



'Moses' – a quarter-repeating watch by hammerstriking Putti (anonymous, ca.1815–20).

Star Collection

QP explores the overwhelming display of treasures at the Patek Philippe Museum in Geneva

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Spoilt for choice, that's what we are. Take a peek inside a pamphlet called 'The Watchmaking Route', detailing an organised tour of Switzerland's watch museums, and you will find over 25 collections listed. Glance over the accompanying map, and there are 30 unmissable locales. But one collection stands out, rivalling any for size and, most of all, quality: the Patek Philippe Museum.

(Right) The exterior of the historic Patek Museum building, rue des Vieux-Grenadiers, Geneva.

(Below) The Patek Philippe Calibre 89. With 33 complications and 1,728 parts, this is the world's most complicated timepiece. Development time amounted to nine years: five years' research and development, and four years of production (1989).



The Patek Philippe Museum is to horology what France's National Motor Museum (formerly the Schlumpf Collection) is to Bugatti automobiles. Having amassed his own array of spectacular timepieces, including stellar examples of miniature enamelling, Philippe Stern, the president of Patek Philippe, used his collection as the core of the museum. Over the years, Patek Philippe has added to the collection, acquiring the most sought-after pieces needed to tell the complete story, through

auction or private sale, even displaying certain unique items that are on long-term loan through the generosity of passionate collectors.

Hallowed surroundings

In many ways, the museum is Stern's 'gift' to the world's watch enthusiasts. And he chose the most apt venue possible for displaying this amazing trawl through the history of watchmaking: number 7, rue des Vieux-Grenadiers in Geneva. Dating from 1920, it once housed the gem cutters, Heller & Son, then the jeweller Ponti Gennari, followed by Piaget. Stern acquired the building in 1975, using it for the workshops that

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manufactured Patek Philippe's watch cases, bracelets and chains. When this operation was moved to the new premises at Plan-les-Ouates in 1995, Stern realised that the now-vacant premises would make a perfect museum.

Beautifully redesigned and refurbished by Stern's wife, Gerdi, and interior decorator Jackie Nyffeler, the museum consists of four themed floors finished in a variety of harmonious materials such as rare woods. Thus, despite the sense of awe experienced as you enter the main door, and despite the knowledge that you are amongst some of the world's greatest horological treasures, the museum is not over-bearing – in fact, it is welcoming. Mrs Stern insisted on this, admitting that, "I had this vision of a warm and snug museum, offering a degree of comfort and privacy." Jackie Nyffeler concurred: "We wanted to create an intimate showcase. Although open to the public, this museum had to come across as private." Consequently, one feels like the privileged guest of a magnanimous collector, rather than a visitor to a corporate showcase.

As with any museum owned and operated by a single watch manufacturer, the heart of the collection is a display of important and representative examples of the brand. Beyond this, the museum resembles more universal collections, much like the Musée internationale d'horlogerie. It acknowledges the history of clock- and watch-making beyond Patek Philippe's contribution, through displays of both select timepieces and vintage tools.

Overall, there are approximately 2,000 outstanding time keepers, automata, miniature portraits on enamel, and other rarities that allow visitors to savour a half-millennium of European watchmaking, as well as the entire 160-year-plus history of Patek Philippe.

The tour starts here...

Start at the third floor and work your way. The uppermost level contains a breathtaking library and the Patek Philippe archives, accessed by every collector who wants to confirm the provenance of a Patek. If, like me, you are an incurable bibliophile, you'd think you have landed in library heaven. The Museum owns over 4,000 precious books and manuscripts, in addition to some 700 archived volumes, capable of identifying any Patek Philippe watch ever produced. You name it: reference numbers, movement and case numbers, calibre, dates of manufacture, sale, servicing... All of these facts are available for scholars' and collectors' benefit, as well as providing the data for the legendary 'extracts from the archives' often found accompanying vintage pieces. As for the main library, the volumes

A drum-watch, with foliot and movement manufactured entirely in iron (anonymous, South Germany, ca.1540).





A Patek Philippe minute-repeating, hunting case clock-watch, with Grande and Petite Sonnerie, as well as a Westminster chime on five gongs (1909).

include some of the rarest horological works in the world; amongst them titles from the 17th century to the present, covering every aspect of watchmaking and related fields.

Down one flight, to the second floor, and you find the general collection, with treasures from the 16th to 19th centuries representing every great watchmaker of that period. It's here that you enjoy a glimpse of Philippe Stern's personal passion – miniature enamels – and are allowed to appreciate the sheer scale of the non-Patek Philippe aspect of the museum. Among the treasures are some of the rarest Breguet watches and clocks, including two Sympathies, early timekeepers in the shapes of pistols or crosses, delights from Rochat, Piguet & Capt and others whose creations are more works of art than mere watches. Even if you have never examined miniature enamels before, you will be dazzled by the exquisite craftsmanship on show (aided by magnifying glasses where appropriate!).

Heart of the brand

Down another flight, and you come to the Museum's true *raison d'être*. However magnanimous and all-encompassing the scale of the

Museum, it is the selection of Patek Philippe watches that attract the majority of visitors. The odds are, before you have even entered the Museum, you knew Patek Philippe as one of the greatest brands of all time. You knew that the vast majority of record prices set at auction are for Patek Philippe watches, and you knew that the most complicated pocket watches of all time were made by this irrepressible Geneva house. And they're all here: the Graves watches, the Packards, the prototype of the Calibre 89, and the Star Caliber 2000, among many others.

One is initially struck by how vast these milestone complications are – the term 'pocket watch' not entirely suiting a timekeeper the size of a hockey puck. Displayed on stands, it is easy to imagine them on either magnate's desk, in place of a conventional clock. However much one may glean from illustrations in a book, nothing quite prepares you for the experience of standing mere inches away from such celebrated testimonials to the watchmaker's craft.

I cried real tears the first time I saw a Breguet made by the master, in Topkapi, Istanbul. At the Patek Philippe Museum, the biggest lump in the



(Left) One of a pair of Piguet & Meylan quarter-repeating mirror-image Heart watches, made for the Chinese market (ca.1820).

(Above) A yellow-gold Patek Philippe chronograph purchased in 1948 by Duke Ellington and sold in 1998 for SFr.1 million. Now on display at the museum, it is one of only three examples of this model known to exist.



throat crept up on me when I saw Duke Ellington's chronograph – one of only three examples of this model still in existence. I recalled the auction, wondering who the lucky buyer really was. It was with immeasurable relief that I realised it would not be hidden away in some collector's dusty vault, never to be shared with the rest of the world.

The spice of life

Everywhere you look, it is surprise after surprise. I fell in love with a Patek Philippe pilot's watch, with meteorological application. The world-timers, the triple calendars, assorted Calatrava variations, the list goes on... I once asked Philippe Stern himself if there were any major gaps in the collection, and he said "No" without a trace of smugness. I now know why: the Patek Philippe Museum, irrespective of it bearing the name of a single brand, is as comprehensive a general watch museum as you will ever find. As for its coverage of Patek Philippe, it goes without saying...

It is almost with a sense of relief that you finally arrive back at the ground floor, to examine a display of hundreds of venerable machines, including lathes, milling cutters and other tools tracing the history of precision mechanical engineering. Time your visit correctly and you could observe a watchmaker restoring timepieces in a glass-enclosed workshop. Leaving this until the end is apt, for it explains just why every single piece you saw on the upper floors was in pristine and perfect working order. You leave the Museum observing a master at work.

There's too much to see, too much to observe, too much to savour in one afternoon. The guided tour, aided by wonderful, interactive multimedia displays, will just about satisfy you, but thoughts of a return visit will enter your head before you even leave the premises. Trust me: this museum is as worthy of the Patek Philippe name as you would hope. ●

Further information: Patek Philippe Museum, rue des Vieux-Grenadiers 7, CH-1205 Geneva, Switzerland. Open Tuesday–Friday, 2–5pm, and Saturday from 10–5pm (closed on national holidays). Tel: +41 22 807 09 10, www.patekmuseum.com