



# The GENTA Touch

Royal Oak, Bulgari-Bulgari and Nautilus are three iconic watches with one thing in common: each sprang from the creative mind of Gérald Genta, who continues to write new chapters in wristwatch design history.

BY LUCIEN F. TRUEB

**B**orn the son of Italian immigrants in Geneva in 1931, Gérald Genta first displayed an avid interest in sketching when he was still a little boy. When his mother presented him with a paint box on his seventh birthday, he began to explore its potential with growing fascination. But his parents were adamantly opposed to the youth's idealistic plans of pursuing an artistic career. After he had completed his obligatory school years, he went to apprentice at one of the big jewelers in Geneva, while also attending classes at the city's trade school. After four years of study, he graduated with very good grades, but found no job available for him. Immediately after the gradua-

tion ceremony, he strode to Pont de la Machine (a well-known bridge in the heart of Geneva), tossed his tools into the Rhône River and swore two oaths: never to work again as a goldsmith or as anyone's subordinate. He has kept those vows to this day.

With new ideas ceaselessly bubbling up from the depths of his effervescent imagination, Genta became a freelance designer. He drew sketch after sketch, which he sold for 15 Swiss francs each. Initially focusing on jewelry designs, he later diversified to include advertising and fashion. He was soon commissioned to create designs for the watch industry. Famed Parisian jewelers repeatedly asked

him to design exclusive watches that they wanted to sell either as one-of-a-kind items or in very limited series. Over the next 20 years, Genta gradually worked his way up to star status in his chosen field.

A crowning moment came when Audemars Piguet commissioned him to design a sporty stainless steel wristwatch. Genta met for preliminary negotiations with Paul-Louis Audemars (1881-1969) and his son Jacques-Louis (1911-2003). The elder Monsieur Audemars died before he could see Genta's design for the Royal Oak, famously drawn in one overnight session in 1970. Genta presented the sketch to Jacques-Louis, who was initially aghast: a sporty



Three long-lived creations by Gérald Genta (left to right): Audemars Piguet's Royal Oak, Patek Philippe's Nautilus, and Bulgari-Bulgari still rank among the world's great classic watches.

Jacques-Louis Audemars was shocked when Genta first showed him the design for the Royal Oak, which Genta had created overnight in 1970.

watch in a steel case was something entirely new for Audemars Piguet. Prior to this time, the brand had crafted nothing but very conservative gold watches and had placed particular emphasis on the technology of their movements. Nevertheless, he signed an exclusive contract with Genta to reserve the rights to the design.

### A Royal Roll of the Dice

The inspiration for the Royal Oak dawned on Genta during a stroll along the shore of Lake Geneva, where he chanced to see a diver at work. The diver was wearing an old-fashioned helmet affixed by eight screws to his diving suit, which was partly made of shiny brass. Genta immediately translated this odd sight into the design for a wristwatch with an octagonal bezel affixed to a circular case by eight clearly visible screws. Although this radical new design differed from Audemars Piguet's previous image as drastically as chalk differs from cheese, it ultimately convinced Jacques-Louis Audemars,

who gambled that, with a little luck, he might be able to sell about 1,000 pieces of this ultra-modern wristwatch. While it probably wouldn't be a strong seller, he reasoned, its sheer novelty would at least make Audemars Piguet a topic of conversation. Genta spent much of his time in Audemars Piguet's ateliers because he had agreed to be directly involved in the process of creating the prototype.

Workers at Audemars Piguet repeatedly insisted that it was simply impossible to assemble the kind of watch that Genta had in mind. Because of his training as a goldsmith, however, Genta not only believed in the feasibility of the design; he had the skills to execute it. More than once, he had to take a jeweler's file in hand to convince the doubters. He was particularly eager to create a seamless connection between the metal bracelet and the case. He was equally demanding about the color scheme of the watch's dial, which took 18 separate attempts to get right.

The success of the Royal Oak exceeded all expectations, despite the watch's high price of 3,750 Swiss francs (equivalent to about \$975 at the time). Incidentally, the recipient of the white-gold prototype was none other than the Shah of Iran, who promptly returned it after he wore it swimming and discovered that AP had neglected to install insulating washers. The Royal Oak went on to become a collectible, classic cult object. When Audemars Piguet celebrated the 30th anniversary of its launch, more than 150,000 had been sold — and the number continues to rise every day. A classic never goes out of style, assuming, of course, that it undergoes timely refurbishing to keep it current with the trends of the times. And periodic renewals are a project that Audemars Piguet performs with particular skill. The Royal Oak's movements, for example, are continuously improved and updated so that everything from a quartz caliber to a grand complication currently flourishes in the grove of Royal Oaks. Along with metals such as stainless steel, gold, and platinum, AP also

uses a wide range of less conventional materials such as titanium, tantalum, rubber-coated steel and carbon.

### Rise of the Nautilus

Genta's agreement with Audemars Piguet didn't prevent him from accepting commissions from numerous other watch brands, including Omega, Universal Genève (for which he designed the Polerouter), IWC (for which he designed the first Ingenieur), Benrus in the United States, and most notably, Patek Philippe. Well aware that several members of the Stern family (which owns the company) were enthusiastic yachtsmen, Genta designed the Nautilus in 1974. This sporty watch in a steel case features a port-hole-shaped bezel and a massive hinge. Despite its ample breadth, it looks uncommonly light because the inner rim of its bezel transitions towards the crystal via a polygon formed from a series of curved segments.



Typically Gérald Genta: an octagonal wristwatch with wooden bezel and decorative golden screws (1990). Roman numerals adorn the mother-of-pearl dial.



Parallelogram: Genta also designed this asymmetrical, solid-gold wristwatch with a mother-of-pearl dial and a hand-wound movement in or around 1990.



## THE GENTA TOUCH

In 1969, Genta also became a manufacturer, and started making his own eponymous brand of watches. He took the step because he felt too many of his good ideas were lying fallow in his clients' file cabinets. Now he was finally able to realize them himself. His business was headquartered in Geneva, but he established a developmental atelier with a manufacturing operation in Le Brassus in the Vallée de Joux. For this purpose, he took over Lemania's old factory number two and painted it pink. The edifice, which the locals took to calling the "Bonbonnière" ("candy factory"), has since been repainted and currently houses Audemars Piguet's watch museum. Genta used the facility exclusively to make exquisite watches in very small series, receiving commissions from throughout the valley (even from Jaeger-LeCoultre) and, of course, from clients in Geneva and Paris.

were Signor Bulgari's unshakable conviction that the Bulgari-Bulgari design was utterly incompatible with his brand's image and his equally entrenched belief that watches of this ilk would be utterly impossible to sell. Genta repeatedly traveled to Rome's Via dei Condotti, where he implored the three Bulgari brothers to accept his design. He was ultimately able to persuade them, and, just as Genta had predicted, the Bulgari-Bulgari family of watches became the brand's flagship model. The original design has been updated regularly over the past 30 years to create many new versions, all of which have been successful. It seems to prove Genta's belief that often a brand's owners either will misjudge — or don't even really know — its true personality.

One day, an unexpected inquiry arrived: executives at Timex wanted to know if Genta

### GÉRALD GENTA TIMELINE

- 1931** Born in Geneva
- 1951** Finishes jewelry-making training
- 1961** Becomes independent watch designer
- 1968** Patek Philippe Golden Ellipse
- 1969** Founds his own watch company
- 1972** Audemars Piguet Royal Oak
- 1976** IWC Ingenieur SL; Patek Philippe Nautilus; Gérald Genta Quantième Perpetuel
- 1977** Bulgari's Bulgari-Bulgari
- 1985** IWC DaVinci (*above*)
- 1985** Cartier Pasha
- 1994** Gérald Genta Grand Sonnerie
- 1996** Sells firm and Gérald Genta brand to Singapore's Hour Glass Group
- 2000** Bulgari acquires the Genta brand from Hour Glass
- 2001** Founds GC (Gérald Charles) Designs

Genta created the complete prototype of the Nautilus in the Le Brassus workshop. His name would not be known as a watch brand for several years, because at this time he primarily built one-of-a-kind items for great Parisian jewelers such as Cartier, Hermès, and Fred. Inquiries arrived from as far away as Japan: Genta designed a watch for Seiko's Reijiro Hattori with a hexagonal bezel and Allen-head screws. Produced in a limited series of 5,000 pieces, this model was an immediate sellout. Top executives in the Swiss watchmaking industry were not at all pleased that Genta had accepted a commission from a Far Eastern client, despite the fact that they massively exported their products to East Asia. Nevertheless, Genta now had sufficient capital to establish his own manufacturing facility in Geneva. After a successful search for a suitable venue, he purchased the building formerly occupied by Spiraux Réunis.

### The Italian Job

It was not only Swiss watchmakers who found themselves at odds with Genta's unconventional aesthetic sense. Despite his personal friendship with Gianni Bulgari, Genta's design for the Bulgari-Bulgari watch met with particularly strong resistance. The problems



Genta's 1980s-era design for the Cartier Pasha was inspired by the original version, designed by Louis Cartier as a waterproof watch for the Pasha of Marrakech.

Genta's love affair with the octagon began with the Royal Oak. The eight-sided geometrical shape characterizes several of his most interesting creations.

would be willing to sketch a watch collection for its brand. Until this point, Genta had worked only for exclusive watch brands and renowned jewelers. Mass-produced watches were entirely new to him. Still, Timex was a global concern that annually produced some 30 million watches. The challenge appealed to Genta. He traveled to Timex's facility in Besançon, France to familiarize himself with the production of Timex watches, which were manufactured there under the local brand name, Kelton. The company wanted Genta to design a wristwatch with an attractive case that could be manufactured inexpensively.

After this introduction to the company, Genta designed a collection of watches that precisely fulfilled Timex's criteria. Among them was an elliptical ladies' model with only two lugs (at the 5 and 7) and a concealed connection joining the strap to the back of the case at the 12. Approximately 600,000 of these watches were sold in the first year alone, and

the other items in the collection were similarly successful, with total production numbering in the millions of units.

This "proletarian" assignment didn't prevent Genta from developing and constructing very special watches as one-of-a-kind items for crowned and uncrowned heads. His clientele included the King and Queen of Spain, the Queen Mother of England, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, Prince Rainier III of Monaco, King Hassan II of Morocco, the Sultan of Selangor and his wife, the prime minister of Malaysia, Tunku Ibrahim and Tunku Araman of Malaysia, and the King of Thailand,

Ever since designing the Royal Oak, Genta has had a love affair with the octagon. This distinctive shape figures into several of his most interesting creations — often transitioning into circles in a design that Genta describes as "squaring the circle." He developed a totally different stylistic direction with the Gefica Safari, which he created for one of his

friends, a big-game hunter. The distinctively large, circular case was made of gold or bronze (either in its natural state or blued) and the sides of the case were decorated with two rows of metal beads in a style reminiscent of an ancient and nearly forgotten goldsmith's technique called granulation. The Gefica was very durable and water-resistant. It also contained a magnetic compass, but because compasses in wristwatches seldom function very reliably, Genta gave the Gefica a separate large compass.

### Cartoon Complications

Les Fantaisies, designed by Genta for the Sultan of Brunei, are probably the most playful luxury watches ever made. Never before had anyone dared to take the Walt Disney characters Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck (which had been widely used on simple children's watches up until the 1960s), trans-



Genta has created many unconventional watches for his new Gérald Charles brand, founded in 2001, such as the Carré (above), with skeletonized tourbillon.



Mickey Mouse: a playful mechanical watch for the Sultan of Brunei

## THE GENTA TOUCH

fer them to mother-of-pearl, and let them point to the time with their animated arms! But the Sultan insisted that he wanted a luxurious Mickey Mouse watch.

Genta achieved a professional milestone in the field of ultra-complicated watches in 1994, when he introduced the Grande Sonnerie, which included a perpetual calendar. The timepiece, which weighs 117 grams, is 15.5 mm thick and 39 mm in diameter. Its domed case has eight parallel "terraces" made of circles cut into small segments. This unique pattern is repeated on the strap lugs. The dial, crafted from pink mother-of-pearl, is cut with three windows to show the month, the day of the week and the leap-year cycle. Hands indicate the seconds, minutes, hours and date; additional scales indicate the type and the switching status of the sonnerie, as well as the remaining power reserve for the gear train and/or the striking mechanism.

In the Rétro collection, the hours are shown in a window at the 6. The minute hand, rather than completing full orbits from 0 to 60, progresses only through approximately 200 degrees of arc before leaping back to its starting position every hour on the hour. To add a bit of spice to this collection, Mickey Mouse is also

available here. The cartoon icon only needs to raise one arm because the Rétro uses an analog display only for the minutes. The Birétro model has its hour window at the 12. An additional hand with a calendar function at the 6 jumps back to its starting point (where it points to the 1) at midnight on the last day of each month. Genta wanted to get away from the monotonous flow of time and to create a watch with a dial on which something exciting would happen at least once every hour.

Genta decided to retire at 65. Tired of playing the role of a corporate boss, he sold his company to the Singapore-based Hour Glass

Group, only to be dismayed at the company's handling of his self-named brand, which he — and collectors — felt was harmful to its prestige and exclusivity. Genta was initially pleased when Bulgari purchased the company in 2000, bringing production of the brand back to Switzerland. However, the Genta watches launched under its auspices also proved to be far different from what Genta had in mind.

To win back the prestige formerly associated with his name, and to prove that despite his age he hadn't lost any of his creativity, Genta founded a new business called Luxury Griffes and inaugurated the Gérald Charles brand.



The Gefica is decorated with metal beads.



The ultra-complex Grande Sonnerie (1994)

## GG'S VIPS

Genta created many one-of-a-kind items for heads of state. His illustrious clientele included (top to bottom): Prince Rainier III of Monaco, King Hassan II of Morocco, King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, England's Queen Mother, and King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain.



Photos: Ullstein Bild

(Charles is Genta's middle name.) Under this brand name, Genta created genuine masterpieces and utterly unconventional watches for impassioned collectors. He no longer owns this company, having sold it to Switzerland's Desco Group, but he still works as a designer for the brand and still feels that he is its soul. The Gérald Charles brand employs teams of watchmakers and artisans with the skills to translate Genta's ideas into realities.

For one of his new creations, Genta collaborated with the watchmaker Antoine Prezioso to create a new type of time display. The A-Evolution shows the hours digitally and uses a single large hand to indicate the minutes. One might argue that this arrangement isn't very innovative, but look again, because there's much more going on in the A-Evolution. An arch-shaped window (from 10:30 to 1:30) always shows three numerals on the hour disk, which begins to turn 12 minutes before each full hour, thereby accompanying the minute hand until the new hour's numeral has reached the 12. When it does, the hour disk stops turning and leaves the minute hand to continue the remainder of its rotation all alone.

## From Clockwork to Canvas

Genta has made it a habit to outdo himself and to top his own excellent earlier creations. His sources of inspiration are diverse and frequently unexpected. For example, while dining in a restaurant, the sight of a black table with an ashtray atop it inspired him to create a wristwatch with a tourbillon that rises above the plane of the dial. To make each watch even more exclusive, every timepiece comes with an original picture, personally painted by Genta, who finds the themes for these paintings on his frequent journeys. People sometimes say that creation is a painful process and that the birth of a new idea is always accompanied by "labor pains." This is not at all the case for Gérald Genta. His work — continuously generating ideas — fills him with happiness and joy. But it's like being a piano virtuoso: one must practice constantly to maintain one's creative edge.

Genta regards a sheet of blank paper as a challenge. Within half an hour's time, he'll fill it



Inspired by Harley-Davidson, the Turbo model indicates world time in two windows.

with the design concept for a new wristwatch. Ideas simply flow from him and link up with one another to form a harmonious whole, and the wellsprings of his creativity have never run dry. In his opinion, it's essential to be a good observer. Anyone who cannot observe well isn't capable of creation, because every idea results from objects in the world around us.

Genta is pathologically curious, eagerly scrutinizing new cars, new shoes and the newest creations of fashion designers. Of course, he also appreciates nature and its constantly changing patterns of blossoms and stones, trees and corals. He knows that many of the sketches accumulating in his drawers will probably never see the light of day as three-dimensional ticking hardware, but that doesn't stop him from sketching yet another wristwatch. It's a labor of love.

Genta is well aware that if a watch design is to sell well, it must have a traditional, classical basis spiced with imaginative, innovative elements and details that attract attention. Each piece in a limited series is individually personalized. With his one-of-a-kind items, Genta strives to understand and satisfy his clients' wishes. One commission, for the former king of Morocco, specified a very special wristwatch equipped with a Rolex movement that needed to be completed in one week. Genta approached André Heiniger, CEO of Rolex

at the time, who put the entire house and all its numerous specialists at Genta's disposal. Genta executed all the difficult details — a genuine ivory dial, turquoise hour indices, a strap made from elephant-tail hair — and the North African monarch had his watch on schedule.

Gérald Genta has one home in London and another in Monaco. The differences between these two places and their inhabitants couldn't

be greater. This diversity has a stimulating effect on Genta, an indefatigable globetrotter, who believes that frequent travel to far-flung places helps keep his powers of observation sharp. In his semi-retirement, having mastered the stylistic exercise of designing wristwatches, he concentrates on painting, his real passion these days. And lately, he doesn't even wear a watch. ■



**Many years of passionate dedication: Genta pages through a loose-leaf notebook full of his watch sketches.**