

One can imagine Patek Philippe's Nautilus causing as much of a commotion back in 1976 as Porsche's Cayenne did in 2003. In a similar line of enquiry to "why does Porsche need a 4x4 off-roader?" watch aficionados must have wondered why the world's finest creator of exquisitely finished movements, housed in the most elegant cases, felt inclined to launch a 42 mm, steel, water-resistant sports watch? While certainly a shocking departure for its time, comfortable familiarity has bred fondness. *QP* traces a legend's revolutionary lineage.

The origins of Patek's Nautilus can be found in the work of its rival, Audemars Piguet. The launch of the steel luxury sports watch, the Royal Oak, was to change the behaviour and expectations of watch aficionados worldwide. Sports watches did not have to begin and end with Heuer, Omega and Rolex ... and yes, it was cool to wear it with a suit. The culprit behind this sartorial innovation? Gérald Genta, watch designer extraordinaire; the man responsible for the 1970s' grand trilogy of BIG watches: the Royal Oak, Nautilus and IWC's Ingenieur.

Jumbo

Launched in 1976, the first Nautilus model was the ref. 3700/1A. Steel maybe, but cheap certainly not. As the advertising so gracefully stated, "One of the world's most expensive watches is made of steel!" However, the range was soon expanded, with the addition of steel and gold, yellow-gold, white-gold, and platinum versions. It is believed that only 12 white-gold pieces were made - probably explaining why one was sold by Antiquorum in 2002 for SFr.80,000! As for the platinum version, word on the boulevard is that only three were ever made.

The design and case construction was unique and never seen before, especially from a manufacture like Patek. Four screws concealed in the two 'shoulders' on the sides secured the rounded-

Brain & Brawn

The evolution of Patek's muscle-bound icon

Imran Khan



Object of desire: a white-gold Nautilus 'Jumbo' from 1979, which fetched SFr.65,725 at Christie's last November.

The culprit behind this sporty but sartorial innovation? Gérald Genta; the man responsible for the 1970s' grand trilogy of BIG watches: the Royal Oak, Nautilus and IWC's Ingenieur.



One of the first models in 1998's reinstated 'Jumbo' line, this stainless steel ref. 3710/1A features a 'state of winding' (IZR) subdial (€8,640).

off octagonal bezel to the case. The bracelet was integral to the case, without any lugs spoiling the overall streamlined aesthetic.

Together with a special crown (not the usual screw-down) and the rubber gasket between the two parts of the case, the Nautilus was water resistant to 120m. This was quite a feat for Patek in 1976, as most Oysters and Seamasters (except the specialist divers' models) were only water resistant to 50m. But despite the robustness of the construction, the Nautilus remained an incredibly thin watch. This could only be made possible by one of the most celebrated and exquisite automatic movements ever – the calibre 28-255.

Inside the machine

The calibre 28-255 was rhodium-plated with 'fausses-côtes' decoration. It had a straight-line lever escapement and a self-compensating and free-sprung balance – Patek's veteran Gyromax. The steel rotor had an inset segment of 18 ct gold for added mass and was held on a copper beryllium ring, running on four ruby rollers. Just like the unique sound of any

performance car, the sound of this bi-directional rotor is quite unique!

The base of the movement was the Jaeger calibre 920 (strangely Jaeger never used the movement themselves), and was otherwise used only by Vacheron and Audemars Piguet. The level of finishing was unique to each manufacture and Patek was naturally finished to Geneva seal standards. What was truly amazing was that, despite having a full-sized, centrally mounted rotor, it was only 3.05 mm high (and this is with a jump type date function). The calibre represents one of the finest automatics ever made, overengineered and finished to a level rarely achievable under today's cost restraints.

In 1981, the Nautilus was introduced in a more market-friendly 34 mm version. Sharing all the aesthetic attributes of its big brother, it contained the in-house calibre 335 SC movement. Still available today, it can be 'blinged' to the prospective purchaser's desire with all types of diamonds. A ladies version is also made, driven by the E19 C calibre, which can also be found in price-defiant jewellery variations.



The 'as-standard' deployant clasp is shown well by this view of a vintage 1979 Jumbo.

Whilst this model has enjoyed continued production, the 'Jumbo', as its older brother became known, was dropped from the line-up in 1990.

Return of the Jumbo

The rise in demand for the oversized watch certainly registered at Patek. The average 36 mm watch is now a standard 40 mm and what was perceived as a fashion trend looks set to become the norm. This has triggered the comeback of the undisputed heavyweight king. The Jumbo is back!

Relaunched in 1998 as the ref. 3710/1A, the new stainless steel Jumbo featured a new dial and movement, but in all other aspects was faithful to the original. One model features what Patek calls a 'useful' complication: the calibre 330 SC IZR shows the mainspring's state of winding, as opposed to a simple power reserve (a feature patented by Patek). A small hand and a 'comet' display, just offset from 12 o'clock, shows the wearer if the amount of stored energy (torque) in the mainspring is sufficient for the optimal running and hence accuracy of the movement.

At last year's BASELWORLD, the Jumbo line was extended with introduction of a new white-gold variant, the ref. 3711/1G. Visually identical, it is powered by the calibre 315 movement and does not feature the power reserve. The signature ribbed dial is



Designed like a porthole: despite the apparent simplicity of the design, the precise angles and curves of the bezel and glass make finishing and fitting the case a highly technical task.

exactly like the classic versions of the original Jumbo. The sapphire crystal display back however, is a new feature for the Jumbo. This year at Basel, rumours abound that a new moonphase version will be launched. Whether well-founded or not, you'll be forgiven for holding your breath.

Collectible

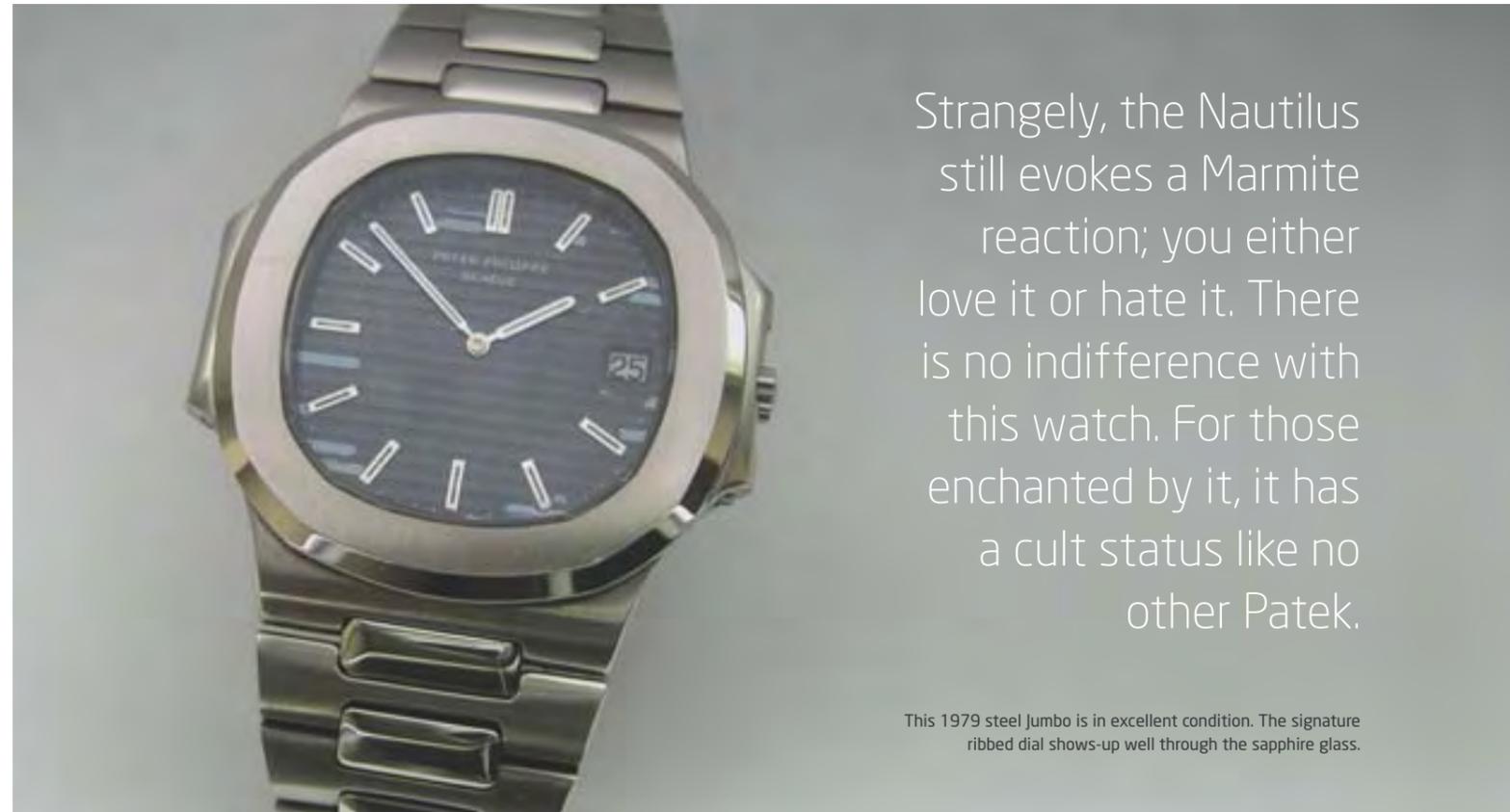
Whilst all the Jumbo range is highly desired (the current models command a waiting list), the original Jumbo is most desired by collectors of classic watches. As with most discontinued models, original Jumbos have risen in value. The unique calibre 28-255 movement no doubt adds to the X-factor associated with collecting. The all steel and gold versions are most desired, whilst not exactly bargains. Typically you can pick up an all steel for £7,000-£10,000, and gold models start at £10,000-£12,000. The steel and gold bi-metal versions are cheaper, at around £4,000-£5,000. The white-gold models – if you can find one – are £50,000-£60,000, and if you ever see a platinum



version (UFO sightings are more common), it will probably roughly equate to the cost of a 3-bed semi in the suburb of your choice.

Strangely though, the Nautilus still evokes a Marmite reaction; you either love it or hate it. There is no indifference with this watch. For those enchanted by it, it has a cult status like no other Patek. Even today, it is like no other Patek. The Porsche Cayenne eventually proved itself in the automotive world – like it or loathe it – endowed with all the genes of its Porsche heritage. Similarly, the Nautilus is pure Patek, albeit on steroids! And strangely, it is more appropriate in today's market than when it was launched, nearly 30 years ago. It fits a niche, sporty enough for canoeing (perhaps too cool for the pool), yet equally at home under a Jermyn Street double cuff. All we need now is that Ferrari limo... ◉

Ladies' yellow-gold ref. 4700/530 Nautilus, with quartz E19 C movement (£17,440).



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This 1979 steel Jumbo is in excellent condition. The signature ribbed dial shows-up well through the sapphire glass.