

*The Queen's  
Watch*





Marie Antonia Josepha Johanna von Habsburg-Lothringen (1755 - 1793), known to history as Marie Antoinette was the Archduchess of Austria and later Queen of France and Navarre, is perhaps best known for her excessive lifestyle and for her execution during the French Revolution in 1793.



Perhaps no other watch in history has had more spectacular a journey than the Breguet masterpiece, No. 160. From concept to creation, through to the present day, the story of this watch is filled with romance, blood, crime and mystery.

Thomas Byczkowski



Breguet Grande Complication No. 1160 is a replica of the Marie Antoinette watch and was created with only a photograph and descriptions as direction. The Swatch group unveiled the replica at Baselworld 2008 at the Breguet booth.

It was a mild Sabbath night, two days after the new moon; the ideal moment for what was to become the biggest crime in watch history. Reliable facts are scarce regarding the sequence of the events on that fateful Friday night, 15th of April 1983. Why the alarm system didn't work and how the villains proceeded through the tiny window is a mystery, as is the actual number of robbers. Oddly they seemed to have had plenty of time for their break-in, because they even left an empty drinks bottle behind along with paper from a wrapped up sandwich.

The window the thieves squeezed through is hardly fifty centimetres in height and about two and a half meters above the ground, down a small dead-end lane. An unofficial entrance shielded by a protruding wall at the backside of the L. A. Mayer Museum at Hapalmakh in Jerusalem - only a stone's throw away from Israel's presidential palace. Half of the lane is shrouded in darkness with the only light coming from the main street, which is separated from the area by a gated parking lot.

On the morning of the 16th of April 1983, Jerusalem woke up to the

sounds of police-sirens. The announcement later stated the theft of 100, including 44 unique Breguet watches, of what was once possibly the most important watch collection of all time. Among them the famous Breguet No. 160, a highly complicated, over 200 years old pocket watch, better known as the Marie Antoinette.

### Fact and fiction

But the enigma of the Marie Antoinette did not start with this theft. Who commissioned the watch is not reliably recorded. Back in the 1780's, as the story goes, Queen Marie Antoinette - well known for her love of jewellery and of men - was adored by one of her suitors so deeply that he approached Abraham Louis Breguet to request a watch be made that would display unrivalled splendour. The royal gift was to include every known complication, with no limit on manufacturing time or costs and all parts normally made of brass were to be executed in gold. That meant carte blanche for the great watchmaker to create a timepiece the likes of which had hitherto been conceived.

The sheer amount of complications incorporated in the watch is astonishing, even by today's complication-heavy standards. It is fitted with Breguet's "perpetuelle" winding mechanism, with a perpetual calendar and an equation of time. The centre-seconds-hand works as a "seconde morte", which marks only the whole seconds. The hours are shown by a jumping hour mechanism. The watch has a power reserve indicator, an equal locking and lift lever escapement, with parachute-shock absorber and a repetition for hours, quarters and minutes. And a thermometer rounds off the choice of complications packed in a heavy but simple six-centimetre-diameter case, with a rock crystal dial and an enamelled second one for changing.

However, the construction of the watch No 160 took such a long time that neither Breguet nor Marie Antoinette lived long enough to admire the finished product. Experts estimate it took until 1827 to complete, four years after the master watchmaker's death and over 34 years after the queen lost her head in the French Revolution. Its production cost was estimated a good 30,000 Francs, and a large part of the work (according to Breguet's workshop-books) was executed by Michel Weber, a master watchmaker in the ateliers of Breguet, who in the three years from 1812 onward spent 725 hours for which he was paid 7250 Francs.

Strangely the watch remained in the possession of the Breguet family for 60 years, until it was sold to an Englishman, Sir Spencer Brunton, in 1887 for the breathtaking price of £600 (which would equate to about £375,000 today). Sometime after his death it passed to his brother and then to the art dealer and collector, Murray Marks, before it appeared in the window of a watch shop close to Regent Street in London. One rainy day in May 1917 the

watch was spotted by Sir David Lionel Salomons; a wealthy Jewish nobleman, scientist and the owner of the second motorcar in Britain, whose uncle, from whom he inherited his title and money, founded the London and Westminster Bank (now NatWest). After Salomons' death in 1925, Breguet's masterpiece found its way to Jerusalem, appearing in the L. A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in 1974, from which it was stolen nine years later.

Almost a quarter of a century on, in November 2007, the story gained momentum again, when news spread about the resurfacing of the watch collection. The L. A. Mayer Museum was said to have bought back the watches secretly in August 2006, including the famous Marie Antoinette watch. Just a year ago, the company "Montres Breguet S.A." announced the production of a replica of watch No 160, which was displayed to the public as No 1160 at Baselworld earlier this year.

### Expert's talk

The quest to understand the Marie Antoinette first leads to the greatest living expert on the work of Breguet, and the last one to have seen the Marie Antoinette before its theft; Dr George Daniels, himself a watch making monument, now living on the Isle of Man.

The clouds are hanging thick around Snaefell Mountain on the Isle of Man, as my car turns into the drive leading up to Riversdale mansion just outside of Ramsey. Rain is setting in as I step out, catching a glimpse of the beautiful view down the meadow, which bends slightly into a valley before ascending to the hills.

Sitting in his living room, Daniels begins to dissect the story of the watch from the very beginning: "I don't believe that the Marie Antoinette was a commissioned piece, because Breguet was in no hurry to build this watch". Daniels had studied the Breguet workshop-books, where all works had been meticulously noted.

Daniels sits up and makes plainly clear: "You can't mistake the Breguet philosophy! There are traits running throughout everything that Breguet made. Everything is proportional, screws to brackets and so on". And then adds, "There were design features in the watch that only Breguet could have done; exercises only he indulged in".

Discussing the special escapement used in the Marie Antoinette: "Breguet believed that the entry sliding action was far more energy-consuming than the same action on the exit-locking", he explains. "And the escapement he devised for the watch had two exit pallets and they were pivoted together".

Breguet No. 160, better known as the Marie Antoinette. Commissioned in 1783 by an unknown suitor (but perhaps Count Axel de Ferson) of Marie Antoinette, Louis Abraham Breguet's masterpiece was not completed till 1827. The pocket watch has a 63 mm case with a transparent rock crystal cover. Inside the complication includes an independent central seconds hand, thermometer, perpetual calendar and equation of time, as well as being self-winding and equipped with the parachute shock protection system developed.



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To discover whether the watch in Jerusalem is the real McCoy, Daniels' believes there is no necessity to scrutinize it for a certain scratch or the secret signing Breguet was known to do. To really crack the secret, one has to look at this famous timepiece in a different way: "There are all sorts of little features in it" Daniels explains, "because all his watches are handmade with little characteristics (...) and small mistakes, which don't matter in the end." But those are like distinctive marks for an expert like Daniels, who would recognize them in an instant.

### The science bit

A few miles down the road at the workshop of Roger Smith, I meet another No. 160 expert, Andy Jones, who offered a brief overview of the mechanism of the perpetual calendar. The Marie Antoinette is fitted with a perpetual calendar, whose functions are displayed with a retrograde hand and accompanied by an equation of time. While the retrograde display is positioned at two o'clock, its regulator mechanism runs on the opposite side, at eight o'clock. "The most striking part of the mechanism", Jones explains, "is the large lever formed like an 'L' that pivots at 5 o'clock and is plainly visible on the picture Daniels published in his book, 'The Art of Breguet'. This component pushes the retrograde rack with the date hand back to zero."

The mechanism dictating the position of this large lever is set on top of the equation of time cam, which rotates once per year. In

there are five pins representing the short months and hold the big lever slightly further anticlockwise, so the pivoted lever on retrograde rack will interact with it sooner and hence return it to zero before it normally would on a 31-day-month. "Now the clever bit", Jones goes on: "The pin that represents February is positioned on a four armed star wheel. Three others are set at the same distance from the centre" - those allow for the big lever to move it furthest anti-clockwise for the normal 28-day cycle - "and this last pin is designed for the leap year, positioned at a distance slightly further in on the star wheel" - making the large lever returning the hands on February, 29th.

Identifying said mechanism with tweezers, he goes on: "This star wheel is indexed by a steel arm with a large foot, which looks like it will interact with all pins, but in actual fact it allows the pins to pass under the lever and only arrest the super imposed star cam", says Jones.

"As the equation of time cam takes one year to rotate and one pin gets indexed per year you can appreciate that it takes four years for the same pin to return and index the extra day for February - looks simple when you know how", says an amused Jones. In contrast to this refined mechanism, today's perpetual watches mostly run on "simple" 48-month cams with different tooth lengths. Only old pocket watches run on the Maltese cross system, which derives from Breguet's mechanism.

Loaded with this information I leave the Isle of Man the next morning, rain still pouring and Daniels' voice sounding loud and clear in my head: "If you want to find out what really happened, you have to go to Israel."

### Toward the Promised Land

It took some months to get an appointment with the head of the L. A. Mayer Museum. As the wheels of the Boeing 747 touch the ground in Tel Aviv Airport, the unusual heat of an Israeli winter sweeps in.

In 1974, the late Vera Bryce Salomon, daughter David Lionel Salomon, donated £100,000 to found the David Salomons Charity with the L. A. Mayer Memorial Institute. She and Mayer both felt that better understanding of the cultural heritage of Islamic peoples might lead to less strife between the Israeli and



N.G.Hayek with Breguet No. 1160.

Palestinian communities. It was here as well, that Bryce Salomons requested a room to be dedicated solely to the exhibition of the remaining part her father's watch collection. The other part of this collection had already been sold at Christie's over two sales in 1964 and 1965.

The L. A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art is situated just about hundred meters down the road from the presidential palace, its facade resembling of a fortress with tall crenulated windows and a broad walled stairway at the front. Once inside the director of the museum, Rachel Hasson, is there to greet me.

"I wouldn't wonder, if the guardsmen were asleep on that night", suggests Rachel Hasson, who was with the museum from the very beginning and vividly remembers the theft. The energetic woman in her sixties with her silvery black hair brushed briskly into a ponytail, had shown me the room where the actual robbery took place. Today it houses a beautiful collection of flat tapestry-woven carpets from Anatolia, called kilims.

Over 25 years ago this small, long room at the far end of the ground floor of this imposing museum, held one half of the most important watch collection in the world. "The thieves robbed the watches, together with some furniture of Miss Salomons", says Hasson.

In her Bureau, Hasson introduces me to a man in his late seventies with bald patch and a thin razor-sharp moustache: Eli Kahn, the curator of the museum. He explains that from the theft in 1983 onwards, they had not heard anything of the whereabouts of the watches. "Interpol told us one day that one of the watches seemed to be in an auction", Kahn says. But it turned out to be a false call".

## Lost and found

"However, the story itself got a tremendous push when Rachel got a call from an art dealer in Tel Aviv. He told Hasson that a lawyer had approached him and requested estimates on a client's watch collection - the lady had inherited them from her late husband. "The art dealer told the lawyer that these watches and clocks belonged to the Mayer Museum, that they were stolen and should be given back. "That was in August 2006", Kahn goes on. They were handed the collection in three torn boxes, looking as though it were nothing but rubbish. "We started to open one by one and Rachel compared them with the catalogue." Here Kahn gets interrupted by an agitated Hasson, who explains the procedure: "I opened them and I saw the numbers and (...) most of the watches were in a very good condition and they were looking

exactly like those in the catalogue that was published close to the theft." Here Kahn leans back again and, quite amused, interrupts his colleague: "And the Marie Antoinette was wrapped up somewhere between the rest of (the watches) like a piece of junk. And when that came out, Rachel started to cry and the lawyer and me had to calm her down."

After a while of discussion, Hasson sums up: "The Breguet watches were in a very good condition apart from one or two missing the hands and some missing the glass. We used to have 44, now we have 41. Three are still missing."

## Buried treasure

But where were the watches all the time and who was this mysterious woman who had inherited them? Neither Kahn nor Hasson would say anything about this: they are bound to secrecy with the police, who are still investigating the case and had to promise to the lawyer not to investigate the matter.

Meanwhile the museum is planning a new exhibition of the watch collection for June 2009, including the 41 that came back. "We are going to invest a lot of money into it and into the security", says Kahn, "especially (now) that people speak about the huge values of the watches."



The L. A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art, Israel.