

# Together At Last: A True Story

by Osvaldo Patrizzi

It almost sounds like the title of a tear-jerking Italian neo-realist movie of the 1960's, although this time the leading actors are not Anna Magnani or Vittorio De Sica, but two small, magnificent and important watches of fantasy. The story I am about to relate, extraordinary and moving as it may seem, is entirely true. I will tell it the way it happened, while filling in the historical blanks with a little imagination. This story, more incredible than fiction, deserves to be told...

## *The Beginning*

The setting is Geneva, circa 1805. Isaac Daniel Piguet, in partnership with Henry Capt, has recently developed a new technique to produce music mechanically, using an invention by Antoine Favre-Salomon. The latter had imagined a system using steel blades that vibrate when set into motion by steel pins on a small revolving cylinder, producing musical notes. These blades replaced carillon bells, which were bulky, difficult to adjust, and therefore costly.

These blades, of different thickness and length, made it possible to obtain notes ranging over several octaves, which were pleasing to the ear. More importantly, the system could be miniaturized. Piguet & Capt had been partners since 1802, specializing in musical watches, automaton watches, ring watches and watches of fantasy designed in the most elegant and charming forms. In addition to the English, Spanish and Italian markets, already extremely receptive to the creations of the two Genevan partners, there was a new market opening up to such

timepieces, which seemed immensely rich and with enormous potential. This was the Chinese market. It was said of the Chinese that they paid for their purchases in gold with little concern for price but were particularly demanding and very refined in their requests. They sought the best that could be produced. The objects they bought were to be superbly finished, down to the smallest detail, as well as being sumptuous pieces of perfect proportions. They were clients that were accustomed to admiring the world's most beautiful porcelain and judged watches by the same criteria. The Chinese, like children playing with a favorite toy, were fascinated by these small mechanisms with music and automata, which featured new technologies applied to the art of watchmaking. They also wanted the most beautiful and sophisticated pieces to be made in pairs with asymmetrical, or mirror image, decorations. It is believed that it was the renowned Jaquet-Droz who had started the fashion of presenting watches in pairs and that in the Chinese culture the most important objects of art were always made as pairs.



Via London or the diplomats who traveled to China, Jaquet-Droz had succeeded in acquiring fame and riches working for that market, especially in the decade preceding his death in 1790. At the time, Geneva was rediscovering the art of painting on enamel, which in the second half of the 17th century had been one of the pillars of watchmaking and had made its reputation. In the middle of the 18th century, a Genevan painter on enamel elaborated a technique which consisted in using a final layer of "fondant", a layer of translucent

Majesty unique objects which were exceptional both for their beauty and quality and for their impressive complications. The pair of objects requested in this case was to be made in 18K gold and to be designed as a pair of elegant amphoras that could also be used as scent flasks. The pair was to be a masterpiece with mechanical complications, showcasing the splendor of the art of Genevan goldsmiths and painters on enamel. The flasks had to be small enough to be carried and yet large enough to be touched by inexperienced hands.



enamel which covers the painted scene and is carefully polished, giving the colors greater depth, while at the same time protecting them from rubbing and damage. The rebirth of the art of enameling brought a revival of several other crafts in Geneva, such as the goldsmith's art, to the detriment of works made in Paris which were beautiful but very expensive. Genevan craftsmen were called "cabinotiers", a term which included all the different crafts related to watchmaking.

The enameled scenes on the amphoras were to be asymmetrical, a mirror image, completely painted on enamel by an artist such as J. L. Richter, one of the best at the time. The main subject was to represent a landscape with a river, painted in the subtle pastel tones of dawn, like the rose-colored skies often seen in Geneva at dawn. There had to be also a lively scene, an allegory with symbols of love. The rest of each amphora had to be engraved and decorated with foliage, preferably laurel leaves on



Among such "cabinotiers", were goldsmiths, like George Reymond or Jacques Moulinié, who were able to create exquisite pieces of perfect proportions and in the purest neo-classical style in fashion at the time, which were highly appreciated in the Orient. One of the traveling traders who accompanied diplomatic delegations to China commissioned a pair of exceptional objects from Piguet & Capt. In order to enter into the Emperor's good graces, such traders needed to offer his

translucent champlevé enamel, enriched with fine pearls. As for the watch, it had to have a dial with the seconds and a visible balance, which would animate each amphora with its constant and regular movement. In each piece, music would accompany the scene with three automata. In terms of size, each amphora had to be 10 cm. high, no more than 5,8 cm. at its widest, and be about 0,8 to 1,2 cm. in thickness. It took quite a long time for these horological masterpieces to be executed

but finally the two amphoras were ready. The price was proportionate to the beauty of the items, whose perfection was unquestionable. When delivering the pieces, Piguet and Capt remarked to the buyer – by way of explanation of the amphoras' costliness - that with time the price is forgotten while the quality remains. How right they were! After a very long journey over land and sea, the pair of amphoras finally reached their destination. They went as far as Peking, capital of the Empire, which was then governed by Jiajing, fifth Emperor of the Qing Dynasty.

### *Tokyo, March 21, 2001*

The preview of "The Sandberg Watch Collection" sale opened at 10:00 a.m. After having been exhibited in Paris and New York, the collection reached Tokyo, its first stop in Asia, before going on to Hong Kong a few days later, and prior to the pre-sale preview in Geneva where all the timepieces from the collection would be shown together one last time.

It was a beautiful day in Tokyo. The exhibition room was perfect for this type of event. It was in a villa in



### *Geneva, October 8, 1974*

-“Ladies and Gentlemen, we will now auction lot 131. An exceptional musical watch with automaton scene, designed as an amphora, in 18K gold and enamel, set with pearls, attributed to Piguet & Capt, Geneva, circa 1805. This lot is illustrated on the front cover of our very first auction catalogue. We are at 160'000 on my left, 170'000 at the back, 180'000, 190'000 new bid in the center, now 200'000, 210'000, 220'000, 230'000, SFr. 230'000 once, 230'000 twice, no regrets? Sold at SFr.230'000 to the English gentleman on my left. Where would you like us to deliver the lot, Mr. Sandberg?”

“I shall take it back with me to Hong Kong, I prefer to have it immediately.”

The English gentleman in question, Michael Sandberg, was at the time Vice-Chairman of HSBC in Hong Kong and soon afterwards became Chairman of the bank. Awarded the title of Commander of the British Empire in 1982, he was made Knight Bachelor in 1986, becoming Sir Michael. After being created a Life Peer (Baron) by the Prime Minister in 1997, he is now known as Lord Sandberg.

the center of the city, in Shibuya-ku, one of the best neighborhoods of Tokyo. The press conference had just ended and the first visitors were already entering the room. From the expression in their eyes, and in particular from the hushed "ohos!" that were continually heard, it was obvious that they were extremely impressed, just as the visitors in Paris and New York had been. By its quantity and quality, this auction was an exceptional event. Never before had so many horological works of art been offered at auction all at once. Representing the technical, stylistic and artistic evolution of more than 450 years of the history of horology, the different types of timepieces in the collection illustrated traditional European watches, fantasy watches, and watches made for the Chinese market. I heard several people saying in amazement, "Lord Sandberg succeeded in finding no less than five pairs of watches made for the Chinese market, they are so rare!" While I was observing how receptive all these visitors were to this art, our Japanese agent Toshi came towards me, accompanied by two tiny, elderly ladies. One of the ladies seemed particularly frail. She was about 75 years old, and was dressed in a European style suit.

The other lady was younger and acted as interpreter. Toshi told me that neither of the two ladies spoke English, but that the older lady had been deaf and dumb since childhood and that her best friend, who accompanied her everywhere, would speak for her. The two ladies had met by chance some twenty years ago in a tramway and had been inseparable friends ever since. Toshi translated the interpreter's rendering of what the older lady wished to convey. The older lady had seen an advertisement for the exhibition in a local paper. It featured an illustration of the amphora, which we had used as the symbol of "The Sandberg Watch Collection". We had chosen this item not only because it had been on the cover of Antiquorum's very first auction catalogue, but also because it was undoubtedly the object which best represented the spirit of the exhibition, and the essence of the Lord Sandberg collection.

"You see," she said, "when I saw the picture I remembered that my father had left me a similar object. I was very excited, and went to the bank to get it, but then, sadly, I saw that what I had must be a copy of the original. Let me show you," she said. With these words, she opened a small package containing a red box, which, I could tell immediately, was very old. "You see", she said with disappointment, "mine is turned the other way!"

Clasping in her hands the red box that held so many memories for her, she seemed even more delicate and frail. We must have made quite a picture, the two of us: I towered over her like a giant (almost 6,4 feet tall), but an attentive, benevolent giant who was drinking in her words and who found himself, rather irrationally, feeling extremely protective of her. She told us that her father had been a diplomat in Berlin in 1930, and that he had had a passion for beautiful objects, especially for decorative watches. This particular piece he had found there shortly before the Second World War and had later given it to her. She finished her story and handed me the little red box. I did not dare open it, I was so intent on the story she was narrating. It was not always easy to understand, being twice translated (once by her friend from sign language into Japanese, and then from Japanese into English by Toshi), and I did not want to miss any of it. I was also inwardly warning myself not to be too hopeful - after all, she had warned me it was only a copy. Finally, very carefully and painstakingly, I did open it. I must have looked rather like a poker player examining his hand with exaggerated slowness. Millimeter by millimeter, the amphora emerged. I saw its handles... I recognized the forms, the decoration, the graduated pearls, and finally, the dial of the watch with its visible balance.



For a moment I was stunned and I could not utter a word. I left the group, to move closer to the showcase where the Sandberg amphora was on display. For minutes - it seemed like hours - I kept looking from one to another. I opened the showcase with my key and picked up the other amphora. Holding both in my hands, my eyes went from one to the other, again and again... Incredible! In my hands I actually held the pair! Pairs of form watches such as this one simply do not exist, no one has ever seen any! I realized a tear had fallen onto my cheek - I brushed it away with the back of my hand. Gloria, who had been watching from across the room, came to ask if I was feeling alright. No wonder - I was white as a sheet and could not articulate a sentence that made any sense. The two ladies were as yet blissfully unaware of the miracle that had just taken place.

Indeed, two of the most beautiful watches ever made, conceived as a pair and then separated for such a long time, had at last been miraculously reunited at the Antiquorum Tokyo exhibition, after nearly 200 years! Once I had gathered myself together, I spent a long time talking with the two ladies, telling them how these objects had been made together, and ideally should remain together. Although I understood the amphora we had just found was a gift from the lady's beloved father, I had to explain that the appearance of the second piece of the pair would irrevocably change things for the prospective buyer, and that it was my duty to inform the public of the rediscovery of the second piece of the pair. However, it is not customary in Japan to decide such matters hastily. Naturally, we would have liked to offer the pair of amphoras for sale, together and at the same time. Nonetheless, we were tremendously thankful that the lady kindly allowed us to borrow her amphora so that we could show the pair together at the Geneva exhibition prior to the auction of "The Sandberg Watch Collection". We were also delighted that the lady allowed us to lend the piece for a few weeks to the new Patek Philippe Museum, where the pair is presently on exhibit.

**Geneva, April 13-14, 2002**

The end of this very moving story is yet to be written, and it will be written by one of you. The lady from Japan, having at last decided, after much thought, to consign the second amphora to us for auction, is giving us the opportunity to reunite this legendary pair of amphoras - hopefully, forever.