a wedge-shaped yellow gold and silver perpetual calendar moon-phase desk clock (Patek Philippe Museum Inv. No. P-140). It was delivered to Packard in 1923, and another almost identical model was sold by Tiffany & Co. to Henry Graves Jr. in 1927 (Inv. No. P-1270). Fast-forward one hundred years to the 2020s, and the most disruptive thing to hit the market in 2021 was a timepiece made according to a design that was a century old. "It's very interesting to be in the early 2020s and to bring out a piece that in a sense is completely out of its time, because this is not something that people expect today," says Thierry Stern.

But while it may have been unexpected, the REF. 27001M-001 desk clock sold for CHF9.5 million (almost US\$10.5 million), and according to Thierry Stern, whoever bought it bagged themselves a real bargain. "I'm pretty sure in the future the price of this clock will just go so high," he says,







Above: the hinged cover opens to reveal the setting controls. Arranged in an arc below the dial, a shape made possible by a complex system of mechanical countershafts, are the five correctors, for the week; day; moon phases; month; and date (C standing for

calendar). In the top right corner are the two key openings for setting the time and winding the movement. On the top left, the key is kept in its recess. Right, from top to bottom: the Patek Philippe Calatrava cross on the clock's cover is surrounded by acanthus

scrollwork; the innovative system for ejecting the winding and setting key from its socket is patented; a useful addition on the new clock's dial is the weekly calendar, displaying the week number in a small frame that moves around the outer scale; turning the

winding and setting key in the stop-seconds opening enables the time to be set to one-second accuracy. Opposite: Packard's desk clock of 1923, with his monogram on the case, is now housed in the Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva (Inv. No. P-140)

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describing a sharp upward curve with a sweep of his hand. “It’s really unique. It’s something that nobody else is doing today. It’s an in-house movement. I put everything I learned over the years about watchmaking into it. It’s important that we can preserve this type of desk clock, it’s part of our DNA.”

With its regulator-style dial and circumferential scale for the week number (in place of the date on the 1923 Packard clock), the outer resemblance of the twenty-first-century clock to its predecessor is uncanny, but beneath the silver, silver-gilt, and walnut exterior everything is different.

In the 1920s, for the Packard model, Patek Philippe repurposed an eight-day pocket watch movement with two barrels, a straight-line lever escapement, and eight-day power reserve. This time Thierry wanted to make the movement from scratch. The seven-year journey required nine new patents to arrive at a movement of 919 parts. The caliber 86-135 PENDING REGISTRATION has three spring barrels connected in series. The clock will run for 31 days at a remarkable level of precision, with a maximum deviation of +/- a single second per day. To distill what that means, it is the near perfect manufacture, arrangement, adjustment, and coordination of the action of almost one thousand components to be accurate to within just one of the 86,400 seconds that make up a day.

The man given the task of delivering on the object in which Thierry Stern enshrined his entire knowledge of horology was the brand’s head of research and development, Philip Barat. “For years, Thierry Stern was talking about how he would like to make a clock like the Packard desk clock. But I said, ‘Mr. Stern, this is not our cup of tea.’ Nobody believed in it, but he insisted.” Eventually, Barat agreed to take on the challenge.

“At first, the idea was to adapt the principle of the dome clock whereby a mechanical movement is rewound every eight days by a battery-driven motor,” says Barat. “But one of the watchmakers said that would be a pity because it’s such an amazing movement and that we should make it all mechanical. Thierry was convinced, and said, ‘But I don’t want eight days’ power reserve, I want one month, I want 31 days.’ I was concerned that the accuracy of the desk clock would not be very good, but Thierry wanted to achieve plus or minus one second per day for the whole month,” Barat recalls ruefully. Everything was designed to minimize power consumption and prolong the reliability over 31 days, “and that’s the reason we developed nine patents for the movement.”

As well as a patent for limiting movement of the large lever to save energy when not active and one for optimizing the performance of the stop pawl to reduce energy

consumption by the perpetual calendar, there is a patented ratchet restraint that ensures the correct rotation, alignment, and stability of the three mainspring-barrels. These barrels benefit from another patent, enabling them to be used in both directions with the aid of an intermediate barrel that rotates in the opposite direction to the other two.

To maintain the level of precision over a month, stable amplitude was crucial. This is guaranteed by a patented constant force mechanism assuring stability of the balance amplitude from the first to the last day of the power-reserve range. And though the power reserve would show empty after 31 days, the patented elastic endpoint and connection to the wheel-train let the movement continue to run, rather like the reserve tank of a car.

But when asked what was the project’s biggest challenge, Thierry smiles fondly and answers, “Convincing my dad. When I saw the price at the auction, I was confident that people will follow our thinking. Of course, I didn’t build a movement just for one single piece. There will be a small series. I don’t know when the next one will be ready,” he says, “but I hope that we will be successful.”

For now, however, Thierry is content with the piece for Only Watch. “It’s gorgeous,” he says. Just one thing bothers him: “To tell the truth, I never like doing this type of auction because I want to keep the pieces.” ♦