

“GÉRALD GENTA THE MASTER”

by *Oswaldo Patrizzi*

Nominated as one of the 20 most important men in the watchmaking world, Oswaldo Patrizzi was born in 1945 and has been very keen on watches since he was young



Dear friends, in this second issue of the Mondani Magazine I would like to tell you about Gérald Genta, a person that has enriched my cultural life. I will present you with an artist, who has shaped – to say the least – the Swiss watchmaking history of the 20th century. My introduction is followed by an exclusive interview that will make you appreciate this man for his simplicity, his genius and his contagious passion that has marked the last quarter of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century.

GÉRALD GENTA 1931-2011

I met Gérald back in 1977. I had just arrived at Geneva, where I founded my auction house. Gérald worked in a little office, where he designed watches for some of the most important watch manufacturers. It was a difficult time for the Swiss horology, which was assaulted by Japanese products that were taking over a large part of the market. Many manufacturers were forced to dismiss employees and the financially weakest even preferred to close.

At the time Gérald seemed to be dissatisfied with what he was doing; industries in crisis were less willing to invest in new creations and working for third parties wasn't always rewarding. He often came to my showroom and many times he complained about the lack of courage and future visions of certain entrepreneurs.

He was convinced that if he had the chance to work on his own and express his talent freely and without limits he would have reversed market trends.

He just had to embark on the adventure of opening his own manufactory, even if that meant to swim against the current.

Gérald was very interested in vintage watch auctions, especially of complicated watches; in his opinion the Swiss savoir faire in this field was unbeatable (at that time I hadn't invented the wristwatch as a collector's item yet).

He was sure – as he confided to me – that in the near future complicated watches would be the answer to mediocre products from the East. Initially they would represent only a market niche, but they would soon become our strength.

When I went to see him, he showed me dozens and dozens of drawings, which flowed from his pencil like water from a spring. “I can sketch up to 30 a day,” he said, “it comes so naturally that I can't repress the urge to create, to express the sensitivity of shapes and develop the perfect proportions in all details.”

Shapes of cases and dials on various pieces of paper on his desk immediately caught my eye, but I could also see some women's portraits.

He almost seemed to be possessed by these two topics: watches and women.

A few years later he told me that “the marriage between pure art and applied art leads inevitably to a new and unexpected form of creative madness.” In my opinion those are words of wisdom and their importance increases day after day, bringing out the creative spirit that exists within us all, although only few have the gift to express it.

You have all heard of Gérald Genta's brilliant career and know about his worldwide reputation. But only few of you know that we greatly owe him the renaissance of the Swiss watchmaking. And only few of you know that the recovery of the watchmaking art began with a simple episode: the creation of the first minute

repeater skeleton wristwatch. Gérald Genta developed this watch in 1981 for a rich client from New York (I felt very much like a fellow conspirator: the client was an aficionado of complicated watches and automatons). One day, when I was passing by Geneva, I told him that, as sophisticated as he was, he had to meet a local artist, a watch designer. I was sure that he would appreciate and encourage him.

This minute repeater was the first extra-slim complicated skeleton watch, which after decades finally gave a boost to the market of complicated watches.

Other models such as perpetual calendars, repeaters and chronographs were available in various showrooms of the manufacturers, but all of them had remained unsold for years, buried in a drawer and almost forgotten.

The creation of this timepiece was a cure-all for his finances and an encouragement to continue doing what he believed in.

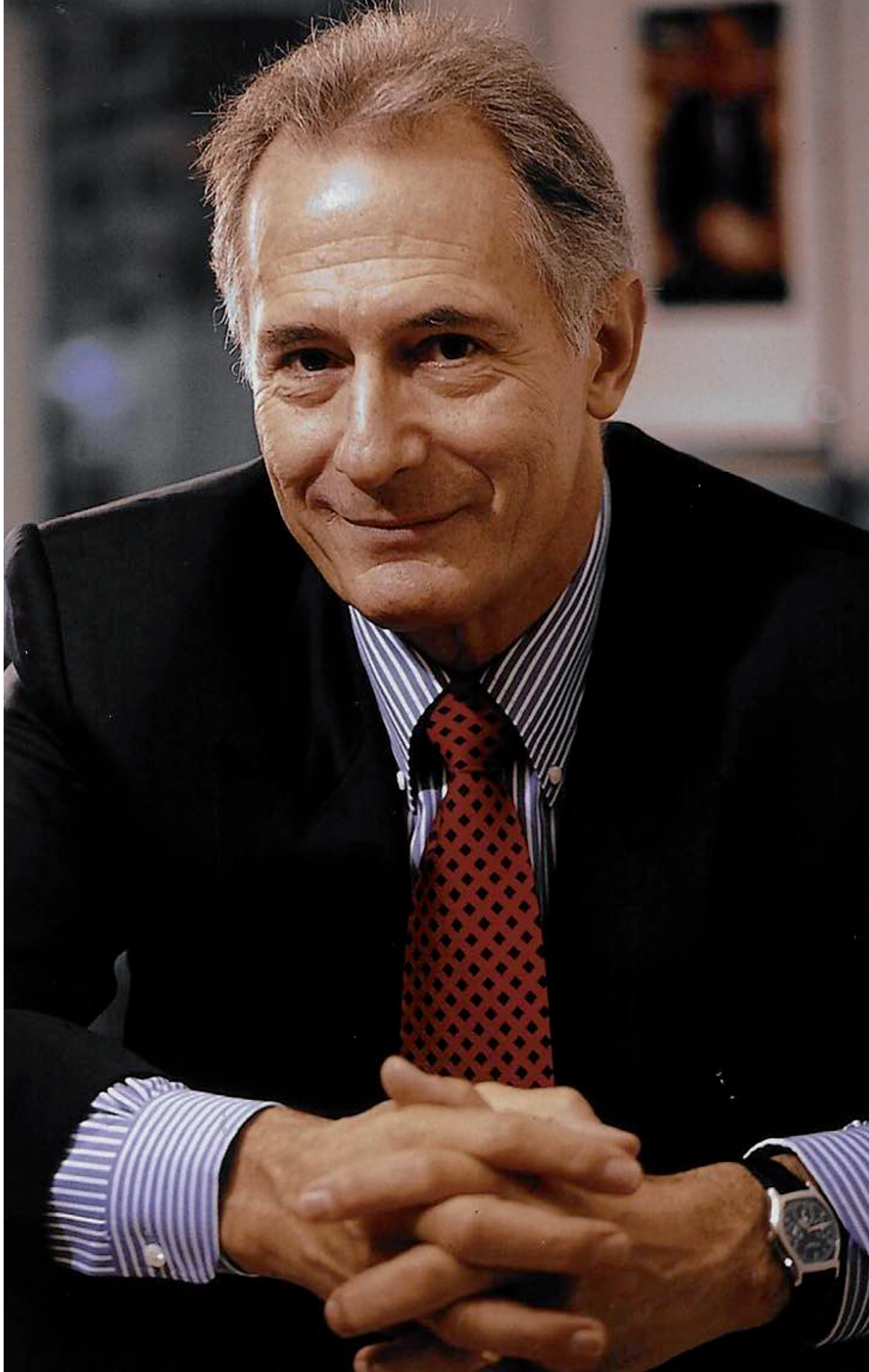
It took some time before others had the courage to follow his example, the rest is recent history.

All this now seems like such a long time ago and watch aficionados compete over millions only to have one of these wonderful timepieces. Those difficult moments seem to belong more to the prehistory than to the recent past.

Gérald, you will not fade into oblivion over time.

Your innate ability for continuous self-renewal makes you contemporary and present, sometimes on our wrist, sometimes in our memories and always in our hearts.

Gérald, you are a legend and we miss you all!



Oswaldo Patrizzi



Gérald Genta in 1988 ▲



Gérald Genta & his wife Eveline in a picture from 1986 ►



INTERVIEW TO GÉRALD GENTA BY OSVALDO PATRIZZI

Who doesn't know Gérald Genta in the watchmaking world!

Who has never once in their lives had a watch on their wrist created by Gérald Genta!

In order to list all of his works, it would be necessary to dedicate a volume just to himself.

To talk about his art, his creativeness and his courage would divert us from the subject of this book and anyway wouldn't be enough to show him the esteem he rightly deserves. A biography on Gérald Genta, "The Maestro and his Art", with texts edited by Carlo Ripa di Meana and Osvaldo Patrizzi, published by Christian Maretti, capably describes and illustrates the artist's life and works.

I was lucky enough to know him in 1977 and be considered as his friend, and thanks to our 30 year friendship I managed to tear some confessions out of him about the birth of Nautilus, anecdotes sometimes touching which, in my opinion, make his story even more fascinating and human. I wish to develop this part of Gérald Genta and the Nautilus introduction in the form of an interview, recorded in his luxurious and comfortable apartment in Monte Carlo, in other words a "free style" chat between friends and enthusiasts of fine watchmaking. -"Everybody knows, Gérald, that you are of Italian origin and have watchmaking in your blood, just as many of our compatriots – could you briefly tell us about your first steps in the field of design and especially of time pieces?"

- "Yes, I was born on 1st May 1931 in Geneva, I have an Italian culture and I'm proud of my origins.

My grandfather came to Geneva in the second half of the 19th century from Tronzano, a little village in the Piedmont plain. My creativeness and the explosive and unstoppable desire in my DNA to create is linked to my origins. I always loved art and fine things, I always wanted to interpret in my own way what I saw and what attracted me. I worked for the "haute couture" at the beginning of my career, I designed and produced jewels, precious items, I started to paint with watercolours at the age of 7 and I've never stopped since then. Today, my passion is not just watch designing but also painting.

Creating is as vital to me as breathing, and sometimes, when this raptus takes possession of my mind, I can even design 30 models in a day, men's and ladies models, with decisive or delicate lines which are often provocative, I love jewellery and like to combine it with watchmaking, I like to create precious watches which are as eccentric as the great couturier's fashion which inspires me.

As the years go by, I don't feel out-of-date at all, even better I have recently signed an "almost" exclusive contract with Patek Philippe which excites and stimulates me. I have more than excellent relationships with the Stern Family and I must say that I'm fascinated by their loyalty and perspicacity. I have always admired them, even when I didn't yet know them personally: I remember

as it was yesterday, when I was at the Hotel Ambassador Restaurant in 1972, during the Baselworld exhibition, and Henry Stern, Philippe Stern, Fichter and Vuischbad were holding a discussion; I observed them talking and wondered what kind of watch I would have designed, if they had ever asked me to create a watch for Patek Philippe with characteristics similar to the Royal Oak? Knowing the fame of Philippe Stern, a famous sailor, great enthusiast of the lake and excellent skier, I would design a watch with an iconography reflecting his sporty nature and reminds him of his passion – a watch which could be worn on any occasion. It had to be waterproof, flat enough to be elegant and easy to wear, the bracelet and the case had to be fully integrated as one, to give the watch harmony and unity. Unlike the Royal Oak, which I had created in 1968 and which was rather angular this had to have soft and rounded lines, like the waves of the Geneva lake.

I took a pencil and sketched a watch on the paper napkin of the restaurant. While for the Royal Oak I drew my inspiration from a diving suit, for Philippe Stern I decided to make a watch which had the shape of a porthole. For a prestigious brand like Patek Philippe, this model had to be unique of its kind. I had imagined it with two hinges on the sides, which had not just a decorative function but also performed the waterproofing function, keeping the two parts of the case blocked; the case back and carriage would have been hinged

by two forced pins (I hadn't thought of the production difficulties that this blocking system required at that time). The bracelet had to be integrated into the case, as part of the same case, polished and satin finished to further enhance it and so break the gray monotony of the steel. Even if it was just a sketch, I liked it and was satisfied!

At the end of the lunch, they didn't come to me, so I went out shortly after carrying the paper napkin sketch with me. At home, I elaborated the drawing and once it was finished, I put it in a drawer, being sure that one day I would have had the opportunity to show it to the Stern family. Very soon I forgot about it together with many other drawings which lay in the drawers of my writing desk. A few months later Lorak, the French agent from Piaget, called me and asked me to design a sports watch, which had a new line, was waterproof and thin enough to contain one of their latest extra-flat automatic movements. Without thinking twice, I took and sent him the drawing of what would have been later the Nautilus. One year later, I received a fine letter of thanks from Piaget, returning the drawing and telling me:

-Thank you, Mr. Genta, for the model you proposed, but Piaget is not yet ready to manufacture stainless steel watches and our strategy does not include the production of a sports watch with these characteristics. -

At Baselworld 1974, I was visited by Mr. Foillet, an agent from Patek Philippe for Arab Countries, who asked me if I could propose a watch for him which had a sports-elegant line, a watch which had the characteristics suitable for a new kind of medium-high clientele. I remember my answer as if it was today:

-Wait a moment – I said – I've got it with me.-

He made me meet Philippe Stern at his stand shortly after and I showed him the drawing. Philippe looked at it carefully for a long time and found it very interesting. After some routine compliments, I promised that I would have made a white gold prototype for him, as it would have been too difficult to produce one in stainless steel complete with dial made by Stern and equipped with bracelet.

Some weeks after, I handed the model which I had created over to his office in Rue du Rhone; I invoiced it at 25,000 Sfr. and went away once he had promised he would produce it.

After 15 days, I called Philippe Stern and

The original drawing of the Nautilus by Gérald Genta



asked him when they would put it into production. I understood from his voice that some perplexities had arisen from management about the model, which maybe diverged too far from the classic Patek Philippe production, or perhaps they had some doubts about the case manufacture. This was very expensive to produce and required the maximum accuracy in the solid steel working, as well as great skilfulness to assemble it. Keeping however the promise made, I stipulated a 3 year contract with him with a royalty of 300 Sfr. for each unit sold. The model was produced with the reference 3700/1A, selfwinding, with 42mm width

and 7.60mm thickness and waterproofing guaranteed up to 120 meters.

It was marketed in 1976.

Unfortunately for me, very few examples were sold at the beginning.

At that time, the Royal Oak and the Nautilus watches were too large, difficult and expensive to produce, and the fact that they had a cobalt-blue dial, which was too similar to the colour of the case and bracelet, didn't meet with the buyers' favour."

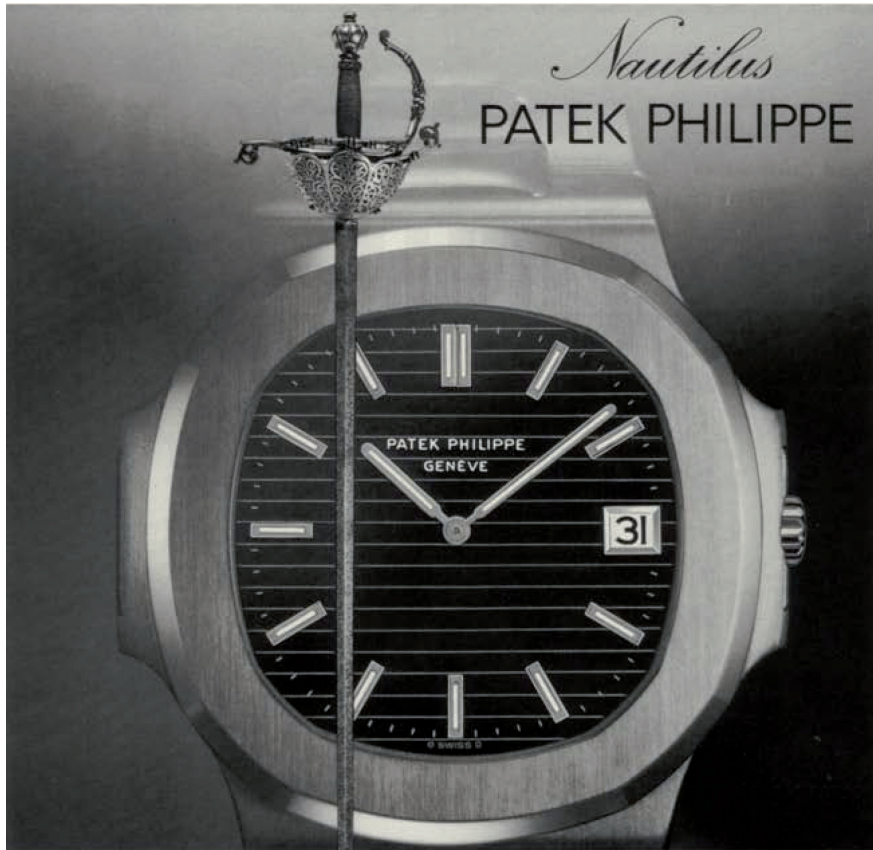
It wouldn't be a happy ending story if these two models hadn't been understood and appreciated as time went by. Finally, the creative genius won and today these two

references are "vedettes", the favourite piece of two prestigious brands.

These are the origins of the Nautilus, born from a sketch on a napkin in a Basel restaurant, of the desire to create a watch suitable for the characteristics and sport qualities of a man like Philippe Stern.

As often happens, they are ideas which originate spontaneously, in an unexpected place, and reveal themselves to be the most innovative and brilliant.

For the Nautilus, Gérald Genta sewed the seed, Patek Philippe gave birth to it.



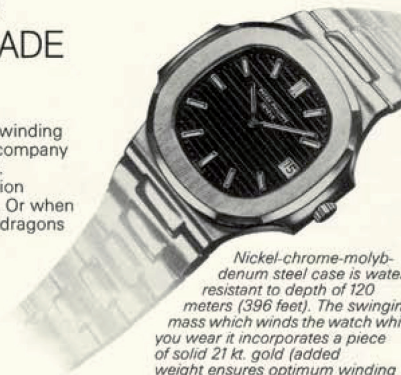
ONE OF THE WORLD'S COSTLIEST WATCHES IS MADE OF STEEL

Like the great swords of another age, Nautilus took shape between the skilled hands of master craftsmen. Like sword and knight, Nautilus and its owner are meant to be inseparable for life. Nautilus, with its hand-finished

Patek Philippe self-winding movement, will accompany you when you dive. Or when the occasion is formal or festive. Or when you set out to slay dragons in the boardroom.

PATEK PHILIPPE
GENÈVE

Catalogue and list of nearest jeweler from Dept. NG, Patek Philippe S.A.,
41 rue du Rhône, 1211 Geneva 3, Switzerland



Nickel-chrome-molybdenum steel case is water-resistant to depth of 120 meters (396 feet). The swinging mass which winds the watch while you wear it incorporates a piece of solid 21 kt. gold (added weight ensures optimum winding efficiency). Amazingly slim case with matching steel bracelet.

◀ Advertising picture of 1970's